

BLUE VERVAIN

By Shirley Froehlich, BSA

Gardeners almost always ask two questions when buying perennials. Will it bloom this year? And, does it bloom all summer? Blue Vervain is a beautiful perennial wildflower that scores high on both counts. It is fast growing and will usually bloom the first summer. It also blooms for six weeks in July and August, almost twice as long as many other perennials.

I had thought of it only as a pretty wildflower but I discovered that it has also been used as a medicinal herb for centuries. The plant has a tranquilizing effect and has been used for insomnia and other nervous conditions, stomach cramps, colds, fevers and other disorders.

DESCRIPTION

Blue Vervain *Verbena hastata* has stiff erect stems with panicles of elegant flower spikes. The tiny tubular shaped blossoms open at the base of the spike first and gradually move up the spike giving a very long season of bloom. For six weeks in July and August the blue/violet flowers delight us and are a treat for bees and butterflies too. The leaves are opposite, lance shaped and sharply toothed. They are 5-10 cm long (2-4"). The plant grows 90-130 cm tall (3-4 ½ ft). It generally remains around 90 cm in heavy clay soil and grows taller in looser, very moist soil.

NATIVE HABITAT

In Manitoba Blue Vervain is mainly found in the eastern Parklands and Boreal Forest. I have seen it growing in Whiteshell Provincial Park. In the rest of Canada it is found from Nova Scotia to British Columbia in moist fields, meadows and waste places. It is also found throughout the eastern United States.

CULTURE

Sun or part shade are recommended for Blue Vervain and medium to moist to wet soil are fine. Moist to wet soils are preferred growing conditions in the wild. It will self seed easily on open, rich, moist soil.

Blue Vervain is at home in regular perennial flower beds and cottage gardens as well as in prairies mixed with other wildflowers and grasses. It also thrives along stream sides, at pond edges and in other damp soils. In prairie style plantings it is great in combination with other native species such as Bebb's Sedge, Northern Bedstraw, Golden Alexander, Swamp Milkweed, Helonium Culver's Root, Joe Pye, New England Aster and Switchgrass. This combination will provide blooming flowers throughout the growing season.

This is an easy plant to start indoors from seed. Alternatively, plants can be purchased and set out in the garden in spring or summer. To start from seed, this variety

needs to be stratified (a cold, moist treatment) for six weeks before germination. I find it easiest to seed the trays, water and then put in a fridge or coldroom to stratify. Do not cover the seed. It requires light to germinate. If the seedlings come up very thick they should be thinned out to prevent damping off or rotting. It germinates well in 5-10 days with bottom heat around 21 degrees C. Bottom heat can be provided with heating cables or by setting the tray just above a hot air register until germination begins. When germinated in mid March they will be ready to plant in the garden in early June.

Whether you are contemplating a new addition to your flowerbeds, adding some pretty flowers to a problem wet area or establishing an easy care prairie, Blue Vervain is a terrific new choice in the gardener's palette of plants. And you won't have to wait long for results!

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