

Penstemon Care Sheet

If you love hummingbirds and wish to provide them with a rich source of natural nectar, growing penstemons is a must. That is but one reason to grow this low maintenance, relatively carefree plant. Another most integral reason is that it is a vital component of any Water Smart Garden. As we in the west struggle with a lack of moisture, creating a garden that can thrive in said conditions will eventually become imperative.

At the Denver Botanic Gardens, many varieties of penstemon are growing and they can be found all throughout the gardens including *Penstemon angustifolius* (among others) growing in the rock alpine garden. I mention this variety as it is being offered for sale during our spring plant sale. *Penstemon barbatus* 'Coral Baby' (Scarlet Bugler; Beardlip Penstemon; Southwestern Penstemon) can be found near the orangery.

I have been growing penstemons for several years – after first learning about them during a previous spring plant sale. At first, I thought they should be planted in normal garden soil but I discovered this is not the best thing for these plants. I took the time to learn about their native habitat and for nearly all species that are either native to Colorado or well suited for our climate/growing conditions, the consensus was that a gravelly mixture is best.

Interlude: My garden is on a slope. As such, I wanted to break up the slope so I had two sets of stairs built – one on each side of the garden. Within those steps (which are about five+ inches deep) red breeze was used as a filler. At first, it did not occur to me to grow anything in there, but it was not long before I started seeing a lot of volunteer plants including mostly asters, dandelions, clover and the like. I then got to thinking. What if I grew some gravel loving plants in each corner?

So, I started with lavender, and they thrived! Lavenders do not like rich soils and enjoy just a gravel mix as its medium. When I discovered penstemons, I realized they enjoy the very same type of growing medium. I purchased a few varieties at the spring plant sale five years ago and those penstemons are thriving within the red breeze adorning various corners of the steps.

That said, I will share now my tips for success when growing these amazingly wonderful and beautiful plants:

- Soil: dry, gritty, gravelly or sandy well-drained soils. Think red breeze or pea gravel with a bit of topsoil mixed in. This growing medium mimics the conditions of their native habitats. ****NOTE**** Penstemons prefer lean soil. No fertilizing.
- Water for existing plants: They appreciate a bit of watering in the spring BEFORE they bloom. Spring rains will usually be more than sufficient but if it is a very dry spring, a bit of supplemental water maybe once a week would be appreciated by your penstemons. If it was a dry winter AND a dry spring, you may consider watering them just a bit. Note, after blooming, no further watering is needed and in fact can do more harm than good
- Water for new plants: Water when the soil is dry that first year and then, usually whatever comes from the sky is plenty.

- Deadheading (cutting back flower spikes): Do you like it when plants naturalize in your garden? If so, leave a few flower stems and let the seeds disperse as they will. You will be delighted by all the baby plants in the spring. If you don't want them spreading, you can remove the flower spike a couple weeks after blooming.
- Winter: Unless the winter is particularly harsh, you may find your penstemons will remain evergreen. That said, many of the leaves, stems, etc. will be brown and tatty. I trim off all dead stems, "crispy" leaves, etc. leaving just the healthy new growth, etc. I also remove all leaf debris, etc. from the base of the plant.
- Hummingbirds: It is important to include a variety of penstemons that will bloom at different times. For example, most will bloom in June but there are some that will bloom as early as May and as late as July or even August. I mention this because a hummingbird will prefer penstemons (and Agastache) over a feeder.

I really wanted to keep this as short as possible, but I hope it helps you with your growing of these amazing and integral plants for the Water Smart Garden. If you have any questions, please do reach out to me and I will be very happy to assist you in any way I can. You can email me at [bjam70 \(at\) comcast \(dot\) net](mailto:bjam70@comcast.net). Of course, replace the words with the @ and . 😊

Species I grow:

Penstemon barbatus 'Coral Baby' | blooms late May into July.

Penstemon barbatus 'Scarlet Bugler' | Colorado native | blooms early spring but sometimes in autumn

Penstemon clutei 'Sunset Crater' | Colorado native | can bloom all season long: April -June

Penstemon eatonii 'Firecracker' | Colorado native | blooms in late May through mid-June

Penstemon palmeri | May and June

Penstemon strictus (Rocky Mountain penstemon) | Colorado native | blooms early June

Penstemon superbus | Colorado native | blooms May and early June

Final thoughts:

Companion planting: I recommend thyme, veronica and cat mint as a ground cover meandering around the plants.

Droopy/flattened flower spikes: You are probably watering them too much or the soil is too rich. Note, the flower spikes will usually remain erect but you can use the grow through supports offered by Gardener's Supply: gardeners.com to keep them tidy.

I am sure I will think of more to add here as time goes by but this should cover it for now. Happy gardening!

Heavenly Hummingbird

