

PENSTEMON DISEASES

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Many of you no doubt grow penstemons for their beautiful flowers and long flowering season, but they are prone to develop disease and also can be killed in severe winter weather, so it is a good idea to propagate a few cuttings each year. They root very easily from cuttings taken in late summer, but it's important to check the health of your plants before propagating.

Penstemons are prone to a microscopic insect; an eelworm - a type of nematode - and if you find this in your plants you should avoid using them for propagation, as this can spread the infection. These nematodes are about 1mm long and enter through wounds and natural openings, breeding internally in the plant tissues as well as externally in buds and leaf axils. Eelworms tend to move upwards, so symptoms are first seen at the base of the plant where yellowing leaves turn brown, and gradually the yellowing spreads higher. The older infested leaves dry out, turn brown and drop off, and eventually there may only be a few green leaves at the top. The plant will die in about three months.

If you acquire new penstemons, scrutinise them carefully before planting out. Because eelworms travel in films of water, the conditions in nurseries favour their spread. Eelworms normally only survive in dead leaves and other tissues for about three months, less in bare soil. Any infested plants should be destroyed, and the site kept weed-free and not replanted with penstemons. However, if you dig out the soil quite deeply and replace it you could replant in the same place.



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Penstemon 'Port Wine'



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Shrubby Penstemon fruticosus 'Purple Haze'

Spider mite is a pest of many glasshouse-grown crops and plants, especially in hot, dry weather. This is more of a pest in small, newly-propagated penstemons, and infested plants will carry the spider mite with them into the borders. The mites feed on the underside of leaves and cause mottling on the upper surface. Cool, damp conditions suppress spider mite, so it's preferable to keep cuttings in a cold frame.

Some of the shrubby species of penstemon, such as *P. fruticosus* and *P. newberryi*, which form evergreen mounds, may suddenly suffer the loss of a section of their stem structure; the leaves turn brown and scorched-looking, and die back. If the affected part is pruned away, the healthy part may regrow, but if dieback is severe it's better to propagate from the remaining healthy shoots. The cause of this dieback is unknown.

Grey mould can wipe out new cuttings, and infected stock should be removed immediately. Powdery mildew can also affect penstemons; this is caused usually by high temperatures, overwatering and poor ventilation. Pick off affected leaves, increase ventilation and use a suitable fungicide. Penstemon can be affected by leaf spot fungi, but this is more prevalent in North America than Europe.

The only virus known to infect penstemon is the cucumber mosaic virus, which causes stunting and leaf distortion. This can also affect campanulas, violas, primulas, vincas, buddleias and daphnes, and is spread by aphids. It is not very common, rarely lethal, and some species of penstemon are more resistant than others but, once infected, the virus is in the plant permanently and it is best to destroy it.

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