

Penstemon barbatus (Beardtongue)

Botanical Bytes by Bruner

By Gregory Bruner

Foliage Height: 12-18”
Foliage Width: 12-18”
Flower Height: 18-36”
Foliage Color: Green
Flower Color: Red
USDA Hardiness: 4-9
Moisture: Average - Dry
Light: Full Sun – Part Sun



Penstemon barbatus is native to the Western United States and is naturally found in Utah, Nevada, Arizona, Colorado, and Texas. Cold hardiness is generally not an issue because it is hardy down to USDA Zone 4.

Penstemon barbatus is also known as Golden-Beard Penstemon, Beardlip Penstemon, or Scarlet Bugler. In some parts of New Mexico and Southern Colorado, it is called varita da San José, which means St. Joseph's staff.

This plant enjoys growing in natural upland or mountain areas but can also be found along roadsides and other open, sunny locations where the soil has been disturbed. The deep-reaching roots allow it to be drought resistant once established, although it may need extra water during its first season. Wet sites should be avoided because Penstemon enjoys growing in well-drained soil, and wet sites could also aggravate disease issues. Partial sun to full sun locations will help maximize the growth and flowering of this perennial.

The flowering season will vary depending on the region of the country, but generally this plant starts flowering in late spring and if deadheaded will bloom a number of times through the summer into early fall. In its native regions the flowering coincides with the southern migration of the Rufous hummingbird. Its flowers provide an important food source for the hummingbird's long trip south.

The spikes of tubular flowers on long stems make this perennial a favorite of hummingbirds and butterflies. Deer are generally not a problem. Penstemon barbatus has few serious health concerns; most insects will ignore this plant, but sometimes slugs and snails will visit younger plants. Powdery mildew can be a problem if this plant is grown in crowded, shady, moist conditions.

The stems show character, whether they are straight or curved, and are popular in floral arrangements. The flowers typically do not drop florets quickly and may last up to 10 days in an arrangement, depending on the Penstemon variety.

Native Americans historically used Penstemon barbatus for treatment of a wide range of illnesses. Penstemon was used in various forms to treat things as simple as sore throats and stomachaches to the much more serious problems of broken bones and gunshot wounds.

The breeding of Penstemons has brought gardeners a rainbow of color choices. The most common colors are red, pink, blue, and purple as well as many shades in between. Genetic improvements have also created many powdery mildew-resistant cultivars. Penstemons are a definite must for gardeners.