

MEADOW BLAZING STAR

By Shirley Froehlich, BSA

DESCRIPTION

Just as its name suggests, this is a plant that will stand out in a crowd. Meadow Blazing Star *Liatris ligulistylis* has bright pink flowers on a spike 60-90 cm tall (2-3ft) in early August. The flowers begin opening at the top first and progress down the spike. They are well adapted to endure dry conditions if necessary. Water and food are stored in corm-like roots and their grass-like leaves minimize water loss during the heat of the summer.

This native perennial is a close relative of the Liatris that we see as cut flowers in florist shops and the cultivated Gayfeather *Liatris spicata* that is sold in garden centres.

Aside from its beauty, the Meadow Blazing Star has several other enduring qualities. It makes a good cut flower and it is useful for dried arrangements since it retains the pink color when dry. Liatris is also one of the Top Ten flowers for providing nectar for butterflies. My plants always seem to have butterfly visitors. When it is finished blooming the seeds fluff out and become birdfeeders for our friends the Goldfinches.

NATIVE HABITAT

In the wild Meadow Blazing Star is found mainly in the parklands, growing in rich soil with reasonable moisture in full sun. In Manitoba a few of the places it can be seen are the Oak Hammock Prairie, Brennan Prairie, Bradley Prairie in Winnipeg, Grosse Isle, and the Trans Canada ditch going east of Winnipeg.

The other Liatris that is native to the prairies is Dotted Blazing Star *Liatris punctata*. This species is more common in Alberta and Saskatchewan since it prefers drier conditions and sandy soils. In Manitoba, Dotted Blazing Star can be found in Bird's Hill Park, Spruce Woods Park, and the Carberry Hills. This species also has bright pink flower spikes, however, it is much shorter, reaching a height of only 30-45 cm (12-18"). Plants have many short spikes of flowers in contrast to the single spikes of Meadow Blazing Star. Dotted Blazing Star is also a good source of seed and nectar for birds and butterflies.

Both types of Blazing Star grow in Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba as well as the Midwestern U.S.

CULTURE

In the garden Meadow Blazing Star grows well in full sun and rich soil. They can be started from seed or plants can be set into the garden in spring or summer. Best results are with 2 year old plants. If you are starting from seed, they germinate promptly within 7-14 days if given bottom heat around 21 degrees. Heat can be supplied with heating mats or by setting the tray under lights or in the sun with a clear covering until

germination begins. The first year the plant looks like one small blade of grass 5-7 cm long (2-3") so it can be easily lost in the garden if set out at this size. Underground, the small leaf blade already has a small round corm about the size of a pea. The Dotted Blazing Star is different from the Meadow with a carrot shaped root. The plants usually bloom the third year from seed.

These plants not only provide a blaze of colour in the garden in August, they are magnets for birds and lots of butterflies too. Why not give them a try!

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