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by Trish Beckjord

White Beardtongue — *Penstemon digitalis*

I have always enjoyed seeing White Beardtongue blooming in the early summer garden. I like the way the flower stalks add a vertical accent, and the way the basal leaf rosettes stay semi-evergreen through the winter. I also definitely enjoy the deep burgundy tint of the maturing leaves in the spring.

This penstemon, one of more than 200 species in the US, is found throughout Pennsylvania. In the wild of SW PA, you will find it in moist, sandy soil in fields, prairies, or open woods. It does best in full sun and is easily adaptable to the residential garden.

The 1-inch long white (sometimes pinkish) tubular flowers arise in pairs from a basal rosette of leaves and cluster at the top of a 2 ½-3 ft. terminal stem. Each flower has five lobes, 2 fused in an upper lip and 3 into a lower lip giving them a sort of snapdragon appearance. Faint violet lines on the lobes act as nectar guides to visiting insects. There is no scent.

White Beardtongue blooms late spring and early summer and pairs nicely with other early summer blooming natives such as Lance-leaved Coreopsis ([Coreopsis lanceolata](#)). The popular cultivar 'Husker Red' was selected from the original species.

This native wildflower attracts hummingbirds and a variety of bees including honeybees and bumblebees. Heather Holm's [Pollinators of Native Plants](#) identifies small and medium-sized native bees such as Carpenter and Digger bees as the flowers most frequent visitors. White Beardtongue is the pollen source for a specialist native Mason Bee (*Osmia distincta*) and a specialist native wasp, Pollen-collecting Wasp (*Pseudomasaris occidentalis*). Seeds are not typically eaten by birds and few mammals eat the leaves. It is described as being deer resistant.



The clear white flowers of *Penstemon digitalis*



Semi-evergreen basal rosette photographed in December

As a perennial, White Beardtongue can be relatively short-lived however it reseeds “nicely” around the garden. I have not found it to be overly aggressive in this way. Seedlings that come up in an undesirable spot can be easily recognized and pulled or transplanted.

Other common names listed by the [Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center](#) for this species include Mississippi Penstemon, Mississippi Beardtongue, Smooth White Penstemon, Smooth White Beardtongue, Talus Slope Penstemon, Talus Slope Beardtongue, Foxglove Penstemon, Foxglove Beardtongue. It’s easy to see why it is always important to search for a plant using its scientific name!

Plant it in your garden and let the hummingbirds come!

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



The bright white of the White Beardtongue pairs nicely with the sunny golden yellow of Lance-leaved Coreopsis.



Upright habit of White Penstemon in its full mid-June bloom.



Ruby-throated Hummingbird at White Penstemon.
From [The Natural Web](#).

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 Penstemon ‘Husker Red,’ a selection from Penstemon digitalis, are genetically identical. Penstemon ‘Dark Towers,’ which demonstrates an even deeper purple foliage, is the result of crossing more than one species. 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](#).