

Dasanthera Cultivars and Hybrids

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Note: pp. 3-5 omitted.

Because we grow such a wide variety of plants, we never wait for miracles to happen but try to insure that they do. Do I dare take credit for the tiny green shoots that started to break from the stems and base of many of the Dasantheras? And if I did, would I have to take credit for the penstemons that were definitely dead? My background in biology left me no choice but to admit that in some cases hybrid vigor might have played a part. At the same time, I wondered if all aspects of their culture in our garden, not only the winter, might have contributed to the severe dieback of the shrubbies.

We had been successfully growing the Dasantheras in our south-facing scree garden since 1985. The soil is a mixture of acid, sandy loam and sharp granite grit for drainage. At planting, we incorporate a small amount of leaf mold or bagged sheep manure and some bone meal and super phosphate. After originally having too rich a soil in this bed, the plants responded to the gritty mix with tighter, more perennial growth. The penstemons did well until the summer of 1988. On top of a drought that began in fall 1986, Minnesota had 45 days over 90°F. (normal is about 10-12 days). This was coupled with our typically humid dog-days. Most of the penstemons grew very lush by the end of summer. The new growth may not have sufficiently hardened-off before frost trapped the moisture in the already dry soils. Desiccation of the foliage was inevitable. During the spring of 1989, the plants were not as vigorous and the flowers were sparse. This spring, I have tried planting some new Dasantheras in areas of a little more shade and richer, slightly more moisture-retentive soil. I have even planted a *P. rupicola* cultivar under one of our large red pines. In our garden none of the Dasantheras reach the grand proportions of plants in the wild. It may be impossible in our climate to preserve every inch of summer's growth through winter. While we are almost starting over with some of the plants, we hope to discover more durable selections.

I have always taken late summer cuttings of the Dasantheras and they root very easily. Dave has now claimed the small amount of cold frame space allotted to my cuttings for his millions of seedlings. If I can find some space, many of the penstemons would benefit from being renewed with cuttings. Short of that, I scratched back the mulch and added some new loam and compost around the surviving plants. We have had timely rains and cool temperatures and most plants are sprouting new foliage and flower buds. Our gardening skills and dogged persistence plus the benevolence of Mother Nature might give us back healthy penstemon plants. I'm afraid that's all we can do; some are gone irreplaceably.

It is amazing that of the countless Dasanthera cultivars, selections, and hybrids described in past journals, fewer than a handful can be purchased from even fewer mail order nurseries. I have also learned that if one of these special plants dies in my garden, it is always the same year

no nursery offers it.

Reproducing enough plants for sale through methodic cloning, even if a nursery has many stock plants, can take several seasons. The genetic composition that makes the plant exceptional can vanish in an instant with the loss of the type plant I'm afraid some of these penstemons, quite literally, are history! Thus, this review of the current availability of *Dasanthera* cultivars is unfortunately very brief. Gwen and I have discussed what it might take to recover some of these long-lost plants. If we must beg, then this article shamelessly exposes our cravings, to the best hope we have: you, the members of the American Penstemon Society.

A Review of the Currently Available Cultivars and Hybrids¹

The *Dasantheras* reviewed in this article were found in recent mail-order catalog listings or exist as living specimens in the Vesall's and Kelaidis' gardens. I am very grateful to Mark McDonough for providing information about the cultivars he developed and others that he has grown. I also



thank Phyllis Gustafson for checking the Siskiyou Rare Plant nursery inventory, Bruce Meyer for input on the need to maintain interest in hybrids, and Roy Davidson for a brief, but encouraging, phone conversation.

I must begin with the lavish beauty, *Penstemon barrettiae* 'na'. She was derived from a hybrid swarm of several blue-leaved penstemons. Now in our garden, she is but a faint glimmer of her former self, as the soft, red-edged leaves begin to cover the winter skeleton. At her peak, she was a voluptuous mound almost a foot and a half⁷ across. The slightly toothed leaves may reach almost 3" in length as they mature and thicken to a glaucous silver. In health, she was freely covered with silken, glistening, rose-pink inch-and-a-half-long flowers. The flowers are larger and more vigorously produced than in the species, and their color is absolutely memorable.

Not the giant of the race as is *P. barrettiae*, *P. cardwellii* is still too large for many gardens. In the wild, *P. cardwellii* is widely distributed and overlaps the ranges of both *P. fruticosus* and *P. davidsonii*. This potluck mixture of hybrids and polymorphic variants has produced a number of excellent garden plants. The species itself is available from only a few nurseries. Several of the *P. cardwellii* cultivars seem to struggle in our climate. I'm not sure if it is lack of cold hardiness or our hot humid summers.

¹ Drawing of *Penstemon davidsonii* 'Serpillifolius'

Leading the list is Roy Davidson's selection, *P.* x 'Breitenbush Blue', a natural hybrid of *P. cardwellii* and *P. davidsonii* from a colony at Breitenbush Lake, Oregon. The slightly toothed leaves are similar to a large *P. davidsonii*-type leaf. Flower color is described as blue, but the



Penstemon davidsonii var. *menziesii* (above)

lavender-to-violet blood of each parent shows through. Mark described the plant as an excellent rock garden subject, growing into a small neat "bushlet". We lost our plant to the drought and have not found a replacement.

David Hale of Portland registered *P. cardwellii* 'Floyd McMullen' in 1985. He discovered the plant with Mr. McMullen at 2600' on Onion Peak near Arch Cape, Oregon. This plant was selected for its low, tight habit of growth, smaller leaves, and wine-purple flowers held barely above the foliage. Hale also mentions that his plants were tolerant of the Oregon coastal climate and even salt spray. This cultivar is small enough for a trough. In our garden the plant is very slow-growing and retains its foliage through the winter, but it has never flowered.

Several white-flowered forms of *P. cardwellii* have been named and may occasionally be offered. These plants typically have a lighter-colored, lime green foliage than the typical forms of the species. *Penstemon cardwellii* 'Albus' will reach the large size characteristic of the species and benefits from regular, severe pruning after flowering. A 1943 selection made on Larch ML, Columbia River Gorge, Oregon was registered in 1961 as *P. cardwellii* 'John Bacher' after its discoverer. It is a vigorous albino that comes true from seed. The foliage is dense, shiny, light green. Dieback is slightly less than in the species. A white-flowered form discovered on Mt. St. Helen's by Dr. David Every has been named in his honor. Mark has grown *P. cardwellii* 'Every White' and said that it is smaller and tighter in habit than 'John Bacher' and "the flowers have more substance." Both of these are included here in the hope that Siskiyou Rare Plant Nursery may distribute them in the future.

Siskiyou Nursery has recently offered two McDonough hybrids that he produced by crossing several white-flowered penstemons. Oddly, the plants Mark selected for registration have colored flowers. He indicated that either the cross was not as he thought or possibly a color gene

reverted back to the dominant lavender-blue color. *Penstemon* 'Wax Works' was derived from a cross between *P. cardwellii* 'John Bacher' and *P. davidsonii* var. *menziesii* 'Albus' x *P. 'John Bacher'* The plant has wax-thickened, shiny, deep green leaves and bright lavender-purple flowers. We thought we had lost it over the winter, but it is coming back from the roots.

Penstemon 'Grape Tart' spent the winter protected in our cold frames before being set-out this spring. If there are penstemon elitists out there who grow only blue-blooded species, this may be the last name they want on their plant list Personally, I love it. The plant doesn't take itself too seriously either. New foliage is tinged with orange and the two-toned corolla is lighter lavender inside. The foliage in our young plant is a shiny medium green. Mark suggested that the orange coloration may be more apparent on older, woodier plants. He had originally chosen the name⁵. 'Sour Grapes'. At the same time an English selection of a penstemon was given priority for that name. Mark said that the plant bearing that name at Kew was large and had pale, washed-out lavender flowers. He thought it might be a *P. cardwellii* derivative. *Penstemon* 'Grape Tart' is a vigorous, pleasantly-flowered plant It is a seedling selection of *P. cardwellii* 'John Bacher' and *P. davidsonii* var. *menziesii* 'Albus'. Both of these new hybrids will from low-spreading mounds of large toothed foliage.

Still circulating is the hybrid *P. x 'Crystal'* from the cross *P. barrettiae* x *P. cardwellii* 'Albus'. Mark described the plant as a hardy, compact bush that bears multitudes of translucent white flowers every year. Its only drawback is the yellow-green coloration of the foliage. This plant is well-known and well-grown in the Northeast, tolerating both the humidity and extreme cold.

Penstemon cardwellii 'Roseus' is the other color contrast to the species. The rose-pink flowers are freely produced over the blue-green foliage. Phyllis reports that this is a favorite of hers and it is vigorous and long-lived in her Oregon garden. The 2'-wide plants self-layer after portions dieback, and she has a large, naturalized display. Our plant has only a few, small, low branches, but there are fat pink buds this spring.

Well-suited to even the smallest rock gardens, *Penstemon davidsonii* var. *davidsonii* and the more northern form, *P. d.* var. *menziesii*, have the habit of being shy-flowering in cultivation. This seems to be remedied by a lean diet and an austere site in the garden. Foliage retention and overall general hardiness has been the best of any of the Dasantheras in our garden. This may be due to their more alpine habitats. The tiny-toothed foliage has been further reduced in the *P. d.* var. *menziesii* cultivars 'Serpillifolius' and 'Microphyllus'. These form the smallest of mounds or mats. The flowers of 'Serpillifolius' are large and red-purple; in 'Microphyllus' they are a violet-blue. Their imperceptibly slow growth makes them perfect for a trough or miniature garden. Another tiny form of *P. d.* var. *menziesii* is 'Minnie', although its availability is unknown. We grow 'Microphyllus' and it is in full bud at this time.

The cultivar *P. d.* var. *menziesii* 'Broken Top Mt.' has been sold by Siskiyou for several years. It forms a low-spreading plant that self-layers. The toothed foliage is resistant to dieback and the flowers are a rich, lavender purple. This plant has lived up to its reputation in our garden. The foliage came through this past winter unscathed, although there are no flower buds evident at this time. Next to it we have a specimen named *P. davidsonii* var. *menziesii* 'Albus' x 'Martha Raye' that we received from Maver Nursery in 1985. The plant is a 2'-wide mat that produces its lavender flowers for us every year. It was introduced by Bruce Meyer and named for the wide mouth of the corolla. This plant readily makes small divisions from the edges of the mat and survives our winters nicely.

Penstemon fruticosus, because of its widespread distribution, is familiar to many gardeners. It

has large, attractive, lavender flowers, but the habit of dying out in the center or growing weak and leggy. Several cultivars are better suited to garden cultivation. Selected from the higher elevation, more refined form of the species, *P.f.* var. *serratus* 'Holly' is an attractive small shrub for the garden. The narrow, deeply serrated, dark green foliage is thickened and dusted with a soft grayish bloom. Even after this past winter, the foliage persisted on the plants in our garden. We can't over-winter any of the evergreen *Ilex* species in our garden and we use this plant for a similar foliage effect. It is one of my favorites. I would agree with Roy Davidson that it is somewhat less than floriferous, although it does produce some large lavender blooms every year. Mark warned gardeners to be careful to grow this plant only from cuttings. Seed of the hybrid offered in the exchanges yields weak, rangy weeds, not the true plant.

Penstemon. var. *scouleri* occurs in the northern part of the range and is characterized by the linear, serrated leaves. A color form with baby pink flowers named *P. fruticosus* 'Charming' is sold by Lambs Nursery. I have had difficulty in establishing the plants I ordered this spring, even in the protection of a pot in the cold frame. Another exceptional selection is *P.f.* var. *scouleri* 'Albus'. Mark hopes that this excellent dwarf plant, discovered by Ed Lohbrunner, still exists somewhere.

Included in our spring order from Siskiyou was a plant of *P. newberryi* 'Red Lassen Form'. I know our winters might give this California native a bit of a shock, but it sounded so appealing, it was worth the chance. They must have taken pity on us here, since it was shipped with several flower buds. Phyllis Gustafson made the selection on Mt. Lassen at about 7000'-8000'. The narrow-throated flowers are a brilliant cherry-red, contrasting with the fuzzy yellow of the anthers. She recommends trying this high alpine penstemon in a rocky crevice that receives minimal summer watering. The nursery has also had the form named 'Mount Shasta', a beautiful albino.



Leaves of *P. fruticosus* var. *serratus* 'Holly', left,

cardwellii 'Floyd McMullen', right

My first experience with a *Dasanthera* penstemon was an plant of *P. rupicola* from Rice Creek Gardens. The plant obligingly grew and bloomed until the infamously hot summer of 1988. The following spring, I lifted the tired plant and relocated several of the pieces to cooler areas in the garden. It is still with us and has a few buds this year. We added *P. rupicola* 'Diamond Lake' to our collection, since it was described by Siskiyou as a more vigorous plant. The selection was made by Crocker and Kline from a plant found near Diamond Lake in the Southern Cascades. Both its rounded foliage and the rich pink flowers are larger than in the type species. In our garden, it has not flowered regularly, although several other Minnesota gardeners have had better success. I might try it in a more shaded position.

More than any other penstemon, I have vivid memories of the billowing rose-pink bouquets of *P. rupicola* clinging to the rocks in Mt. Rainier National Park. I will continue to pursue that same glory for our garden and hope that special, more amenable forms of that species will be offered.

Penstemon rupicola 'Albus', which we acquired as cuttings from Betty Lowry's garden in Seattle, has proved remarkably durable. The rounded foliage is leathery and emerges as pale green then matures to a waxy blue-gray. Even as a barely rooted cutting in the cold frame, it produced several plump white flowers. It is a slow-growing, small plant that has formed a rounded mat only 5" across. Our other gift from the Lowry garden was a cutting of *P. rupicola* 'Myrtle'. This surely must be one of the tiniest, most slowly growing bits of protoplasm ever to be designated a living plant Mark told me that the miniature mound he grew reached the dimensions of 4" x 6". I suspect he had the giant form. Our plant has expanded to a 1" cluster of dinky leaves in three years. In larger specimens, the gray-green, oval leaves will measure to one quarter of an inch and provide the strength needed for a small display of dark red flowers. This miniature little plant deserves a minute eye-level niche.

A complex cross of *Penstemon fruticosus*, *P. davidsonii*, *P. rupicola*, and *P. rupicola* 'Albus' produced several hybrids which Mark registered and Siskiyou has in stock. *Penstemon* 'Pink Dust' and *P. 'Pink Holly'* are each very distinctive in leaf and flower. The gray, rounded foliage of *P. 'Pink Dust'* is covered with a heavy, waxy bloom and the flowers are a light, soft pink. Markedly toothed, holly-like leaves with a heavy texture and waxy, bluish cast characterize *P. 'Pink Holly'*. The flowers are bright pink. Both plants mature into small dense bushes about 6" by 12". We lost 'Pink Holly' during the winter, but 'Pink Dust' is healthy.

Mark also wanted me to mention two other penstemon hybrids with *P. rupicola* in their pedigree. The horticultural selection *P. 'Roezlii'*, an English hybrid, fared beautifully for him in his New England garden. Glaucous, blue-green mats of small, acute, leathery leaves form the background for the numerous, narrow, bright pink trumpets. The foliage is retained through most winters or readily fills in with healthy new growth each spring. A current source for this plant is unknown. The other hybrid, also with an English connection, is *P. 'Pink Dragon'*. Available as seeds from Jack Drake Nursery, this strain is produced by a mating of *P. rupicola* and *P. fruticosus* var. *scouleri*. Mark was very enthusiastic about the progeny. Each plant raised exhibited tight mats of serrated, elongated leaves and great quantities of pink flowers. This is one lottery you can't lose.

In Conclusion

This list represents the *Dasanthera* cultivars and hybrids most easily available to gardeners through mail order nurseries. Not only is the list small, but with the exception of Mark McDonough's new selections, many of the plants are the same ones that have been reviewed before. These are a fraction of the number recorded in the American Penstemon Society Register. It is a mystery why so few have been introduced or maintained in cultivation in spite of their exceptional qualities. Preservation of these garden plants may seem insignificant in comparison to the need to protect the wild species against the encroachment of civilization.

Some of these *Dasanthera* penstemons have been developed with the hybridizers' skilled guidance and others have appeared as beautiful variations in the diverse and intertwined natural population. Each represents a unique plant and a story of someone who recognized the special attributes of the plant and its value to gardeners. It is significant that we, as gardeners, preserve these plants not only for their botanical diversity, but as part of the history of the art we pursue.

Resources

Davidson, Roy. "Dasanthera Remembrances." *Bulletin of the American Penstemon Society* Vol. 41(2): 28-29. Dec. 1982.

Davidson, Roy. "Dasanthera In My Garden." *Bulletin of the American Penstemon Society* Vol. 21: 41-47.1962.

Davidson, Roy. "Uncomplicating the Penstemons." *Alpines of the Americas. The Report of the First Interim International Rock Garden Plant Conference*. 1976. ARCS NW Chapter and Alpine Garden Club of B.C.

McDonough, Mark. "Penstemons and Other Westerners in Troughs Part n -The Penstemons." *Bulletin of the American Rock Garden Society*. Vol. 40(2): 53-63.1982.

Nurseries

Siskiyou Rare Plant Nursery, 2825 Cummins Rd., Medford, OR 97501 Rice Creek Gardens, 1315 66th Ave. NE, Minneapolis, MN 55432 Lambs Nursery, E. 101 Sharp Ave., Spokane, WA 99202.