

Blazing Star is a Summer Showstopper

BENEFICIAL LANDSCAPES
Nebraska Statewide Arboretum

Most gardeners are purposeful in their planting. The priorities vary from one person to another, but we want things like hardiness, beauty, drought-tolerance, focal points, food for pollinators, multi-season interest. From late July on into fall, blazing star or *Liatris* offer all that and more... including usage as dramatic, long-lasting cuts.

In the landscape, people walking, biking or driving by may well screech to a halt for closer inspection; and they have the same effect on butterflies. They make almost everyone's top 10 list for wildlife, as they attract a plethora of bees and butterflies and the seedheads are an important food source for songbirds late fall and winter.

The blazing stars/gayfeathers are easy-to-grow, adaptable to soil types and long-lived in sunny sites. They make their appearance in spring as a tuft of grass-like leaves. Later, leafy spikes appear rise above the foliage, each one bearing showy, tightly packed flower buds. The rosy purple flower spikes, some of which can be 2 foot long, provide a strong vertical accent in the garden and look great in drifts or small clumps between prairie grasses. They are unique in that the blossoms open from the top of the spike down, allowing the removal of spent blossoms in cut arrangements.

Different species tend to be quite similar in flower appearance but with different bloom times and heights. Plants don't go by the book, and their time of bloom can vary depending on sun, moisture, soil and competition. They also tend to grow much taller in home landscapes than in a prairie setting. The richer soil, lack of plant competition and fewer grasses around them make a difference.

Regardless of their height and whether they're placed at the front or back of the border, *Liatris* are "see-through" plants with narrow flowering spikes that won't obstruct the view, though they will draw all the attention when they're in bloom.

Here's a few to consider for the home landscape, listed from shortest to tallest, with an asterisk for Nebraska natives.

- Dotted blazing star, **Liatris punctata*, grows 12-18" and blooms September to early October.
- Tiny-headed liatris, *Liatris microcephala*, grows 18-24" and blooms July-August. White Sprite Strain has white flowers.
- Scaly blazing star, **Liatris squarrosa*, grows 20-24", is somewhat shorter-lived and blooms July-August.
- Rough blazing star, **Liatris aspera*, grows 24-36", has larger blossoms August-September but is very short-lived and needs dry, sandy soil where it can reseed itself.
- Thickspike gayfeather, **Liatris pycnostachya*, grows 24-60", can handle moister sites and blooms July-August. The long-lasting blossoms of 'Eureka' can be a foot or more in length.
- Spiked gayfeather, *Liatris spicata*, grows 24-48", also can handle more moisture and blooms July-August. The cultivars 'Floristan Violet' and 'Kobold' receive some of the highest ratings in the industry because of their strong stems and the quality and length of their blooms, while the white-flowered 'Alba' and 'Floristan White' cultivars have fewer and smaller blooms and are shorter-lived.
- Large-headed liatris (PHOTO), *Liatris ligulistylis*, grows 36-72" and blooms can cover more than half of its height July-August.

