

Plant Guide

# thickleaf penstemon

## Penstemon pachyphyllus A. Gray ex Rydb.

Plant Symbol = PEPA6

*Contributed by*: USDA NRCS Idaho State Office and National Plant Data Center

[](http://www.wildflower.org/gallery/result.php?id_image=5665)

Thickleaf penstemon. W.D. Bransford, Ladybird Johnson Wildflower Center.

### Alternate Names

*Common Alternate Names:* thickleaf beardtongue, elephant ear penstemon

*Scientific Alternate Names: Penstemon pachyphyllus* var. *pachyphyllus, Penstemon pachyphyllus* var. *congestus*

### Uses

*Grazing/rangeland:* Thickleaf penstemon is eaten by wildlife and livestock (Monsen et. al., 2004). There is no published information on palatability and it is considered of incidental value as forage. It does provide diversity in the plant communities where it is found.

*Erosion control/reclamation:* Thickleaf penstemon provides excellent soil protection (Monsen et. al., 2004).

*Pollinators:* The large, purple colored flowers of thickleaf penstemon generally attract large bumblebees (*Bombus* sp.) (Kramer et. al., 2011).

**Ethnobotany**

The Havasupai Tribe of north central Arizona folded leaves of thickleaf penstemon lengthwise and placed them in their mouth to create a sound similar to a baby deer while hunting (Native American Ethnobotany Database).

### Status

Please consult the PLANTS Web site and your State Department of Natural Resources for this plant’s current status (e.g., threatened or endangered species, state noxious status, and wetland indicator values).

### Description

*General*: Thickleaf penstemon, a member of the Figwort Family (Schrophulariaceae), is a short-lived perennial, native, herb growing 30-65 cm tall with well-developed basal leaves and a few, erect, simple stems arising from a thick crown. The leaves are fleshy, bluish-green in color and covered with wax. Leaves are opposite, and basal leaves are 5-10 cm long and 12-35 mm wide, oblanceolate to spatulate. Upper leaves are 2-5 cm long and 7-20 mm wide. Flower clusters are 2-5 flowered, tubular and blue to violet in color. The fruit is a capsule 9-13 mm long and seeds are 2-3 mm long. Cronquist et. al., (1984) recognizes two botanical varieties and provides a key to distinguish them based on floral characteristics as well as geographic distribution.

*Distribution*: Thickleaf penstemon is found in the western states of Wyoming, Colorado, New Mexico, Arizona, Nevada and Utah. For current distribution, please consult the Plant Profile page for this species on the PLANTS Web site.

*Habitat*: Thickleaf penstemon is found in salt desert shrub, sagebrush-grass, pinyon-juniper, mountain brush, and conifer plant communities (Monsen et. al., 2004).

**Adaptation**

Thickleaf penstemon specific information is limited. Penstemon species in general, prefer well-drained, infertile, disturbed soils. Thickleaf penstemon occurs on dry gravelly soils at elevations of 5,250-8,200 feet (Cronquist et. al., 1984). Annual precipitation requirements are estimated to be 10-16 inches for thickleaf penstemon to establish and persist.

### Establishment

Monsen et. al., (2004) state that the planting process for thickleaf penstemon is similar to other penstemon species. The general recommendation is to plant seed in the fall from 1/8 to no more than ¼ inch depth into a firm, weed-free seedbed. Good seed to soil contact is important for germination and establishment. There are approximately 335,000 seeds per pound (Monsen et. al., 2004). To achieve a target seeding rate of 25 seeds per square foot, 3.25 pounds PLS (Pure Live Seed) /ac should be planted to achieve a full stand. When used as a component of a seed mix adjust the seeding rate to the percent of mix desired. Thickleaf penstemon should be drilled through a legume box or with a seed dilutent such as rice hulls because the seeds are small and may separate from other seeds in the mix.

Mulching, irrigation and weed control benefit stand establishment. Some seed may not germinate until the second growing season. Plants begin growth early in the spring and flower blossoms appear in the late spring and early summer. Flowering should not be expected until the second growing season.

Weed control will be required during establishment. Because penstemon is a broadleaf plant, the use of broadleaf type herbicides is not recommended. Mowing weeds when they are beginning to bloom will help reduce weed seed development.

### Management

Thickleaf penstemon should be used as a minor component of seed mixtures. Management strategies should be based on the key species in the established plant community. Grazing should be deferred on seeded lands for at least two growing seasons after seeding to allow for full stand establishment. It is a short-lived plant, but with proper management, natural regeneration should maintain plants in the vegetative community.

### Pests and Potential Problems

Information on pests and diseases of thickleaf penstemon is not well known. In general, penstemon is susceptible to soil-borne fusarium and rhizoctonia root rot which can be severe in poorly drained loam and clay textured soils. Grasshoppers and other insects may also damage plants.

### Environmental Concerns

Thickleaf penstemon is a native plant species found in western North America and has no known negative impacts on wild or domestic animals. It is not considered a weedy or invasive species but can spread to adjoining vegetative communities under ideal conditions. It co-exists with other native species and adds biodiversity to plant communities.

### Seed and Plant Production

There can be considerable variability in seed dormancy among collections of the same species of penstemon. A few methods can be used to overcome dormancy including the use of aged seed where after-ripening causes seed to lose dormancy, moist pre-chilling (stratification), and the use of plant hormones referred to as gibberellins (GAs). Kitchen and Meyer (1991) found germination of thickleaf penstemon to be negatively affected by chilling. There were also significant differences in germination between different lengths of stratification periods. Treatment of thickleaf penstemon seed with GA3 at a minimum concentration of 50 ppm resulted in complete germination. Abella (2009) evaluated emergence of 61 plant species where seed was subjected to liquid smoke treatments and found significant difference between non-treated seed and seed exposed to a 10 % (vol/vol) aqueous smoke. Non-treated seed of thickleaf penstemon had 3% emergence vs. treated seed which had 30% emergence.

A standard method for propagating penstemon for transplants is to stratify the seed for 8-12 weeks in cold and moist conditions. Seed should be surface sown into plant containers, pressed into the soil surface with containers then stored under cool (36° F), dark conditions for 8-12 weeks. After the stratification period, bring plants into greenhouse conditions and allow plants to grow for 8-12 weeks before transplanting in the field. Propagation of new plants from division of older plants is also possible.

Fields for seed production can be established from direct seeding or from transplanting greenhouse grown containerized stock. Direct seeding should occur in late fall to allow for natural stratification of the seed. Thickleaf penstemon should be seeded in 30-36 inch rows at a rate of 1.0 pounds PLS/ac (target 30 pure live seeds per linear foot of drill row) to allow for mechanical weed control (Cornforth et. al., 2001). The use of weed barrier fabric is an alternative to allow closer spacing, reduce weeds and conserve soil moisture. Plant spacing of 18 inches provides for maximum growth and seed yield when using weed barrier fabric.

Seed normally ripens from mid-August to mid-September and is mature when seed capsules dry and become hard and dark in color. Seed will shatter once capsules have opened. Seed can be harvested by hand-stripping or with a combine. Seed is separated from the capsule with use of a hammermill or barley debearder followed by fan cleaning. Seed yields average 100 pounds per acre and seeds can be stored for up to 14 years without appreciable loss of viability (Stevens and Jorgensen, 1994).

### Cultivars, Improved, and Selected Materials (and area of origin)

There are no cultivars, improved, or selected materials of thickleaf penstemon. Common wildland collected seed is available from commercial sources (Native Seed Network).

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