

Ode to the Penstemon

As diverse as this group of plants is, they all share some common characteristics. The genus *Penstemon* contains over 250 species from North America and Mexico. In each flower only four true stamens (pollen bearing structures) are present, despite the Greek derivation *pente*, five and *stemon*, stamen. American garden books call them 'Beard Tongues', referring to a hairy surface on the staminode (the reduced fifth stamen) within each flower, and on the lower lip of the corolla. We horticulturists are accustomed to 'oral' references in the description of flowers...teeth, throat, tongue, etc. Without digressing any further, let me say that I've never heard anybody ask if we have any Beard Tongues for sale. It's just *Penstemon*.

Some species, like *P. pinifolius* are ground-huggers from dry washes. Some, such as *P. pseudospectabilis* are native to California deserts. Others are alpine in origin, requiring a rocky soil and excellent drainage. One example is *P. newberryi* (Mountain Pride), whose bright pink flowers can be seen sprouting from scree and granite crevices at high elevations in our Sierra Nevada. This and the other alpine species won't appreciate being planted in our Bay Area clay and are best left to container culture.



On the other hand, a huge group of garden hybrids exists under the 'technically inaccurate' heading of *Penstemon gloxinioides*. There are dozens of colors, sizes, and shapes to choose from here, though most bear large flowers on 2- to

3-foot-tall racemes. These plants stand out in my mind primarily for the late summer spectacle they provide, but also as dependable border subjects where conditions are not

extremely hot and dry. Come take a look at what's available in our gallon Sun Perennial section. For patient, more budget-minded shoppers, our 4" pots are only \$6.95.

These garden perennials gained notoriety as bedding plants in English-style borders, and in smaller cottage garden settings. We enjoy almost 6 months of bloom here in the Bay Area, from April (if already established) through September.

Care is easy if you follow the basics for most non-woody perennials: cut back and divide in fall, feed in spring, and groom in summer.

Now is the best time for planting as we anticipate fall rains.

—Paul

WEEKEND SPECIALS

Sept 3-5
Roses

All sizes/varieties ~ 50% OFF

Sept 10-12
Bellingham Gloves

'Blue' all sizes ~ \$4.29 (reg. 5.99)

Sept 17-19
CA Natives

All sizes ~ 30% OFF

Sept 24-26
Camellias

All sizes ~ 30% OFF

Oct 1-3
Chrysanthemums

4-inch pots ~ \$1.99 (reg. 2.95)

Oct 8-10
Recipe 420 Potting Soil
1.5 cu. ft. bags ~ \$15.75 (reg. 20.99)

Oct 15-17
Happy Frog Fertilizers
4 lb. bags ~ \$10.25 (reg. 13.99)

Oct 22-24
Iceland Poppies
4-inch pots ~ \$1.99 (reg. 2.95)

Oct 29-31
Cover Crop Seeds
All varieties ~ 30% OFF

LIMITED TO STOCK ON HAND.
NO DELIVERIES ON SALE MERCHANDISE.

Hours: 9:00 am to 5:00 pm • No entry after 4:40 pm • Closed Thursdays

510-526-4704 • berkeleyhort.com • mail@berkeleyhort.com

Tips on thrips

Thrips has become the number one pest in California gardens in recent years. Many people do not realize that their gardens are infested until the leaves of their plants are stippled and silver-colored with thrips damage. Colonies of these tiny sucking insects can be found on the undersides of infested leaves. The tiny white to yellow nymphs and yellow to black adults leave behind black spots of feces. Once leaves are damaged they cannot recover and are best removed.

Most thrips damage occurs during the warmer, drier months of the year. Plants in dry shady locations appear to be more susceptible with the lower leaves at greatest risk. Well-watered healthy gardens and plants with overhead watering tend to be less susceptible. Forceful streams of water on the undersides of infested leaves can help control this pest. Plants most susceptible to thrips include *Azalea*, *Bergenia*, ferns, *Luma*, *Pyracantha*, *Rhododendron*, *Toyon* and *Viburnum*. Recently Camellias and evergreens have shown damage as well.

The sooner this insect is detected, the easier it is to control. Spray with a solution of Insecticidal Soap or a Horticultural Oil, at recommended rates. Thoroughly spray your plant with special attention to the undersides of leaves and the lower branches. Because of their short persistence, oil or soap sprays are less disruptive of natural enemies.

Nuccio's Nurseries, a grower of Camellias and Azaleas, uses a spring spraying of Horticultural Oil to control their thrips infestations. Any subsequent outbreaks are controlled by releases of Lacewing beneficial insects which they order from insectaries.

There is evidence that plants with good mulch around their bases are less prone to thrips infestations, and Earthworm Castings are our choice for this. Mulching may provide an environment for natural predators plus improve the overall health of the plant by conserving moisture. Removal of badly infested leaves and any plant debris from around the base of the plant is recommended before spraying.

While there is no magic cure for thrips, keeping a close watch on established plantings, selecting plants that are less susceptible, deep watering during the warm season, and immediate treatment when thrips are first detected will go a long way toward managing this widespread pest.

Save the Date

As a warmup for our Centenary next year, we are planning a day of fun at the nursery on

Saturday, November 6th, 2021.

For this pre-100th anniversary event we will have a live guitarist in the garden, and a succulent workshop by David Boniske that includes a free bento box lunch with drinks. Be sure to follow us on Instagram for more information about our pre-100th celebration and how to sign up.



Miscellaneous Ramblings from a semi-retired horticulturist

The past 18 months have me wondering if we will ever get back to life as we knew it. I look back and realize just how much I have taken for granted. Reminiscing: here are some things that I miss about the good old days.

Orange groves were once commonplace around Los Angeles. Now, because of introduced agricultural pests, urbanization, and the paving of huge expanses of arable soil, overheating, and a lack of water, they are essentially gone.

Oak woodlands (and their wildlife) were once all over the CA central valley and Sierra Nevada foothills. Now, due to overharvesting, suburban sprawl, shopping malls, and a dropping water table, they are becoming rare.

Snow in the lower Sierra Nevada used to linger in drifts in normal years, leading to a spectacular display of wildflowers. Now we consider ourselves lucky to get a good show, due to low snowfall and a warmer vernal season.

Lawns were once widespread throughout the Bay Area, yet discoveries about chemical fertilizers and pesticides, soil/runoff and a water shortage have reduced the expanses of green grassy areas that I remember from my childhood.

When asked if a particular plant can be grown in our zone, my reaction is to answer based on advice from a trusted gardening reference book or personal experiences from my youth. But now it seems that I am forced to rely on recent climate trends or meteorological data to give useful advice.

During my youth as an aspiring gardener, I used to think that there was some empirical answer to everything botanical. From one April to the next, even the next ten, very little changed regarding concepts like dormancy, harvest, pest control, or cold hardiness. Now that I've been around the block, I realize that assumption was wrong. We live in a dynamic and rapidly changing world. We can deny these changes, at the peril of our gardens and our natural environment, or we can embrace them and make the most of what we are served.

Keep in mind that certain things are still worth doing even if there's no guarantee that it will turn out as you expected. Planting a tree that won't mature for another 30 years is still a good thing. Growing your own herbs and vegetables will always be safe. Taking action to bring attention to human impact on climate change is worthwhile.

Just remember that future generations might have their own warm memories based on what we are experiencing right now.

—Paul

THE GARDENER'S CALENDAR

September Checklist

- › Deep-water young trees to reduce leaf scorch.
- › It's harvest time. Share your bounty with friends, neighbors, coworkers.
- › Visit farmers' markets; make notes of varieties for next year's edible garden.
- › Make sure your garden is fire-safe. See us for recommendations.
- › Withhold water from your Amaryllis (*Hippeastrum*) plants this month.
- › Buy spring-blooming bulbs now. You can plant later if necessary.

October Checklist

- › Give your potted plants a boost with Fish Emulsion.
- › Our first 2022 calendars come this month!
- › Plant Iceland Poppies now for a spectacular winter display.
- › Sow your cover crop seeds as the weather cools down.
- › Come see the new Japanese Maples before leaf-drop.
- › Our first rain may come this month. Adjust your watering system accordingly.

1922 TO 2022

Next year will be our 100th Anniversary

Lots of fun events are scheduled every month, and make sure to visit us in August, September, and October, when we'll have free workshops, speakers, live music, local food vendors, special deals, and much, much more! This will be huge!

Hanging out in the sun

We are often asked for recommendations for trailing, flowering perennials that can handle direct sun, for hanging pots or wall planters. Here are some suggestions:

The hands-down favorite among the staff is ***Lotus maculatus***. The fluffy, silvery foliage looks delicate but, fortunately, it is not, and it cascades beautifully. In late spring, the plant explodes with bright flowers that look like a cross between a flaming match head and a parrot's beak. They are unusual and delightful. The plant has a wispy, airy appearance. It uses little water once established and is easy to grow.

Second on everyone's list is ***Calibrachoa***. The variety of colors! The almost-constant blooming! The foliage is sturdy enough to jut out a bit before succumbing to gravity and hanging down. The bell-shaped flowers come in a riot of colors; some are demure, many are showy. Some flowers are bicolor, some tricolor, some are speckled, some are striped, and some almost shimmer in the sun. With veined petals (sometimes in complementary colors, sometimes in contrasting colors) and deep centers, each flower provides a lot of color depth in a small package. Favorites include the perky yellow and white 'Lemon Slice', the fiery orange 'Tangerine Punch' and 'Crackling Fire', the

painterly 'Holy' series (like 'Holy Cow' and 'Holy Smokes') and iridescent colors like 'Cabaret Deep Blue'. Best of all with *Calibrachoa*, the spent flowers fall off quickly, so no deadheading is required. *Calibrachoa* is a full, bushy plant.

Verbena ranked 3rd in popularity, for its bursting clusters of flowers and exceptional heat hardiness. ***Sutera*** (*Bacopa*) is another good perennial for direct sun, offering prolific blooms in a variety of colors. For succulent lovers, the top choice is ***Portulaca***. The abundant plump, fleshy leaves are edged in pink. The flowers, mostly in pinks, yellows, and reds, are stout and bright. *Portulaca* is easy to grow, easy to maintain, and uses very little water once established. This is a full, chunky plant. ***Delosperma*** is a great succulent. It is a lanky, trailing, elegant plant with light green leaves and reddish stems, covered in daisy-like flowers that burst from the plant like fireworks. Like all succulents, it is a drought-friendly plant requiring little water. —Amy



SEEDS FOR THE SEASON

As the weather again begins to cool in October, the Bay Area typically starts to experience rain. This makes it an excellent time to begin sowing cool season crops and flowers!

Vegetables: Peas thrive in the cool Bay Area air. Check out our large selection of peas including the mildly sweet snap variety 'Sugar Daddy' by *Botanical Interests*.

Cover crops: Now is the perfect time to plant a cover crop in your expiring vegetable bed. They help to reduce erosion and naturally put nitrogen back into the soil. Be sure to look for cover crops such as white clover from *Pacific Coast Seed*.

Annuals: Nasturtiums thrive in the cool season. They vine out creating soft masses of edible yellow, orange, white, or red flowers. Nasturtiums reseed easily making this annual seem almost a perennial. *Botanical Interests* offers a large selection of nasturtiums, including the luscious 'Black Velvet'.

Natives: California poppies seem to be a favorite of locals and out-of-towners alike. Both the traditional orange California poppy and fun multi-colored mixes, can be found in the *Larner Seeds* section.

Happy Planting.

NEW ARRIVALS



Grevilleas

Native to Australia, these colorful shrubs are well suited to our Bay Area climate. Bright fire-engine red to orange-scarlet, or pink flowers attract hummingbirds. Some of our favorite low-growers are 'Jade Mound', 'Wakiti Sunrise', and *G. lanigera* 'Coastal Gem'.

#1 size cans

\$19.95 to \$22.95

Banksia species

Got a dry, rocky hillside, in full sun? Want something different? Here are some spectacular options. Flowers are borne in cone-like clusters at the ends of branches. Check out *B. baxteri* or *B. grandis* for an otherworldly look!

#5 size cans

\$79.95

Hibiscus 'Disco Belle' mix

And now, for something completely unlike the previous item. This one needs a wet location. Low growing, to 2.5 feet; large 6-to-8-inch white, pink, or dark pink flowers adorn these perennial shrublets for much of the year.

4-inch pots

\$7.95

Penstemon species & hybrids

With so many to choose from, there is simply not enough space in the garden. You've read the cover article, so you know that they're simply amazing. Myriad color choices, sun/shade/deer tolerance (maybe), clay...what's not to like!

#1 size cans

\$14.95 to \$16.95

The Lazy Gardener: Earthworks facilitate passive irrigation

Earthworks are strategically designed ways of shaping the earth to slow the flow of storm water.

The vast majority of our rain water runs off into streams and sewers, carrying chemicals, fertilizers, and sediment. Three quarts of healthy soil can easily hold one quart of water. Instead of investing in rain barrels and their accoutrements, why not use your own soil as a living sponge?

This year, I'm being mischievous in the garden. All that weeding, mowing, pruning, and ploughing can be a lot of work, so I've made an experiment of asking "what can I get away with not doing?" In February, when I sowed common vetch and nasturtium with the Must Have Mustards Baby Greens Seed mix by Botanical Interests, I scattered seeds haphazardly over mulch, hose-watered for about a minute, and walked away. I didn't remember to water again until a couple of days later, at which point the mustard tendergreens had already sprouted. As an inexperienced grower who has never had a modicum of luck with seeds, I was amazed to see first the five types of mustard, then the vetch,

then the nasturtium grow happily in a garden bed I had spent next to no time caring for. More compelling still was that vetch (which I had scattered elsewhere in the garden and watered just as frequently) was not sprouting anywhere except this new garden bed. I suspect that my nitrogen-fixing cover crop thrived in this spot alone because I had engineered my garden bed as part of a very simple earthworks system.

In California, landscapes incorporating earthworks make the most of occasional, heavy rains to replenish groundwater reservoirs rather than allowing valuable moisture to run off into streams and sewers. Earthworks consist of thoughtfully placed basins, drains, and walls, all built out of soil. A **swale**, used to catch rainwater and runoff, is a depression or trench that holds water while the soil absorbs it. This infrastructure is especially useful to gardeners in the East Bay, where our clay soils, resisting vertical absorption, tend to drain more laterally. Raised mounds of soil, called **berms**, can be used to direct water into swales. Together, berms and swales create terraces that facilitate passive irriga-

tion, discourage erosion, and look fantastic. These two terraforms also complement each other by allowing lazy gardeners to kill two birds with one stone.

Dig an on-contour trench and pile up the excavated dirt directly downhill and parallel to your swale. Break up the clods, tamp down the top of the pile, and cut a spillway through the bed to accommodate any overflow (maybe into a second swale?). Voila! You've built a berm and swale. Some permaculturists like to plant their swales with aquatic plants and use their berms as raised paths. I opted to do the opposite, filling the swale with a cedar chip mulch and planting the berm. The roots of my mustards, vetch, and nasturtium are able to reach water stored in and around the swale. Rain that fell in other areas where I'd sowed vetch was not able to percolate as deeply, and were therefore subject to more surface evaporation. Can you get away with scattering seeds over woodchips and watering twice in early spring? Yes, but only with the help of earthworks.

—Schuster