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Firecracker Penstemon in the Landscape

Heidi Kratsch, Extension Ornamental Horticulture Specialist
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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
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:

- 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.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Apr</th>
<th>May</th>
<th>June</th>
<th>July</th>
<th>Aug</th>
<th>Sept</th>
<th>Oct</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Color</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Fruit (seedheads)</strong></td>
<td>Capsule</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Form</strong></td>
<td>Clumping, erect, few to many stems</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Texture</strong></td>
<td>Medium</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Ultimate Size</strong></td>
<td>10-40 inches</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Rate of Growth</strong></td>
<td>Medium to fast; flowers in second year.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Plant Community</strong></td>
<td>Most communities from subalpine to salt desert shrub.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Availability</strong></td>
<td>“Utah’s Choice” selection; (visit <a href="http://www.utahschoice.org/natives/wheretobuy">http://www.utahschoice.org/natives/wheretobuy</a> for more information).</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Cultivars</strong></td>
<td>‘Richfield Selection’</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

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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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