

## *Verbena bonariensis*



*Verbena bonariensis* is a tall, airy plant.

Purpletop verbena is an upright, clump-forming plant with wiry, widely branched stems. It reaches a height of 3 to 6 feet and spreads 1 to 3 feet. Unlike many other tall herbaceous plants it is unlikely to tip over. The stiff stems and branches are square and rough, like sand paper. The deep green, lance-shaped serrated leaves form a mounded rosette at the base of the plant, with few on the stems. The flowers are borne in rounded clusters 2 to 3 inches across. The individual flowers are little purple or rosy lavender tubes, about  $\frac{1}{4}$  inch across. It blooms from mid-summer until the first frost.



The flowers are borne in clusters atop long stems.

The flowers are highly attractive to butterflies and other insects and a good substitute for buddleia where that plant does not survive. The airy habit of this plant makes it a good choice for the front or middle of the border, despite being so tall, since you can see right through it. Since it is so thin, it is best planted in masses or columns, or else it will be overlooked. Even in large groups, however, they will not provide a background like other tall annuals or perennials will. They are perfect in a cottage gar-



Butterflies and other insects love *Verbena bonariensis* flowers.

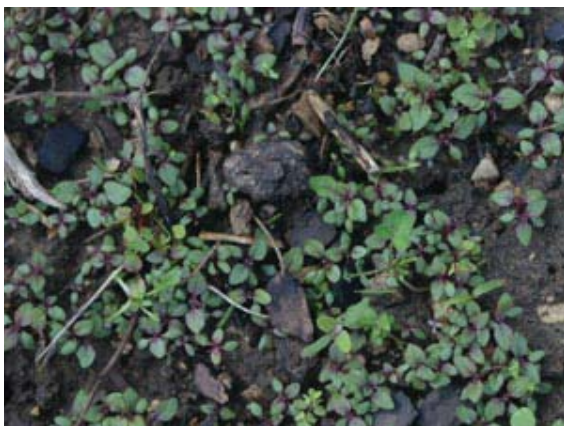
den mixed in with other plants. The flowers contrast effectively with yellow, orange and pink flowers. Interplant *V. bonariensis* and plants like purple basil or purple coneflower for an interesting monochromatic display. The cut flowers last a long time in flower arrangements. England's Royal Horticultural Society Floral Committee awarded *V. bonariensis* an Award of Garden Merit (the Society's symbol of excellence given to plants of outstanding garden value) "because of its attractive flowers and uncluttered habit."

*V. bonariensis* is very easy to grow from seed – both indoors or from volunteers in the garden. Start seeds indoors 8 to 12 weeks before the average date of last frost. Cover the seeds with a thin layer of seeding mix, as they need darkness to germinate. Germination is slow and irregular, so be patient.



*Verbena bonariensis* can reseed prolifically.

Outdoors, don't disturb the soil too much in spring if you want the volunteer seedlings. Seedlings take a while to germinate, especially in our colder climate (they may not appear until as late as June). Pinching the first few shoots of the young plants will encourage branching and create a more compact, shrub-like plant. I prefer to leave them in their natural, open form. Either place transplants or thin volunteers to about 2 feet apart.



*Verbena bonariensis* seedlings.

If you did not deadhead flowers the previous year, you may end up with a carpet of volunteer seedlings which will require drastic thinning. If you don't want any more verbena plants in that area, they can easily be pulled or hoed out; cultivating in early spring can also discourage germination. Volunteers can be transplanted; small plants tolerate the move better, but I have had success with plants of nearly blooming size. Try to leave as many roots intact in a soil mass when moving plants for better results. The plants will droop when their roots are disturbed, but they will recover once established. Be sure to keep transplanted volunteers well watered until they are re-established.

Plant *V. bonariensis* in full sun and well-drained soil. It is fairly drought tolerant so doesn't require watering once established (unless we get no rain) and enjoys the heat. Although it will grow acceptably in poor soil, it will thrive in fertile soils with high organic matter. It has few insect or disease problems other than powdery mildew. The white spots on the leaves do not seem to have much impact on blooming, though.

– Susan Mahr, University of Wisconsin

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### Additional Information:

- *Verbena bonariensis* – on the Missouri Botanic Garden's Kemper Center for Home Gardening website at [www.mobot.org/gardeninghelp/plantfinder/Plant.asp?code=A111](http://www.mobot.org/gardeninghelp/plantfinder/Plant.asp?code=A111)
- *Verbena bonariensis* – on the Floridata website at [www.floridata.com/Plants/Verbenaceae/Verbena%20bonariensis/676](http://www.floridata.com/Plants/Verbenaceae/Verbena%20bonariensis/676)