

Penstemon Beauties

Although a couple of the South Okanagan native penstemons - shrubby penstemon (*Penstemon fruticosus*) and yellow penstemon (*Penstemon confertus*) - have bloomed already this year, others of this rather large and varied genus are still in bloom, just beginning to set flower buds, or have yet to flower.

This seems like a good time to familiarize or reintroduce you to this beautiful perennial.

Penstemons are native to our continent, primarily western North America. The flower colour ranges from creamy yellow, through a wide palette of pinks, purples and blues, to bright orangish-red. Penstemon height also varies: from less than one foot to the five- to six-foot Palmers penstemon. Foliage shape and colour varies as well.

Penstemon (PEN-stem-en or pen-STEM-en) flowers typically have five free or separate lobes, two up and three down. Of primary importance is the lower central lobe as it serves as a landing platform for pollinating insects, including bees. The plant is commonly called 'beardtongue' because its central lobe is tongue-shaped and covered with short hairs that help guide pollinators into the flower.

We occasionally see a hummingbird at the desert penstemon or Arizona penstemon (*Penstemon pseudospectabilis*) flowering in the demonstration garden. Butterflies frequent other penstemons, including Richardson's (*Penstemon richardsonii*), another South Okanagan native.

Perhaps the best attribute of penstemons for Okanagan gardeners is they are very easy to grow and most are perfect for our hot, dry climate. With very few exceptions, penstemons prefer a sunny location, and average, well-drained soil.

This is a plant that generally does best in the driest zone of your garden, although some of the cultivated hybrids such as Blue Buckle or Red Rocks are better suited to a zone with drip irrigation for the occasional drink.

Plant penstemons in small groups for an especially nice effect; smaller varieties are perfect in a rock garden setting.

Some penstemons self-seed quite freely, so be sure to cut the spent flower stems if you want to discourage this behaviour.

No doubt you have guessed I am very fond of penstemons, so much so we have set aside an area in our demonstration garden to show them off. We propagate harder-to-find species from seed, adding to our inventory each spring.

Just beginning to show colour is the pink sand penstemon. It won't be long before Richardson's, pineleaf (*P. pinifolius*), war axe (*P. grandiflorus* - new to us this year) and dusky penstemon (*P. whippleanus*)* are blooming.

(* Hey – I didn't name this ... but it's an interesting name, wouldn't you agree?)

Whatever your colour or height preference, penstemons are an ideal addition to your xeriscape. If you're not sure which species you'd like to add to your landscape, drop by our demonstration garden for a peek!

From the Art Knapp's newsletter: This Saturday Scott and Terry will wrap up the spring season **Garden Talk** by interviewing Jeff Lynka. Jeff, City of Penticton parks department, will talk about the City's xeriscape demonstration garden, which is looking fabulous right now.

Toni Boot is the founder and owner of Grasslands Nursery in Summerland, a nursery specializing in sustainable gardening. Comments and suggestions for future Water Wisdom columns may be directed to her at grassnursery@telus.net. Visit www.grasslandsnursery.ca to join our blog discussion.