

CHRIS' CORNER



Photo is Baptisia 'Carolina Moonlight'-submitted by C.Stafford

This month, our guest contributors to Chris' Corner are Dr. Susan Hamilton, the Director of UT Gardens and Master Gardener Faye Beck. Dr. Hamilton and Faye Beck would like to introduce to you the UT Gardens May 2012 Plant of the Month, false indigo.

Dr. Hamilton and Faye Beck write:

Baptisia, commonly called False Indigo, may be the plant for you if you are looking for a fantastic, old-fashioned perennial that is both beautiful and tough.



Baptisia is a native American wildflower and a member of the pea (legume) family. It grows up to three feet tall and just as wide. Its striking vertical form and ability to serve as a focal point when blooming each spring can make this plant a garden star. In Tennessee, its spiky blooms usually last three to four weeks during April. It also makes an attractive space filler during the summer. The plant's showy, pea-like seed pods add to its appeal as the pods are retained well into the summer.

Baptisia requires full-sun for best performance, although the white form tolerates partial shade. It grows best in deep, rich soils but is tolerant of poor soils. Baptisia is actually native to open prairies and can live for decades. The plant's strong, fleshy root system allows it to be quite drought resistant. They are perfect plants for xeriscaping.

Popular selections include the blue-flowering species *Baptisia australis*, *B. minor*, *B. 'Purple Smoke'*; the white-flowering species *B. albescens*; *B. alba* var. *macrophylla*, and *B. alba* var. *alba*, *B. 'Wayne County Form'*; the creamy yellow-flowering species *B. bracteata* var. *bracteata*, *B. bracteata* var. *leucophaea*, *B. 'Carolina Moonlight'*; and the bright yellow-flowering species and variety *B. sphaerocarpa 'Screamin Yellow'*.

Freshly sown *Baptisia* seeds germinate easily and quite fast, usually in two weeks. If seed pods are not removed in a timely manner, many seedlings will sprout the following spring. If different colors are near each other they freely hybridize, so it's possible to have unusual color combinations.

Baptisia can also be propagated from stem cuttings. Most root easily in spring when the growth is soft, but the success rate drops off to zero as the plants harden. Cuttings should be dipped in a rooting hormone, and then kept in high humidity until they root, usually about eight weeks. You can divide *Baptisia* in early spring or fall, but care must be taken to make a deep and clean cut of the roots with a sharp spade and to provide abundant water upon transplanting. *Baptisia* resents being transplanted and may wilt until the roots adjust; however, container transplants do well.

I want to personally thank Dr. Hamilton and Faye Beck for introducing false indigo to us and sharing their knowledge about the UT Garden May 2012 Plant of the Month. Run out and get *Baptisia* and you will be the talk of the neighborhood! For more information, contact Susan Hamilton at sueham@utk.edu.

Until next time, happy gardening!

Dr. Sue Hamilton is on the faculty in the University of Tennessee Department of Plant Sciences and also serves as Director of the UT Gardens. Faye Beck is a Tennessee Master Gardener from Knox County. The University of Tennessee Gardens located in Knoxville and Jackson are part of the UT Institute of Agriculture. Their mission is to foster appreciation, education and stewardship of plants through garden displays, collections, educational programs and research trials. The gardens are open during all seasons and are free to the public. See <http://utgardens.tennessee.edu/> and <http://westtennessee.tennessee.edu/ornamentals/> for more information.



Christopher Angel