

Penstemon

Penstemon: Also known as Beardtongue or Bearded Tongue, Penstemon is a member of the Snapdragon family and is a prairie plant native to the western United States with colorful, tubular flowers on upright spikes. Flowers bloom from early to mid-summer or early fall and may be pink, blue, red, purple and white. Ironically, they've long been cultivated in Europe for cottage gardens with over 250 species developed.

Size: Plants generally grow 1 – 3 feet in height and bush outward with multiple, densely flowered spikes.

Exposure: Full sun

How to Plant: Plant in spring and choose a site with good drainage. Depending on variety, space 1 – 3 feet apart from other plants to allow for growth. Use a garden hoe or tiller to loosen the soil 12 – 15 inches deep and work in a 2 – 4 inch layer of compost. Dig a hole twice the width of the pot the plant is in. Carefully remove the plant from the pot and set in the hole, making sure the top of the root ball is even with the soil surface. Firmly tamp down the soil around the plant and water thoroughly. Taller varieties look best in groupings in wildflower gardens or to the back of borders; newer, smaller varieties work well in rock gardens or to the front of the border.

Pruning: Cut stems back to a few inches in late fall; if you live in an area that experiences freezes, cut back to the same after the first true “killing” frost. If you occasionally prune stems during the growing season to where the flowers have died back, you will be rewarded with more blooms and an extended growing season.

Water needs: One inch per week during spring and summer months; many do fine with much less during the rainy season. The biggest threat to Penstemon in the home garden is summer over watering and soggy winter soil.

Soil: Neutral pH and well-draining.

Fertilizing: Little needed if at all and none after established.

Pests: Penstemon are not bothered by much except the occasional slug or snail around their lower foliage.

Snapshot: Penstemon thrive on benign neglect. They require little maintenance, tolerate dry soil and extreme heat, make good cut flowers, and are easily propagated from cuttings, attract all manner of bees yet seem nearly immune to our usual foothill pests. Also guaranteed to deliver one of the greatest joys of being a foothills gardener – hummingbirds!

Michele Rugo

University of California Cooperative Extension Master Gardener of Calaveras County