

A Darned Good Summer Bloomer

With memories of our spring plant sale still fresh in my mind, the one question that still rings strong is – “What do you have that will bloom all summer?”. Of course, the plant had to have other points of merit as well; it needed to be resistant to deer browse, require little in the way of maintenance and if could attract butterflies that would also be a plus. Initially, I was going to jokingly respond that such a plant only came in plastic with plastic butterflies, but then I remembered that there was indeed a plant that would meet their requirements: *Agastache* or Anise Hyssop.

Agastache is a genus of plants that are predominantly native to North America, although, *Agastache rugosum* is native to Asia. The name *Agastache* originates from the Greek *Aga* or *Agaan*, meaning ‘very much’ and *Stachys*, meaning ‘ear of grain’. With only a slight stretch of the imagination, it is easy to see how the flower structure very much resembles a thick ear of wheat or grain. The flower stems terminate in a spike of flowers, with the individual flowers loosely to very densely arranged in a whorled configuration about the stem. Depending upon the species or cross, the flower spikes range in length from 2” to 6 (8”) and the flower colors range from orange to blue to yellow. To its merit, the flowers open over a very prolonged period and with some of the newer selections, the flower stalk also elongates with time, yielding more flower buds. Bottom line, the plants typically bloom from late June into October! Many of the Hyssops have been also used for medicinal or culinary purposes. The leaves of *Agastache foeniculum* or Licorice Mint, a mid-western native, were used to make a tea for stomach ailments and the addition of the blue flowers to your salad will yield a refreshing, minty touch. If you do add the flowers to your salads, check for tiny insects which typically inhabit the flowers. I suspect they would not make a desirable addition to your salad!

Agastache x ‘Blue Fortune’ was one of the first hybrids to be released on the market and initially came to my attention in 2004. It is a cross between *Agastache foeniculum*, and *Agastache rugosum*. ‘Blue Fortune’ reaches heights of 3’ and produces 6” long sky blue flowers which are always abuzz with butterflies, moths and bees. It also appears to be sterile, since it does not have the annoying self-sowing habits of *A. foeniculum*. *Agastache* ‘Black Adder’ is similar, but the plants only reach around 2’ tall and the flowers are a more vivid blue. ‘Purple Haze’ has more open flower spikes that are more violet in color than blue. It reaches heights of between 2 and 3’ with a dependable flower display until frost.

For all members of this genus, full sun and good drainage is a necessity. I have also found that soils that are slightly on the lean side will also prevent the plants from growing too leggy and flopping. For those with exceptionally gritty and well drained soils, consider *Agastache rupestris*, the Licorice Hyssop. Native to Arizona and New Mexico, it is amazingly hardy if given the proper drainage. Growing to 2’ tall, *A. rupestris* produces more open spikes with larger and distinctly tubular orange flowers that are very appealing to hummingbirds! The foliage is also more slender than it’s afore mentioned cousins and has a distinctly silver appearance. It is an ideal candidate for dry, shallow soils typical of rock and scree gardens.

With their long bloom period, appreciable size and interesting spiky flowering habit, most of the *Agastache* make fine additions to the mixed border. The flower color looks great when used in

drifts with blue foliated grasses or mounded shrubs or perennials. Next time you are asked what is in your garden that will bloom all summer, answer: “Why, *Agastache* of course!”