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## Pretty Penstemons

By Lydia Holley, Master Gardener

Every spring, I am enchanted with the penstemons in my garden. Their charming blooms look like miniature bells. When they sway in the breeze, you almost expect to hear a melodic chime. Do not be stingy when adding penstemons to your garden. Each blossom is tiny, the perfect hat size for a miniature fairy. But these plants bloom in abundance on long stems which rise up to show off their pretty blooms. The more stems you have, the better the show.

Hummingbirds and butterflies are attracted to penstemons, lapping the sweet nectar like children licking ice cream on cones in the summer heat — in a frenzied manner, not wanting to miss a drop.

Place penstemons in full sun and you may be rewarded with their ability to multiply in a mannerly way, seeding themselves into a presentable patch of delicate beauty.

### Ugly Name for Pretty Flower?

Penstemons are commonly called beardtongue. I often wondered how such a sweet plant acquired such an ugly common name. It has to do with their stamen. If you look closely, you can count five stamens in each petite bloom. One of those stamen is different than the others — it is sterile. You will be able to pick out this sterile stamen because it is hairy. It is this attribute which gives penstemons the name beardtongue.

You should be able to find a penstemon to compliment your garden, since there are around 250 different species. Some are tall, some short, with blooms in several colors, and even several shades of foliage. Penstemons have a large native range, from Canada to Guatemala. There are numerous species native to the United States, several native to Texas, and at least two — *Penstemon digitalis* (Mississippi beardtongue) and *Penstemon murrayanus* (Scarlet beardtongue) — native to East Texas.



If you want to be enchanted, attract hummingbirds and butterflies (and possibly miniature fairies) to your garden, add penstemons. When they bloom, remember to look into their tiny bells to see their bearded tongues.

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