

Baptisia australis

2010 Perennial Plant of the Year™

Light

Plants thrive in full sun. Plants grown in partial shade may require staking.

Soil

This North American native is easily grown in well-drained soil and is drought tolerant after establishment.

Uses

This spring flowering shrub-like perennial may be used to fill the back of the border or in the wild garden.

Unique Qualities

The combination of flower and leaf color is dramatic in the early blooming season.

Flowers are followed by inflated seed pods that are useful for dried flower arrangements.

Hardiness

USDA zones 3-9



Baptisia australis Selected as the 2010 Perennial Plant of the Year™

Baptisia australis is the Perennial Plant Association's 2010 Perennial Plant of the Year™. *Baptisia*, pronounced bap-TEEZ-ee-uh aw-STRAH-lis, carries the common names blue false indigo, wild indigo, and baptisia. Less commonly occurring names are indigo weed, rattleweed, and rattlebrush. This Eastern United States native is member of the Fabaceae family (formerly Leguminosae). The name of the genus, *Baptisia*, is derived from the Ancient Greek word, *bapto*, meaning to dip (dye) or immerse, while the specific epithet, *australis*, is Latin for southern.

Blue false indigo grows three to four feet tall and three to four feet wide in an upright habit. This exceptional perennial grows across a wide range of zones and is one of the most adaptable native species. Often, when first planted, baptisia has only several stems and appears sparse. However, the clump goes from a slow start to really flourishing within three years, when it reaches full size. Because *Baptisia* clumps expand to a diameter of approximately four feet with a shrub-like habit, these dimensions should be considered when plants are placed in the landscape. It grows best in full sun, but can survive partial shade. If the plant is grown in shade, staking may be in order to prevent flopping. It is drought tolerate, once established. It should be noted that this perennial has a tap root and should be placed in a permanent location. Some clumps are 20 years old and have not been divided. This low-maintenance quality is another attractive feature.

Newly emerging shoots produce violet-blue, lupine-like flowers in erect 10- to 12-inch racemes atop flower stems extending well above the foliage mound of clover-like, trifoliolate, bluish-green leaves. The spring flowers are present for three to four weeks. The flowers give way to inflated seed pods which turn charcoal black when ripe, which flower arrangers consider to be ornamental. The dried seeds in the pods rattle in the autumn breezes, creating a nice sound effect. In earlier times the pods were popularly used by children as rattles. The common name, blue false indigo, refers to the use of this perennial by early Americans as a dye, albeit an inferior one, similar to the true indigo (genus *Indigofera* of the West Indies).

Baptisia australis is an excellent plant to anchor the back of the border. It is also valuable for cottage gardens, native plant gardens, and native area of prairies and meadows. It is best as a specimen or planted in small groups. Blue false indigo can be used with bulbs and other spring flowering perennials to make interesting combinations. Various *Heuchera* selections can create a skirt with leaf colors either echoing or contrasting the flower color. The purple blue range of *Amsonia* selections also make nice neighbors. Baptisia is a true American beauty that attracts a number of butterfly species to the garden.



There are no serious insect or disease problems. Taller plants may need support, particularly when grown in partial shade. A desirable attribute of blue false indigo is that it is seldom damaged by deer browsing. Baptisia is listed as containing several alkaloids having a bitter taste making the plant unpalatable to browsing.

Baptisia australis is seed propagated. Like many other legumes, it has a hard seed coat. Seeds must be scarified when germination occurs in an artificial setting. Seedlings may be transplanted when small; however, dividing large clumps is not advisable due to the tap root structure of this perennial.

