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Firecracker Penstemon in the Landscape

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Penstemon eatonii

Firecracker penstemon

Description: Bright scarlet flowers that shower from arching stems of firecracker penstemon have made this plant a favorite of many penstemon enthusiasts. The species is found throughout the West at elevations from 3,000 to 11,000 feet. It is adaptable to various soil textures but thrives in low-fertility soils. Like most penstemon species, its roots require excellent soil drainage. The bright red tubular flower makes it a favorite nectar source for hummingbirds. The common name for penstemon is ‘beardtongue’, named for the infertile stamen that protrudes from the flower and looks like a hairy tongue. Firecracker penstemon is cold-hardy all over the Intermountain West, and preliminary common garden trials indicate that seed source should not influence its hardiness.

Cultural Requirements:

- **Native Habitat**: Widely distributed throughout the West.
- **Soil**: Well drained, low fertility, pH 7.0-8.0
- **Cold Tolerance**: Zones 3 - 7
- **Drought Tolerance**: High
- **Salt Tolerance**: Unknown
- **Sun/Shade Preference**: Full sun to part shade
- **Propagation**: Seed, stem cuttings, or division
• Maintenance  Do not over-water or over-fertilize. Reseeds freely, so clip stalks after final bloom to prevent spreading.

• Problems  Susceptible to lodging (stalks fall over) and root rot diseases if over-watered.

**Landscape Value:**

- **Use in the Landscape**  Borders, accents, rock gardens; often recommended as cut flowers.
- **Foliage**  Basal leaves are ovate, upper leaves are opposite and lanceolate and slightly curled.
- **Inflorescence**  Showy. Will re-bloom if spent flowers are removed.

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**Propagation:** To start seed indoors, cold-moist stratify for up to 112 days, and sow into container to a depth of 1/8 inch. For sowing seed outdoors, sow seed in fall and cover with 1/8 inch soil. Pre-soaking seed with 500 ppm gibberellic acid (GA) prior to cold-stratification may improve germination rate. Division of mature plants may be done in spring or fall.

**Additional Photos:**

![Image of cultivar 'Richfield Selection'](USU Herbarium)
References:


USDA Plants Database. 2008. URL: http://plants.usda.gov


This fact sheet belongs to a series of fact sheets about Intermountain West native trees, shrubs, perennials, and grasses called “Native Plants in the Landscape.” Look for others in the series by visiting http://extension.usu.edu/htm/publications, then clicking on ‘Horticulture’ and ‘Native Plants’.

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