

Penstemon digitalis (Foxglove penstemon)

Botanical Bytes
By Gregory Bruner

Foliage Height: 12"-18"

Foliage Width: 18"-24"

Flower Height: 24"-36"

Foliage Color: Green

Flower Color: White

USDA Hardiness: 3-8

Moisture: Dry - Average

Light: Sun - Part Sun



Penstemon digitalis is a good, solid backbone of the garden. This leafy critter ranges from the northern states of Minnesota and Maine down to South Carolina and west to Texas. It can be seen on roadsides, woodland edges, and large open fields throughout these areas.

Beardtongue, Smooth white penstemon, Talus slope penstemon, and Foxglove penstemon are just a few of the common names that vary from region to region. The name beardtongue derives from the fact that one of the stamens has a tuft of hairs on it. The remaining stamens are hairless, which leads to the name Smooth penstemon.

The garden potential for this plant is high. The foliage is a lush green. The rosette of leaves may reach 18-24" wide as the plant matures. This flush of greenery turns a wonderful red in the fall, thus adding a second season of interest. The foliage may begin to look a bit rough by spring, so trim it back once the new growth begins to show.

No gardening discussion is complete without discussing the flowers. The stems will rise out of the mass of foliage up to a height of three feet, showing off the flowers for all to see in late spring or early summer. The white tubular flowers have no scent but still attract all sorts of aerial visitors including butterflies, moths, hummingbirds, native bees, honeybees, and bumblebees. It is also a larval source for some butterflies and moths. The odds are in the gardener's favor that the flowers will have some fun visitors. The flowers will brighten up your garden for at least 4-6 weeks. The flower stems are rigid enough to make good cut flowers. Bringing the beauty of your garden inside is always enjoyable.

The average gardener's yard will normally have a spot for this leafy family member. It prefers full sun but can tolerate some shade if necessary. Average to dry sites are definitely better than wet ones. If this penstemon is planted in poorly drained wet soils, it will struggle and eventually die. Root rot becomes much more common for this plant in soggy sites. On the other end of the spectrum, during extreme dry spells foliage may turn yellow and wilt. However, unless it is an extended drought, the plant should bounce back after the next rain. The ability of a plant to adapt is important for its survival. This plant is drought tolerant, salt tolerant, and deer resistant, which allows it to thrive in a wide range of situations.

Penstemon digitalis has a résumé that places it at the top of the list for sunny gardening. It is a semi-evergreen, wildlife-attracting specimen that should give years of enjoyment. Whether you enjoy the flowers or the hummingbirds, bees, and butterflies, it is a winner!