

# DASANTHERA REMINISCENCES

Roy Davidson

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Being interested in the proposal of a propagation and exchange facility to perpetuate selected penstemon clones, I am anxious to review some of those that have passed through my life and garden, most of which I can still provide for the project. It is a sad fact of life though that they do not prosper here in this cold Puget Sound garden as it has become shadier and consequently cooler, and the winter air drainage is poor.

One of the best things I found while studying the distributions and variations (and the hybrids) of the *Dasanthera* in the wild was from a hybrid swarm between *dauidsonii* and *cardwellii* on the Oregon Cascade Crest near Breitenbush Lake. I called it 'Breitenbush Blue' as it was nearest to azure of any *Dasanthera* I had seen. It still persists in the arid garden at my sister's in eastern Washington where it reflowers nicely in late summer on tidy little bushes of a pleasant dark green, the leaf margins trying very hard to be smooth, but under a hand glass they are undulate and with rudimentary little toothy projections.

Another reflowering clone came from seed gathered by Carl and Edith English in the Siskiyou of northern California quite close to the type station for Miss Eastwood's *P. newberryi* ssp. *berryi* and the color is a pleasant pink. It has been with me for twenty-five years as has the blue. Both these are small in scale, enough so as to be ideal trough plants.

There are those smaller still, the miniature mounds. One such came from Myrtle Hebert when she still lived at Elma, and it is a delightful half-size *P. rupicola* with very gray quarter-inch oval leaves and dark red flowers, not many of them but good color. It is a very slow but a very special little thing. Smaller still is a so-called *P. menziesii* 'Serpyllifolius' that originated with the Oregon Saxton & Wilson nursery. It is an oddly erect and twiggy little one with big red-purple flowers and a general look of having been bronzed. This one has been here thirty years, a record.

Another that is miniature in scale, although quite different, is the little huddle that sits on the bleak but majestic Steens Mountain and other such remote northern Great Basin places. It was called *P. davidsonii* var. *praeteritus* and when I went to see it at 8300 feet in the blazing sun, I was surprised to find it looking like a half-sized *P. fruticosus*, and in his study of this alliance of penstemon, Dr. Evory determined that it actually is much nearer than *davidsonii*, although he did not think it was sufficiently important to warrant a taxonomic shuffle. In the garden it persisted and made a nice enough little mound of bronzy green but was not sufficiently at home to give flowers and has finally expired. It might well behave better in trough cultivation and is ideal in scale for the purpose. Flower, of course, is lilac.

Among plants that are larger in detail are the forms of *P. rupicola*, surely the most highly regarded of the species in the rock garden literature. Its greatest appeal is the contrast of warm

color on cool plant--crimson and gray. There is often mention of albinos in the wild but it seems apparent that the one in cultivation arose in the Victoria garden of Mrs. Wilson, either as a seedling or a budsport; it can give white seedlings and Bruce Meyers has obtained quite a number of improved forms, having the vigor that is not inherent in most albinos. These all seem to have the finest foliage effect of any, pale chartreuse oatmeal flakes in spring, in summer almost blue, becoming rimmed with maroon in autumn and with the stalks, petioles and leaf margins rufous with winter cold, then the contrast of fresh new leaves again. Some of his later developments have an extended season of flower or actually a second season, and at no apparent strain, but the first stalks must be cut away as soon as they have finished to ensure this.

Although I did not actually find the splendid little crystalline leaved 'Holly', I feel I did contribute to its recognition, at least with the name. It had come to me as a misidentified nursery plant. I was shortly to discover in the wild any number of similarly crisped and toothy *P. fruticosus* var. *serratus* in the heights surrounding Hells Canyon of the Snake River, but the selector had indeed chosen well and I never bettered it. There is no leaf quite like it produces, and it does not need any other recommendation, being the usual tidy plant with lilac flowers as per that taxon.

There is a race in the Wallowa peaks and adjacent Blue Mountains that goes unrecognized by name, and I propose we call it the Wallowa form of *P. fruticosus*. It would conform to what has been described (and then forgotten) as *douglasii* as found by David Douglas, a small plant (for that species) with leaves smooth-margined. In its best occurrences the flowers are violet-purple of nice effect, near to the best colors in *cardwellii* which is a much larger plant with toothy leaves. This Wallowa plant generally goes as *var. serratus* which is, of course, impossible since it has no serrations.

Dave Evory in his field work relating to the doctorate on this group of penstemons found the small form of *cardwellii* 'Alba' and we have been calling it "Evory White", but it might more appropriately and commemoratively be known as "Mt. St. Helens" for he found it on the now destroyed pumice mountain. It is a far tidier plant than the better known Columbia Gorge albino found by and named for 'John Bacher'.

*Penstemon fruticosus ssp scouleri* contains some real treasures in this size plant, such as the truly pink 'Charming' with narrow sawtooth foliage, and Ed Lohbrunner's 'Alba' with not unexpected yellowish foliage. In this size too is the gray-leaved English hybrid going as 'Six Hills Hybrid' for the nursery where it was raised some fifty or so years ago. Its proprietor felt that it had been sired by *scouleri* and it came up in a flat of otherwise perfectly good *rupicola*. It is my own opinion that he had it figured out very logically for it is what I would expect from such a combination. (What we in the USA have had by the name is red rather than mauve and the leaf is quite ovate; in fact, it seems just another *rupicola*.)

Another English hybrid plant is the well-known Penstemon 'Roetzlii' of horticulture, and to the botanist *P. newberryi forma humilior*. It is quite similar to the plant Carl English named 'Edithiae'<sup>1</sup> from mating *rupicola* and *barrettiae*. In appearance these are like half-size *barrettiae*, with flower of similar color and good size.

*Penstemon newberryi* gives plants in this size range, as well as smaller ones, the clone I called 'Mount Shasta' for the mountain where I found it was the reddest but it is here no longer. Down on the highway where it crosses the foot of Black Butte is a fine colony of robust plants from which good things can be selected, though the colors are not so intense as that one was. The usual *Penstemon fruticosus* gives plants of this dimension, too large for the usual rock garden, but of good landscape value, with rich green leaves and lilac flowers. And, of course,

the giant *P. barrettiae* is a great beauty if one has the room for it. *Penstemon montanus* never took to this garden although I did keep the ssp *idahoensis* for some years, though I never flowered it and it finally gave up. The effect of the soft amethyst flower on the felted gray leaf is extremely pretty. *Penstemon cardwellii* is another rangey one in its usual forms, too large for all but really big rock gardens. The handsome red form that surely was the result of introgression from *rupicola* that I named 'Cardinal' was not quite such a monster and the color was fine; I no longer have it nor the several nice pink ones, nor the one with white mottled leaves, but this was only a curiosity though interesting enough to those who enjoy the abnormalities of nature.

There must be many more, but these are some I have particularly enjoyed and think worthy of perpetuating.