

***Baptisia* – A Plant Of Royal Heritage**

May is one of the most difficult times of the year for people who like plants. All of the plants simply look great! How is one to choose? My solution is to find a plant that looks great in May, holds up well during the finicky summers of NJ, has interest in the fall, and does not ask much in return in regards to maintenance. What plant is that? An herbaceous consideration is False Indigo, botanically named *Baptisia*. The species most common in the garden is *Baptisia australis*, native to the Eastern United States. As the common name implies, it has an interesting historical background. During the mid to late 1700's, there was a shortage of true indigo, derived from the Asian plant *Indigofera*. Farms were established throughout the Southwest to grow the darker blue forms of *Baptisia australis*, in order to extract the dye. In fact the name originates from the Greek word bapto, which means to dip – alluding to the dye found within the flower! Due to the effort required to extract the pigment, the program quickly died (such wit). But, the plant is still a true garden winner.

In May, the blue green foliated stems of *Baptisia australis* have reached a height of 2-3' before flowering. Since the plants are in the Fabaceae or legume family, the flowers naturally resemble those of peas or beans, measuring 1" in length. They are arranged in a whorled manner around a flower stem of 10-15", borne above the foliage. The flowers are effective for 3-4 weeks, before morphing into 2 ½" long pods in early summer. As fall approaches, the pods turn dark purple, and the seeds rattle within, providing amusement for those young at heart! Occasionally, the weight of the pods will force the stem to bend over or collapse. As a preventative, some gardeners shear the plants just after bloom, removing any developing seedpods. The plant will actually push new growth reaching a height of 4' by July. In autumn, the foliage turns black with the first frost. If grown individually, it is not attractive. But, if grown with grasses that have orange or yellow fall colors, the effect is quite stunning!

If blue is not your color, there are several other species of *Baptisia*, all native to the Midwest, which can provide you with color alternatives. *Baptisia alba* has purple flower racemes (stems) and white flowers, reaching heights of 5' or better. *Baptisia tinctoria* has spikes of yellow flowers, growing only to 3-4'. There are also a number of new cultivars that are becoming available. The most readily available is 'Purple Smoke', a naturally occurring cross between *Baptisia australis* and *alba*. The flowers are a dusky blue, with dark purple stems. The plant also has smaller leaflets than *Baptisia australis* and only grows to 2-3' in height.

In the wild, the Baptisias grow in full sun and well-drained soils, conditions that need to be duplicated in the garden for the best results. If the plants are grown in light shade or in soil that is overly fertile, they are more apt to require staking. Baptisias are extremely drought tolerant, which is not a surprise considering that they have a root system that can penetrate up to 6' deep. With the current trend for drier summers, this is a desirable trait. However, it goes without mention that any plant with that extensive of a root system will be difficult to transplant and divide. Fortunately, with proper siting, plants are long lived, not requiring frequent division.

For the best show, mix masses of Baptisia with various ornamental grasses and summer blooming forbs. Several years ago I visited the prairie at the U. of Wisconsin in October. The black foliage of the frosted False Indigo looked just like miniature Buffalo meandering among the orange hues of the tall prairie grasses. The garden does not get any better than that!