

## An Annual of Yesteryear Providing Airy New Dimensions

Annuals were traditionally described as plants that transition from seed in spring to summer bloom and back to seed come fall before dying with the frost. They were also called 'Bedding Plants' since they were to be planted in a garden 'Bed' where they rapidly covered the ground with low and dense floral displays.

As with many plants, the definition of an annual is now changing and includes many tropical and marginally hardy perennials.

Many 'annuals' also stretch to new heights and are no longer simply used to carpet the 'Bed' of a garden. *Verbena bonariensis*, commonly known as Tall Verbena or Purpletop (pictured at right) is certainly not new to the gardening world, yet it is now providing airy new and creative dimensions to annual displays!



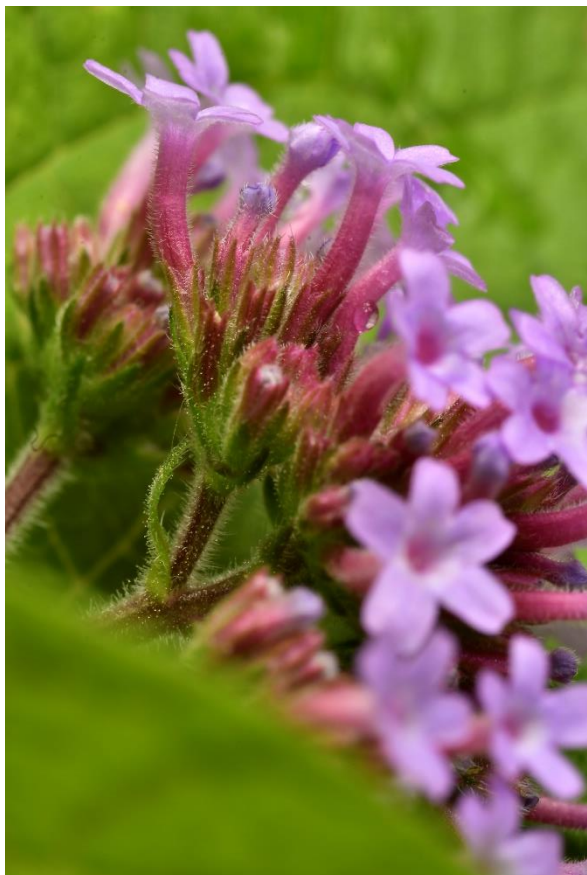
The genus *Verbena* is a member of its own family or Verbenaceae and contains around 130 species, native to North and South America, Asia, Africa and Europe. *Verbena bonariensis* is native from Columbia and Brazil, south to Argentina, where it inhabits dry and sunny locations. The genus name was initially penned in 1753 by the Swedish botanist Carl Linnaeus (1707-1778). The name comes from the ancient Roman term of *Verbēna*, which referred to stems and leaves of any of a number of herbs, such as Olive and Myrtle that were suspected to have supernatural powers for religious rituals. Linnaeus also described and named this species, based upon its origin. The plant was first introduced to the European gardening world in 1726 when it was grown by William Sherard and his younger brother James in Eltham England. The seed was extracted from a dried specimen sent to them from Buenos Aires. The brothers were well-known in botanical circles and it was not unusual for them to receive specimens from distant regions. In fact, their garden had such an interesting collection of plants that the German botanist Johann Jacob Dillen Dillenius (1684 –1747) described many of the unusual specimens in his book *Hortus Elthamensis*, with the title referencing the name of the garden's town. It was the origin of the dried specimen sent to the Sherard brothers, namely Buenos Aires that provided the inspiration for the species name of *bonariensis*!

In North America, plants in this genus are commonly named Verbena. However, in Europe and occasionally in the US it is referred to as Vervain, a reference to *Verbena officinalis*, an herb often used for medicinal purposes. Vervain comes from the Celtic *Fer* for 'to remove' and *Fain* for 'stone', referring to how *Verbena officinalis* was once used as a treatment for kidney stones! *Verbena bonariensis* is commonly known as Tall Verbena or Purple Top, a most appropriate name considering the plants can easily reach heights of 3-4' and are topped with purple flower.

In fact, plants have been known to reach heights of 6', although I have yet to see plants with such skyward intentions. The light green stems are slender, square and stiffly hairy or hispid as it is botanically termed. The short stiff hairs provide the stems with a very bristly feel, which is a common denominator throughout the plant. The olive-green foliage appears at the nodes and due to the long internodal stretches of the stem, the foliage is rather sparse. The foliage is oblong to linear in shape, measuring 1-4" in length by ¼-¾" in width. Arranged oppositely along the stem, the broadest leaves are located near the base of the plant, transitioning to the linear form along the stems. The long internodes combined with the narrower leaves along the stems also aide in producing the plant's airy and transparent qualities. The leaf margins are dentate and they share the bristly, sandpaper-like feel of the stems.

The unique and garden worthy trait for Tall Verbena is the shear strength of these tall stems. Often only ⅛" or slightly larger in cross section, they have an impressive ability to proudly support secondary stems and their flowers, even in the face of wind or rain! The first flower cluster appears at the tip of the initial stem and as this stem branches repeatedly along the upper half of its length, additional flower clusters appear at the tips of these branches. Over time, additional buds break dormancy from the leaf axils near the base of the main stem, producing ever more flowering stems and allowing colorful blooms to appear until a hard frost.

The flowers appear in a 1-3" diameter flat-topped structure called a corymb. A corymb has a central stem with numerous pedicels or floral stems of various lengths branching from this stem such that the arrangement creates this flat-topped floral structure. For *Verbena bonariensis*, the



corymb is densely packed with floral buds, allowing it to bloom for well over a month. Each flower features 5 petals roughly ⅓" long that are fused along most of their length to create a long basal tube that is maroon or maroon-red in color (as seen on the left). At the tip of the tube, the petals initially appear as a small blue ball before the petals unfurl (also seen at left) to expose the rosy-blue interior. The color of the petals nicely compliments the maroon color of the floral tubes below. The open flowers reach near ¼" in diameter. As expected, when the flowers are inspected closely the outside of the floral tube is hispid, and although not visible to the passing eye, each flower has 4 stamens with a single style and stigma. At the base of the flower is a short tube-shaped calyx with 5 pointed sepals. It too is hispid and maroon in color with longitudinal green markings.

The flowers are pollinated by long tongued bees along with various butterflies such as the Eastern



Tiger Swallowtail (as seen at left), making them a flurry of activity on a warm summer's day.

Following pollination, each flower produces 4 small nutlets or seeds, which are eaten in small quantities by Sparrows and Juncos. Most of the nutlets fall to the ground where the hard seed coat degrades after a lengthy winter exposure. Come late spring, it is not unusual to see numerous seedlings appearing where plants had been located the year prior. Its prodigious ability to

produce seedlings has led to it being cited as an invasive plant in southern and western regions of North America. The plants are hardy from zone 7-11 and following warm winters in NJ, it is not unusual to see a few plants from the previous year resprouting. In the garden, unwanted seedlings are easily pulled or destroyed by cultivating or disturbing the soil in early May.

Traditionally, *Verbena bonariensis* was installed in masses much like other bedding plants in an effort to create a block of color. It was also placed at the back of a border owing to its height. However, the beauty of this plant is how the airy and near leafless stems allow people to view through the plant to subjects behind and beyond. This trait makes it a great option for planting at the front of the border,

since the act of viewing through the stems gives the garden more dimension and makes it appear larger. In addition, it is fun to interplant Purpletop amongst shorter annuals or perennials, giving the garden an airy multi-level appearance! The number of options is nearly endless, but one combination I enjoyed at Mohonk Mountain House was an



underplanting of dark purple foliated ornamental peppers, as seen above in the lower right of the image. They had also underplanted it with a brilliant red Salvia, which provided a far more lively appearance. At Longwood Garden, it was interplanted with *Plectranthus argentatus* (Silver Spurflower) as seen below. Regardless of the combination, the layered effect gives the garden an unexpected and magical 3-D appearance!

Of course, not every garden or container needs a Verbena with the potential to grow 3-4(6)' tall! 'Lollipop' is a more recent introduction that grows to a more modest 1-2' tall and 2-3' wide. It is ideal for smaller gardens and for container culture. Although the stature of the plant is smaller, the floral corymbs are nearly equal in size and number to the straight species and the bloom

period lasts just as long! Since the plant is tolerant of light frosts, I always enjoy adding it to containers of Pansies in early May. It works well as the ‘bridging plant’ by providing height and color to the spring container only to be well-established for the summer composition to follow. It also looks great with Lamb’s Ears (*Stachys byzantina*) and the seedheads of Tumbleweed Onion (*Allium schubertii*) as seen on the right. To the gardener’s dismay, seedlings of ‘Lollipop’ revert to the heights typical to the species.



Both the straight species and ‘Lollipop’ prefer full sun, although they will perform admirably in filtered sun. Plants are pH adaptable but, they do require well-drained soils that do not puddle following a rain.

Providing a number of unique and different design applications from other annuals, *Verbena bonariensis* remains a readily available yet little seen ‘annual’ for summer color. Well-mannered in maintained gardens and beloved by pollinators, what was once considered a traditional bedding plant is finding airy new dimensions in contemporary gardens!



Bruce Crawford  
Manager of Horticulture, Morris County Parks Commission