Firecracker Penstemon in the Landscape

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Firecracker Penstemon in the Landscape

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Graham Hunter, Research Associate, Center for Water Efficient Landscaping

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.

<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>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Color</strong></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Fruit (seedheads)</strong></td>
<td>Capsule</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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</table>

• **Cultivars** ‘Richfield Selection’

**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:**

![Additional Photos](image_url)
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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