



Dense Blazingstar — *Liatris spicata*

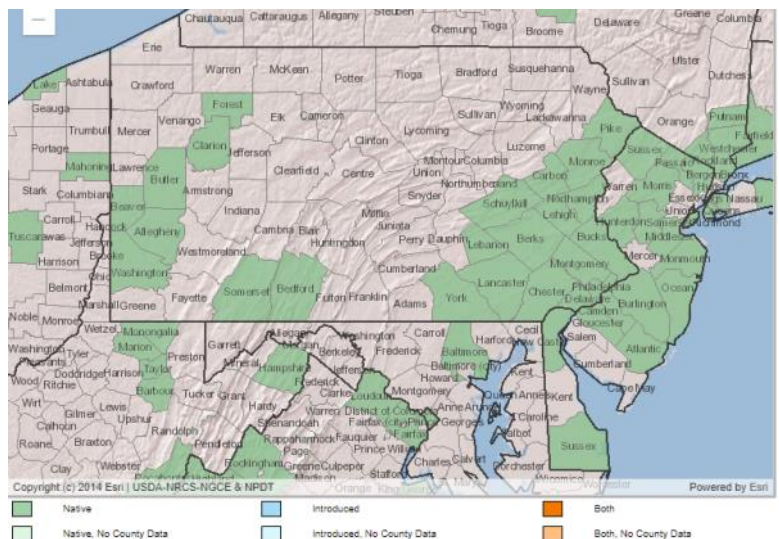
Blazing Stars are a native wildflower that has long been known for being a fantastic native for attracting butterflies to your garden. In Illinois, where I worked for a number of years, six *Liatris* species could be found across various types of sunny prairie and wetland habitats. In Pennsylvania, however, with all of our wonderful woodlands, there are far fewer blazing stars and only one species – Dense Blazing Star (*Liatris spicata*) – is somewhat common. Even its natural range is not distributed evenly across the state but we are lucky to have it here in Allegheny County.

In Pennsylvania, Dense Blazing Star grows in the moist soils of certain prairie types and meadows, and along marsh edges. This blazing star would be one of your best native plant choices if you have a sunny, damp spot in your yard, but it also adapts well to garden soils and is fairly drought tolerant once established. Another common name is Marsh Blazing Star.

This beautiful native produces a tall terminal flower spike that, like June's White Beardtongue, brings another vertical accent into the garden. Densely clustered magenta pink blooms start flowering about mid-July and carry on into August. The flower spike is typically 6-12" long with the flowerheads crowded along the spike facing in all directions; each flower head consists of 5-9 smaller florets. Flowering starts at the top and moves down. For all its beauty, there is no floral scent.

Each plant can produce several flower stalks from a basal rosette of 12" long narrow leaves that get smaller as they move up the stem. Clumps will become larger each year on this long-lived native.

Dense Blazing Star will grow 2-5 feet tall depending on conditions. It is happiest in a loamy soil that has enough organic material to hold moisture. This is one of the natives that should not be over-fertilized or it will overgrow and become unattractive. It may require staking to remain upright.



PA counties where Dense Blazing Star has been documented (green)

Source: <https://plants.usda.gov/home/plantProfile?symbol=LISP>

The only strike against this blazing star is that rabbits like to chew on new plants and deer will browse the mature clumps so keep them protected until they are established and less sensitive to browsing pressure.

Blazing stars support a wide range of pollinators. They are highly recommended as a Monarch nectar source by the [Xerces Society](#) and other skippers and butterflies also find the flowers an attractive nectar source. They also attract bumblebees and leaf-cutter bees, and are the host plant for two flower moths. All bees collect nectar and some bees also collect pollen as a good protein source for their emerging young.

A popular cultivar in the nursery trade selected for its shorter height is called *Liatris 'Kobold'*, but mark your calendars for the spring native plant sale next year sponsored by the [Audubon Society of Western Pennsylvania](#). Dense Blazing Star was on their list of spring offerings! When available, it can also be purchased from North Creek Nurseries, a wholesale grower, through [Izel Native Plants](#).

If you would like to see Dense Blazing Star growing in its native habitat, we are lucky to be a fairly close drive to Jennings Environmental Education Center near Slippery Rock in Butler County. The Jennings EEC is home to a rare and beautiful 20-acre native prairie that has existed since the last ice age. It is named for Dr. Otto Emery Jennings, a well-known botanist who discovered the rare prairie in 1905. The Western Pennsylvania Conservancy, partnered with Dr. Jennings and the Butler Garden Club to protect the property. Jennings was the first reserve established in Pennsylvania to protect an individual plant species and remains the only public and protected prairie in the commonwealth. Here's a great story from the Allegheny Front in 2020: [A Rare Prairie in Pennsylvania Is In Full Bloom Right Now.](#)



Dense Blazing Star Flower spike
Source: [Wildflowers of Western Pennsylvania](#)



A close up of Blazing Star's florets
Source: https://www.illinoiswildflowers.info/wetland/plants/msh_blazingstar.htm

For more reading about this native wildflower, see [Wildflowers of Western Pennsylvania](#) on Facebook. Use the search tool and search for the scientific name.

A note about cultivars: Cultivars are selections of a species or hybrids of several species that are propagated vegetatively or by tissue culture in order to maintain the preferred character. Hence, all *Liatris* 'Kobold,' a selection from *Liatris spicata*, are genetically identical. The origins of *Liatris* 'Floristan White,' another popular cultivar with white blooms, is not as clear. The nectar or pollen value can be diminished or lost with these manipulations. When possible, it is best to plant the native species. For more information on this question see Annie White's [How Native Plant Cultivars Affect Pollinators](#).



This *Schinia* flower moth can be hard to see on this Blazing Star flower spike.

Photo: Photo: [Don Cadle / BugGuide.net](#)

Source: <https://xerces.org/blog/plants-for-pollinators-blazingstar>