

## Kentucky Garden Flowers

# Verbena

**Robert Anderson and Sharon Bale, Extension Floriculture Specialists**

Verbena or vervain plants are used primarily for hanging baskets and mixed containers because they have bright and unique flower colors and fast growth suited to container production. These same characteristics suit landscape use, so we have evaluated verbenas for landscape use. Verbenas were seldom used in Kentucky landscapes before 1995. Annual verbena has always been rated as mediocre for summer performance in Kentucky because it must be cut back strongly in mid summer and loses 3 weeks or more of summer flowering for that reason. The non-patented vegetative verbenas have not been used here, even though they are used in Southern landscapes. The introduction of many new patented varieties has increased the interest in this group of plants.

In general, the newer verbenas are propagated from cuttings to maintain the phenotypic characters. Some vegetative verbenas are marginally hardy across the state, they survive some winters, some winters they don't. 'Homestead Purple', 'Lilac Time', 'Fiesta' and *V. peruviana* are relatively hardy while others are less hardy as landscape perennials. A landscaper or gardener will have to rethink how to use verbenas in the landscape. 'Lilac Time' was in full flower April 15, 2000 and was as spectacular as creeping phlox and flowered much longer. Verbenas seem to be summer garden plants, but most are really best in spring, early summer and fall. This could be due to a temperature or photo-period response or something as simple as insufficient fertilizer or water, but we have no data to confirm details. The types that seem more similar to *V. tenuisecta*, seem to go out of flower for 6-8 weeks from mid July through August while those more similar to *V. canadensis* do produce more flowers all summer. All the types flower very well in spring, early summer and fall.



Verbena varieties at Proven Winners in California

The new verbenas are derived from a number of verbena species and selections. It is difficult to determine the true genetic background of the current plants, but they fall into general categories by leaf appearance and plant size. When I saw *V. goodingii* in the desert scrub in the mountains of northern Mexico, it seemed surprisingly similar to many of the vegetative verbenas.

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Flower Color	Height	Season	Pests	Uses	Propagation
lavender, purple, pink, red, peach,	4" - 24"	spring, summer to frost	thrips, powdery mildew, whitefly	ground cover, bedding, hanging baskets, containers, border, background,	cuttings, seed

**Performance** – Verbenas are grown as annuals or perennials in Kentucky gardens. The plants adapt to Kentucky garden conditions and are tolerant of our hot summers and relatively tolerant of dry conditions. All grow best in full sun gardens. The spectacular colors of the new varieties make verbena a plant more Kentucky gardeners should try.

**Brazilian Verbena** – *Verbena bonariensis* – A tall, sparse plant that is generally perennial in Kentucky. This is an excellent plant for hot, dry Kentucky summers. The panicle of flowers measures 2 inches across. When these plants are over-fertilized, they will grow to 4 feet tall and must be cut back. It was named for the city of Buenos Aires where it was first discovered. Unfortunately, this plant has naturalized in the southeastern U.S. and will probably naturalize in your Kentucky garden; it self sows easily. It is considered a zone 7-9 plant, a tender perennial in Kentucky, but it comes back reliably from seed.



*Verbena bonariensis* – close-up of lavender flowers and typical garden appearance.

**Clump Verbena, Rose Verbena** - *Verbena canadensis* – This group of verbenas have larger, less divided leaves. These plants are typically good to outstanding plants for Kentucky gardens. Plants have a low spreading form and they flower profusely all summer. The creeping stems will root into the soil or mulch. These plants may be perennial in southern and western Kentucky and annuals in central, northern and eastern Kentucky, depending on the variety and the winter weather. If they will be perennial, they will emerge late (late May or early June) so don't give up on them too early in the spring. These plants love hot weather and plenty of water and fertilizer. They tolerate drought reasonably well, but flowering and overall growth will slow considerably. Some types may self-sow each year. Newer varieties are patented, so they cannot be propagated and sold without permission from patent owners. The heritage of the newer varieties, whether primarily *V. canadensis* or *V. tenuisecta*, was clear in the late 1990s, but specific heritage has been blurred by continual improvement through breeding.

### Varieties

**Patented** – each series has 6 to 12 separate colors; more details at the commercial websites.

‘Temari’ series, ‘Superbena’ series, ‘Tukana’ series – available from Proven Winners, [www.provenwinners.com](http://www.provenwinners.com)

‘Escapade’ series, ‘Lanai’ series, ‘Rapunzel’ series – available from Fischer USA, [www.fischerusa.com](http://www.fischerusa.com)

‘Wildfire’ series - available from Ball FloraPlant, [www.ballfloraplant.com](http://www.ballfloraplant.com)



'Temari Patio Blue'



'Blue Princess'

**Non-patented** – A number of varieties were evaluated at the UK Arboretum and the Horticulture Research Farm by both authors from 1996 to 2001. The following ratings resulted from these trials.

Excellent landscape performance

'Homestead Purple' - purple, 6-10" tall, usually hardy, aggressive, coarse growth all summer as long as it gets water and fertilizer. ('96-'01) This variety is a vigorous grower that does not mind heat. The dark green foliage stays attractive all summer. This plant type was found by Allen Armitage and Michael Dirr at an old homestead in Georgia. It is late to emerge in spring and some suggest that some winter protection should be provided for central and northern Kentucky.

Good landscape performance

'Blue Princess' - blue, 8-15" tall, not hardy but has great potential as an annual especially in containers, good summer flowering. ('99-'01)

'Fiesta' - pink/red, 6-8" tall, mottled blooms are very attractive, must be cut back after bloom to promote rebloom. ('98-'01)

'Lilac Time' - lilac, 6-8" tall, was in full bloom April 15, 2000, earliest blooming of all the verbenas, should be cut back after bloom to promote rebloom. ('98-'01)

'Mabel's Maroon' - burgundy, 6-10" tall, vigorous, good flowering. ('01)

'Summer Breeze' - bright rose, 8-14" tall, vigorous, great color. ('01)

Mediocre landscape performance

'Abbeyville' - light blue, 6-8" tall, begins bloom early but must be cut back to promote rebloom. ('98-'01)

'Appleblossom' - pink, 6-8" tall, blooms later in the spring than others, must be cut back to promote rebloom. ('98-'01)

'Batesville Rose' - burgundy rose, 6-10" tall, not hardy, grows well but few summer flowers. ('98-'01)

'Dorothy Burton' - pink, grows well, but few summer flowers. ('01)

'Greystone Daphne' - lavender, 6-8" tall, not as hardy as some others. ('98-'01)

'Pink Sunrise' - pink, 6-8" tall, not hardy, grows well but few summer flowers. ('98-'01)

'Snowflurry' - white, 6-8" tall, not reliably hardy, but some plants did overwinter. ('98-'01)

Verbena canadensis - lavender, 8-12" tall. ('01)



'Superbena Coral'



'Homestead Purple'

**Annual Verbena – *Verbena x hybrida*** – Annual verbena is a relatively common garden bedding plant sold across the state. Performance is often not as impressive as the vegetative varieties of clump verbena and moss verbena.

'Obsession' series, 'Peaches and Cream', 'Quartz' series, 'Romance' series, 'Novalis' series

**Verbena peruviana** – This plant has small red flowers on a plant that is 2-3" tall with a low-growing habit. Peruvian verbena was relatively hardy in our trials. The plants are rather unique; consider using for a very low ground cover and it may be cut back to promote re-bloom. ('98-'01)



Annual verbena at Bodger Botanicals.

**Rigid Verbena – *Verbena rigida*** -

Vigorous grower, dense plant produces many flowers. Usually considered a zone 7-9 perennial, but comes back reliably in Kentucky's hardiness zone 6.

**Moss Verbena – *Verbena tenuisecta*** – Moss verbena plants have smaller leaves that are finely cut. In general, these plants do not flower well in mid summer but flower profusely in spring, early summer, and fall. Plus they are frost tolerant. These verbenas lay flat against the ground and spread dramatically. Depending on the variety, plants can be placed 3-4 feet apart and they will fill all the space during the summer. The leaves are smallish and highly dissected, almost fern-like. The creeping stems will root into the soil or mulch. These plants may be perennial in southern and western Kentucky and annuals in central, northern and eastern Kentucky. If they will be perennial, they will emerge late (late May or early June) so don't give up on them too early in the spring. These plants love hot weather and plenty of water and fertilizer. They tolerate drought reasonably well, but flowering and overall growth will slow considerably. Newer varieties are patented, so they cannot be propagated and sold without permission from patent owner.

**Varieties –**

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‘Aztec’ series, ‘Aztec Magic’ series – available from Ball FloraPlant, [www.ballfloraplant.com](http://www.ballfloraplant.com)

‘Babylon’ series – available from Proven Winners, [www.provenwinners.com](http://www.provenwinners.com)

**Non-patented** – ‘Cotton Candy’, ‘Sissinghurst’, ‘Imagination’, ‘Sterling Star’, ‘Tex Tuf Purple’



Verbena in basket at Goldsmith Seed



‘Babylon Light Blue’



‘Tapien Pink’



‘Tapien Lavender’

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