

Penstemons of the San Gabriel Mountains near Los Angeles, California

<http://tchester.org/sgm/plants/keys/penstemon.html>

Introduction

Penstemons in the San Gabriel Mountains have tubular flowers, colored either scarlet or a shade of purple or blue, and opposite (paired) leaves. The flowers have five petals usually divided into two lips--the upper one of two lobed (rounded) petals and the lower of three cleft (cut) petals. The name, Penstemon, comes from "five stamens". Sometimes one of them is hairy or bearded giving rise to the common name for some species, Beardtongue.

The red-flowered penstemons in the High Country are often pollinated by hummingbirds, sometimes of the genus *Selasphorus*. It's a gorgeous site to come upon while walking the highest trails--red flowers, red hummingbirds. Exquisite!

The following descriptions are intended to be useful to hikers and discuss only structures and features that are visible without magnification, distinguishable without measurement and understandable without using a dictionary.

Key

Purple or Blue Flowers

- Heavily lined on lower lip = [Penstemon grinnellii](#)
- Not heavily lined on lower lip
 - Small floppy plant, elevation above 6700' = [Penstemon caesius](#)
 - Not small plant, elevation less than 6000'
 - Leaves clustered on stem; linear = [Penstemon heterophyllus](#)
 - Leaves not clustered; clasping
 - Leaves clasping, not toothed, sometimes folded lengthwise = [Penstemon speciosus](#)
 - Leaves fused at base, spiny toothed = [Penstemon spectabilis](#)

Scarlet Flowers

- Shrubby or vinelike plants

- Leaves paired with heart-shaped bases, low elevation = [Keckiella cordifolia](#)
- Leaves in threes, linear; middle elevation = [Keckiella ternata](#)
- Not shrubby or vinelike plants
 - Leaves gray-green or waxy-blue, low to mid-elevation = [Penstemon centranthifolius](#)
 - Leaves not gray-green, highest elevations
 - Plant hugging the ground, leaves of similar size, often purple-colored early in season, flower stalks droopy = [Penstemon rostriflorus](#)
 - Plant with basal leaves largest, few leaves on stem and those decreasing in size upward, upright flower stems = [Penstemon labrosus](#)

Purple Flowers

- [Penstemon caesius](#)
 - Common name: San Bernardino beardtongue
 - Plant communities: Yellow Pine Forest, Lodgepole Forest, Subalpine Forest
 - Elevation: between 6700 and 11300 feet
 - Location: Dawson Saddle
 - Flower: [diagram](#)
 - Comments: this plant grows under the Jeffrey pines on the Dawson Saddle Trail on the rocky north-facing slope before you come to the junction with the PCT; it has a floppy habit, soft gray-green leaves and a plain violet-blue flower; be happy when you find it, it's one of the few colorful flowers you'll see on this part of this wonderful trail
- [Penstemon grinnellii](#)
 - Common names: Grinnell's penstemon, Grinnell's beardtongue
 - Plant communities: Yellow Pine Forest, Foothill Woodland, Pinyon-Juniper Woodland
 - Elevation: between 1640 and 9500 feet
 - Location: Mount Wilson, Bear Flat, Sawmill Mountain, Granite Mountain, Mill Creek, Angeles Crest Highway (SR 2)
 - [Flower:](#) in the San Gabriels, the flower is generally light lavender and the purple guidelines for the bees very prominent on the lower lip; the tube is inflated; note the classic hairy or bearded tongue in this picture
 - [Leaf:](#) yellow-green in color and sharply serrated on the edges
 - [Seed:](#) the beige-colored seed stalk remains above the plant throughout the winter
 - [Habit:](#) a squat, bushy plant; note the gravelly soil on a slope
 - Comments: occurs in gravelly soil on granitic substrate under dry conditions; it seems to be the most common understory plant along SR 2 at high elevations; its serrate yellow-green leaves with last year's remnant flower stalks are often the only non-tree, non-shrub plant seen during of the colder part of the year in this area
 - Link: [Penstemon grinnellii](#)
- [Penstemon heterophyllus](#)

- Common name: foothill penstemon, bunchleaf penstemon
- Plant communities: Chaparral, Foothill Woodland, Yellow Pine Forest
- Elevation: between 164 and 5249 feet
- Location: near Rincon Station, Mill Creek Summit, Mint Canyon, Sunset Ridge Trail
- [Flower](#): young buds yellow
- [Leaf](#): linear leaves formed in bunches; [diagram](#)
- [Seed](#)
- [Habit](#)
- Comments: occurs under dry conditions on slopes
- Link: [Penstemon heterophyllus](#)
- [Penstemon speciosus](#)
 - Common name: royal penstemon, showy penstemon, sagebrush penstemon
 - Plant communities: Sagebrush Scrub, Yellow Pine Forest
 - Elevation: between 0 and 10400 feet
 - Location: intersection of Table Mountain Road and Big Pines Highway at Big Pines
 - [Flower](#): bright royal [sky] blue; [flowers](#) grow close together without much stem in between
 - [Leaf](#)
 - [Seed](#)
 - [Habit](#)
 - Comments: occurs under dry conditions; on steep rocky slopes/road cuts on Table Mountain
- [Penstemon spectabilis](#)
 - Common name: showy penstemon
 - Plant communities: Coastal Sage Scrub, Chaparral
 - Elevation: between 328 and 7874 feet
 - Location: Roberts Canyon, Browns Flat, Glendora Ridge Road
 - [Flower](#): young buds purple
 - [Leaf](#): paired leaves fused at base on flower stem, edges serrated; [diagram](#)
 - [Habit](#)
 - Link: [Penstemon spectabilis](#)

Scarlet Flowers

Shrubby or vinelike

- [Keckiella cordifolia](#)
 - Common name: heart-leaved penstemon
 - Plant community: Chaparral
 - Elevation: between 0 and 3937 feet
 - Location: San Gabriel Canyon, Burro Canyon, Rubio Canyon, Gabrielino Trail,

SR 2 from Clear Creek to Shortcut Saddle

- [Flower](#)
- [Leaf](#): the leaves clasp the stem and are heart-shaped at the base and pointy at the tip; [diagram](#)
- [Habit](#) vinelike
- Comments: this plant looks like a red-flowered honeysuckle; the leaves turn yellow to red to crimson and remain on the plant giving beautiful, long-lasting late summer to fall color
- Links
 - [Heart-leaved Keckiella](#)
 - [more](#)
 - [and yet more](#)
- [Keckiella ternata](#)
 - Common names: wand penstemon, blue-stemmed keckiella
 - Plant communities: Chaparral, Yellow Pine Forest
 - Elevation: between 0 and 6000 feet
 - Location: Charlton Flat, Sawmill Mountain, Mt. Wilson
 - [Leaf](#): in sets of threes or twos, serrated edge; [diagram](#)
 - [Habit](#)
 - Comments: occurs under dry conditions in canyons and on slopes

Not Shrubby

- [Penstemon centranthifolius](#)
 - Common name: scarlet bugler
 - Plant community: chaparral
 - Elevation: between 0 and 5905 feet
 - Location: Mt. Disappointment, Rock Creek, Crystal Lake, Henninger Flats, San Francisquito, Mt. Gleason, Bouquet Canyon, Liebre Mountain
 - [Flower](#): not obviously two-lipped; short, scarcely spreading petals all of a similar size
 - [Leaf](#): thick, gray-green or waxy-blue with a whitened look; smooth edges
 - [Seed](#)
 - [Habit](#)
 - Comments: found in dry, open places
 - Links
 - [Penstemon centranthifolius](#)
 - [Penstemon centranthifolius](#)
 - [Penstemon centranthifolius photos taken at Cajon Pass](#)
- [Penstemon labrosus](#)
 - Common name: San Gabriel beardtongue
 - Plant communities: Yellow Pine Forest, Lodgepole Forest
 - Elevation: between 4921 and 7874 feet
 - Locations: Buckhorn, Grassy Hollow, Mt. Wilson, Horse Flats, Blue Ridge, Mt. Williamson Trail
 - [Flower](#): the flower is very distinctive because of the three long lower petals that

are:

- 3/8 size of whole flower
- longer than the upper petals
- strongly reflexed, that is, turned backwards (the somewhat similar Bridge's penstemon doesn't have such long petals and they point downward)
- the base of the flower is swollen and yellow

diagram

- Leaf: the tough, bright-green leaves are mostly basal; they get much smaller as they go up the stem; they only go up about halfway; the edges are smooth
- Habit: upright flower stems
- Comments: very attractive to hummingbirds; occurs on dry slopes and benches
- *Penstemon rostriflorus*, *Penstemon bridgesii*
 - Common names: beaked penstemon, Bridge's penstemon
 - Plant communities: Yellow Pine Forest, Lodgepole Forest, Subalpine Forest
 - Elevation: between 5000 and 10700 feet
 - Locations: Kratka Ridge, Roundtop Mountain, Dawson Saddle
 - Flower: the upper lip of the flower is variously described as domed, beaked, or helmetlike, in other words, it has an overbite! the petals of the lower lip point downward; diagram
 - Leaf: dark green, linear leaves of similar size from base to top of stem, the edges are toothed
 - Habit: low to the ground, spreading; flower stalks droopy; woody at the base
 - Comments: this is a quite common plant along the upper elevation trails where other herbaceous plants are scarce; it begins its year's growth with small linear leaves with the undersides and the stems appearing almost purple; long blooming period; attractive to insects
- *Penstemon eatonii* not found in the San Gabriels
 - Common name: Eaton's firecracker
- *Epilobium canum* has only four petals; not a penstemon
 - Common name: California fuchsia

Sources

[CalFlora Occurrence Database: Advanced Query](#) search for *Penstemon* in Los Angeles County.

A California Flora by Philip A. Munz. University of California Press, 1968.

Flowering Plants, The Santa Monica Mountains, Coastal and Chaparral Regions of Southern California by Nancy Dale, Capra Press, 1986

The Jepson Manual, Higher Plants of California edited by James C. Hickman, University of California Press, 1993

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