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H.E. Bates

the well-known novelist writes about how his garden grows



THE FRIENDLY PENSTEMONS

What would you have thought and said. I wonder, if your parents had discovered you *Scrophulariaceae*? You would not, I fancy, have been entirely flattered. Yet this ludicrous lump of letters is, in fact, the family name of one of the most charming, and all too little grown, of garden plants—namely the penstemons, the word simply deriving from *pente*, five, and *stemon*, meaning stamens.

It always puzzles me greatly why penstemons are not more grown. Every year visitors to my garden gaze on them with something near to rapture, and declare they have never seen them before and then, more often than not, end up by saying something about 'those lovely foxgloves'. This remark is entirely excusable, since that is precisely what penstemons do look like: a sort of superior, dwarfed foxglove, though with a greater range of colour and a later period of flowering.

It is possible that gardeners may well be frightened off penstemons in the belief that they are not hardy. True though this is to a certain extent, the cause of failure with penstemons, is, I fear, all too often the fault of the gardener rather than that of the plant. One of the ills to which many gardeners (and jobbing gardeners especially, alas) are addicted, is the autumn exercise of tidying up and cutting down. More plants, I suspect, are lost through this passion for winter tidiness than any other. The spring version of the same complaint is almost equally responsible for the quick demise of many a lovely bloom in the garden.

Penstemons simply will not tolerate either version of this treatment. Left alone, they will certainly end up the winter by looking more or less like withered and broken reeds; cut down too early in spring, they will reward you by dying almost instantly. Their state of miserable untidiness from December to late April must therefore be tolerated with patience. The dead-looking stalks will afford the plant a certain degree of protection, after which, as light and warmth both increase, new shoots will happily appear from ground level, ready for a longish summer flowering.

Fortunately penstemons are easily raised from seed and may, in fact, be treated simply as annuals. Here, however, may lie a further cause for failure: that of sowing too early. Bad gardening books, like bad history books, are all too prone to repeat the mistakes of their predecessors, and one of their commoner exercises in misguidance is to suggest that penstemons should be sown in February. I firmly believe this to be, for the ordinary gardener, far too early. In the summer of 1969—I readily acknowledge it, of course, to have been a long and glorious one—I sowed penstemons as late as June and was rewarded by the loveliest possible display in August, September, October, and even November.

This seed was simply that of the ordinary mixed *Hartwegia* varieties which you will find in any catalogue, and which will give you a range of colours from near white through shrimp pink, sugar pink, near scarlet, crimson, violet and sometimes to an almost blackish purple. The flowers in these strains are sometimes less like big foxgloves than small gloxinias, and the garden name for this entire group is, in fact, *P. gloxiniodes*.

The nomenclature of the penstemons, all of which come originally from the North American continent, is much confused, and I therefore won't confuse you further by trying to explore it in detail. Let me simply say that Newbury Gem is a vivid scarlet beauty which can easily be raised from seed. There is another called Ruby which, charming though it is, should be used carefully by those who are sensitive to anything approaching magenta (I myself find Ruby delightful when married

to any silver-leaved partner). Another scarlet charmer is *barbatus*, also called *chelone barbata*, with altogether narrower, more refined tubular flowers on stems of delicate grace.

Though there is not, as far as I know, a really good pure white penstemon (I am open, even eager, to correction on this) there are several blue ones. *P. caeruleus*, as its name implies, is one, though *P. heterophyllus* True Blue is probably better. *P. ovatus* begins its flowering life by being blue but gradually turns to purple, a feat which again may not altogether please those who are hypersensitive to colour. Its compensation is that it flowers all summer long.

There are many named varieties of penstemon which may be bought for spring planting (never in the autumn) and may be kept true to name by the simple process of taking late autumn cuttings which may be over-wintered in a cold greenhouse or frame. These, however, are not exactly cheap and, for my own part, I prefer, for two reasons, the mixed garden varieties: first because their mixture of pinks and crimsons and scarlets and violets and purples I find delightful; second because out of every mixed batch you will, without doubt, find half a dozen purer, more refined examples which, when increased from cuttings, will give you a variety equal in loveliness to any of the named varieties and which you can then name after your first-born, your favourite rich maiden aunt, or your best girl-friend. Friend, by the way, is wholly in tune with the penstemons. They are an entirely friendly family, graceful, unflamboyant and quite lovable.

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Fans of H. E. Bates will find his recently published autobiography, *The Vanished World* (Michael Joseph, £2 10s), enthralling reading. This tells the fascinating story of his childhood years through to the publication of his first book in the early thirties, *The Two Sisters*. □□