

New England Blazing Star, Northern Blazing Star

Liatris scariosa (L.) Willd. var. *novae angliae* Lunnell

Family: *Asteraceae*

Synonyms: *Liatris novae-angliae* Lunnell; *Liatris borealis* Nuttall

by Anne B. Wagner

While walking or biking along the roads of Block Island in August, you may spot a spike of magenta flowers growing out of a grassy clump in the gritty, sandy soil. It's a stunning sight! This is New England Blazing Star, the only *Liatris* species native to New England and ranging into New York and Pennsylvania. A hardy perennial that grows from a corm, it resembles a clump of grass when it emerges in spring. The long, linear leaves ascend the flower stalk, growing smaller as they reach the bottom of the flower spike. The button-type, rosy-purple flowers (see illustration) bloom from the top down. We rarely see this late-summer beauty because its habitat is restricted to sandy coastal grasslands, heathlands on off-shore islands, clearings in dry woodlands—all habitats susceptible to development and to succession by woody plants, which Blazing Star cannot compete against—and occasionally, along roadsides or powerlines. Rhode Island Natural Heritage Program classifies New England Blazing Star as state-endangered; that is, the plant is in danger of dying out completely (Enser, 2002). The plant is being considered for federal listing, as it is globally rare and many populations contain only a few individuals. New England Blazing Star is seldom cultivated, but the New England Wildflower Society usually offers seed and sells three species from its nursery. The Rhode Island Wild Plant Society occasionally offers at its plant sales plants grown from seed gathered in the state.

Fortunately for gardeners, many species of *Liatris* suited to a wide range of garden situations are available in the trade. Some sport flowering stalks resembling bottlebrushes. Others feature more widely spaced, button-type heads that resemble thistles. Blazing Stars range in color from rosy-pink through lavender to purple, and some white forms are available. Blazing Star attracts butterflies, moths, bees, and a host of other insects. Finches and small mammals feed on the seeds.

Cultivation

Grow Blazing Stars in full sun in borders, in meadows, in cutting gardens, or as specimen plants. Species that tolerate moist conditions grow naturally in wet meadows with Big Bluestem, Switchgrass, Boltonia, goldenrods, Cardinal Flower, and Monarda and in irrigated gardens with phlox, Purple Coneflower, and Black-eyed Susan. Species that prefer dry conditions grow naturally in sandy grasslands with Little Bluestem, Black-eyed Susan, Stiff-leaved Aster, goldenrods, and Purple Coneflower. Tall stalks may need staking. Grown in shade, stems may twist. Once established, Blazing Star is drought-tolerant. Blazing Star is a long-lasting cut flower; harvest when about 2 inches of the spike is in bloom.

Propagation

Seed: Collect ripe seed in fall when flower heads become fluffy. Sow immediately outdoors or store dry in the refrigerator. Seed germinates best when treated to 90 days cold, moist stratification at 40 degrees F., followed by 70 degrees F. Unstratified seed germinates at an uneven rate over a long period at 70 degrees. Alternatively, in fall, lay the entire seed stalk on a nursery bed or soil-filled flat and cover with sand. Seeds germinate in spring.

Division: Mature plants can be divided in early spring. Dig the plant, separate into individual corms, and replant. Mature corms can be cut into pieces and planted like a seed potato, leaving an "eye" in each portion and planting it in gritty soil.



Illustration by
M. Downes

Liatris (Blazing Star) Species and Cultivars

Botanical Name	Common Name	Height	Color	Bloom	Soil	Notes
<i>L. aspera</i>	Rough Blazing Star	3-6'	rosy-purple	Aug/Sept	moist>dry	rounded bracts resemble pine cone
<i>L. cylindracea</i>	Dwarf Blazing Star	1-2'	purple	July/Aug	dry	flower heads taller than wide; bracts pointed, tight
<i>L. graminifolia</i>	Grass-leaved Blazing Star	1-2'	purple	Aug/Sept	average	
<i>L. ligulistylis</i>	Meadow Blazing Star	3-5'	purple	Aug/Sept	moist	very showy
<i>L. punctata</i>	Dotted Blazing Star	1-2'	rosy-purple	Aug/Sept	dry	translucent dots; fleshy taproot; bracts w/hairy edges
<i>L. pycnostachya</i> <i>L. pycnostachya alba</i>	Prairie Blazing Star	3-5'	rosy-purple white	Aug/Sept	wet>moist	long, pointed, reflexed bracts
<i>L. scariosa</i>	Northern Blazing Star	4'	deep purple	Aug/Sept	sandy	button-type flowers with hemispheric heads
<i>L. spicata</i>	Spike Gayfeather	3-4'	rosy-purple	Aug/Sept	wet>moist	most common species in cultivation
	'Floristan'	3-4'	purple	Jul>Sept		
	'Floristan White'	3-4'	white	Jul>Sept		
	'Kobold'	1-1'	rose-lavender	Jul/Aug		bracts blunt and held tightly against flower head
<i>L. squarrosa</i>	Scaly Blazing Star	1-2'	purple	Aug/Sept	dry	pointed bracts spread outward

Chart based on University of Maryland fact sheet augmented by information from Niche Gardens, U.S. Department of Agriculture, and Prairie Moon Nursery. Fourteen species of *Liatris* can be seen in the gardens at NEWFS Garden in the Woods.

References

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www.nichegardens.com

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*indicates sources directly utilized in this piece