



Cultivation Notes

No. 50

THE RHODE ISLAND WILD PLANT SOCIETY

Fall 2009

Penstemons, Selected Species

Family: Scrophulariaceae

Tall White or Foxglove Beard-tongue, *P. digitalis*

Hairy or Northeastern Beard-tongue, *P. hirsutus*

Eastern or Smooth Beard-tongue, *P. laevigatus*

Eastern White Beard-tongue, *P. pallidus*

Small's Beard-tongue, *P. smallii*



P. smallii © Thomas G. Barnes

By Marty Fisher

One of the largest, if not the largest, genus of plants native only to North America is the penstemon. Species can be found in every corner of the continental United States from the seashore to the highest alpine meadow, from the driest desert arroyos to the wet marshes of the northeast. The bloom stalks appear on stubby stems of low creepers or can reach 4 to 5 feet tall in the rainy east. The amazing color range of white to blues to pinks and purples makes them suitable for any garden palate.

Various parts of the penstemon have been used for hundreds of years by Native Americans as one of their medicinal plants. Extracts from the roots were applied to gunshot and arrow wounds, inserted into the tooth cavity for pain, and taken directly for consumption and whooping cough. The flowers were boiled to make a sweet tea. In wilderness areas even today, animals browse the plants for food.

Beard-tongues are easy to identify. Most have opposite leaves rising from a basal rosette. They have brightly colored tubular flowers that flare open. The five petals with two upper and three lower lobes are fused into a tube. The lower lobes stick out farther to form a tongue on which bees can land. When the seeds are ripe, the tube becomes an upright capsule from which they can easily be collected.

Penstemon digitalis, Tall White Beard-tongue, is a stunning perennial with large clusters of white snapdragon-like 1" flowers on 4 to 5 foot stems that bloom in June in Rhode Island. The wide, lance-shaped leaves are clustered in a basal rosette. This penstemon can be found in fields and woods and grows well in garden borders.

Penstemon hirsutus, Hairy Beard-tongue, is a relatively short penstemon with bloom stalks reaching 12" to 18," which makes it an excellent rock garden plant. The violet to pale rose blooms appear in early summer. The foliage has coarsely serrated leaves and the stem is covered with long bristly hairs that give the species its name. Because these plants adapt to a variety of growing conditions, they can naturalize an area, especially if it is dry and rocky.

Penstemon laevigatus, Eastern or Smooth Beard-tongue, is a rare type thought to be present in R. I. The light purple $\frac{3}{4}$ " long corolla is small and the lobes are at right angles to the throat. The oval, basal leaves support the 18-24" bloom stalk. Blooming time for this beard-tongue is late spring.

Penstemon pallidus, Eastern White Beard-tongue, is one of the shorter eastern species, reaching less than 18" when flowering in spring. The corolla is small and white. Because it thrives in loam or somewhat sandy soils, it is comfortable in R.I.

Penstemon smallii, Small's Beard-tongue, is considered one of the showiest species and grows to two feet or more. Large, leaflike bracts occur in the inflorescence, making this penstemon easy to recognize. The corolla is pale purple or reddish purple blooming for weeks in the late spring. This plant is thought to be native to R.I., but there is no formal documentation of its existence here.

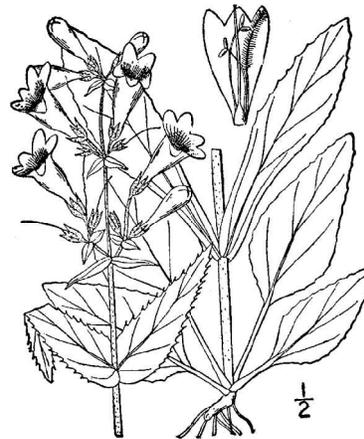
Propagation

Seeds: The best method of propagating native penstemons is from seed. The dried capsules yield many seeds in the fall. Numerous seed companies sell a wide variety of penstemons. Although the seed packets often recommend a period of cold stratification, good results may be obtained by planting directly in pots or flats. Warm sunshine and moisture should help produce seedlings within four weeks. Plants spend the first summer establishing roots and usually do not bloom until the following year. Note: Penstemons may cross pollinate and produce hybrids if more than one variety is blooming in the garden at the same time.

Cuttings: Soft or semi-hard wood cuttings can be easily rooted by placing them in a moist medium in a protected area until established.



Tall White or Foxglove Beard-tongue, *P. digitalis*



Hairy or Northeastern Beard-tongue, *P. hirsutus*



Eastern or Smooth Beard-tongue, *P. laevigatus*



Eastern White Beard-tongue, *P. pallidus*

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RIWPS Policy — *Never dig plants in the wild or without the written permission of the landowner. Take seeds sparingly.*

Note: Cultivation Note is a regular feature in **WildfloraRI**, the Bulletin of the Rhode Island Wild Plant Society. If you would be interested in writing a future cultivation note article or have suggestions of plants you would like to see included, please contact Richard.fisher@ucdenver.edu. The previous cultivation note topics are listed on the website and there is an easy to follow set of guidelines for the format of your article. — *WildfloraRI* Editorial Committee