

Hebe

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A fine-textured evergreen

Wondering how to add winter interest in your garden without sacrificing space to a plant that never blooms? Perhaps you prefer the low maintenance of evergreens yet want to diversify leaf form or color in your plant palette. *Hebe* is a plant that may accomplish these aims.

A fine-textured evergreen from the southern hemisphere and member of the plantain family *Plantaginaceae*, *Hebe* are native only in a few regions of the world. Most *Hebe* brought to the Pacific Northwest have been introduced from New Zealand, but several others originate from the west coast of South America, Rapa in French Polynesia, and the Falklands. *Hebe* relatives may surprise you: toadflax, snapdragons, plantain, penstemon and foxglove. Recently reclassified as a division of the larger genus *Veronica*, *Hebe* most nearly resemble its relatives when in bloom, when its common name “shrubby Veronica” becomes self-evident.

Among the genus are 33 cultivars awarded garden merit by the Royal Horticultural Society in England—and with good reason. Like all evergreen plants, *Hebe* serve nicely to define garden architecture, particularly in winter. In summer, its formal habit offers a pleasing contrast in a community of less tidy neighbors. While some *Hebe* reach proportions of small shrubs, many *Hebe* are diminutive in size. Those just 12-36” in diameter and height make ideal choices for small spaces or as low hedging.

Hebe adapt well in certain microclimates with challenging conditions. Able to withstand salt-laden winds and sandy soil, equally well-suited to rock and clay soil, *Hebe* root happily in coastal environments and rock gardens. Because they generally prefer alkaline to neutral soil, *Hebe* are content placed near lime-leaching concrete sidewalks, foundations or pavers that would otherwise antagonize acid-loving natives. Given full sun, yet protected from extreme heat and prolonged freezing, they are satisfied in containers. Once established, *Hebe* are low-maintenance and drought-tolerant, undemanding, yet ornamental.

Cultivation of *Hebe* in Washington is limited almost entirely to west of the Cascade range, because excessively hot or cold weather threatens its survival. Even west of the Cascades, *Hebe* has a reputation to die back or kill in winter. There are, in fact, a few readily-available cultivars which do poorly, namely, “Amy,” “Tricolor” and “Patty’s Purple.” In addition, fall-blooming cultivars with *Hebe speciosa* in their parentage more often fail. (Fall-blooming species may be more prone to dieback, because late blooming prevents them from hardening off at a time when sudden temperature decline is likely. *Hebe* often suffer winter injury in spring or fall after an early cold spell which follows mild weather.) On the whole, however, their tender reputation is

undeserved. Between the years 2000 and 2009, Oregon State University trialed hundreds of *Hebe* species and cultivars. The vast majority proved cold-tolerant at 19° F—and some below 0° F. A few even bloomed in mid-late winter.

Winter damage can be minimized by careful selection and cultivation of *Hebe*. While large-leaved *Hebe* species are tempting, the smaller-leaved are generally hardier. In addition, pay close attention to local microclimate conditions before planting. Plant them in almost any soil that is well-drained and amended with organic matter. Heavy clay soil is problematic, because summer blight and failure to overwinter can occur if their roots are saturated for prolonged periods of time.

Set them in a hole at the same depth they were in the container. Use bark, straw or sawdust at the base for winter protection, but pull it away during the growing season. Reduce watering after mid-August to allow new growth to harden off before the first heavy fall frost. Should you choose a marginally hardy cultivar, position it close to a warm building or under an eave, where it can escape damage.



Hebe Quicksilver can be a subtle but colorful addition to your garden. *Photo by Sheri Hunter / WSU Skagit County Master Gardeners.*



'Mrs. Winder' Hebe / Photo by Sheri Hunter



'Aureum' Hebe / Photo by Sheri Hunter



'Calendonia' Hebe / Photo by Sheri Hunter

Not all *Hebe* bloom. All, however, require full sun in the Northwest to develop foliage color and form and some to bloom well. *Hebe* form new flowers at the growing tips, so pruning should be limited to pinching spent blooms, or they may not bloom again until the following season.

Among the 90-100 species of *Hebe*, many bloom in varied shades of pink or lavender as well as brilliant white. Planted in a group with care, it's possible to have *Hebe* in bloom from late June through late autumn. Try planting *Hebe* in a summer pollinator feast of pink whirling butterflies (*Gaura lindheimeri*), golden oregano (*Origanum vulgare* 'Aureum'), coral bells (*Heuchera micrantha*) and fennel (*Foeniculum vulgare*). They are irresistible to honey bees, long-tongued bumblebees and butterflies.

Whatever the variety of foliage colors—burgundy to bronze, blue-green to variegated yellow, pink or cream—*Hebe* enhance four season garden interest. In winter, for example, when soaked with rain, silver-blue leaves of *Hebe* 'Quicksilver' (*H. pimeleoides*) virtually glow among evergreens, dwarf heavenly bamboo (*Nandina domestica* 'Brandywine'), golden variegated periwinkle (*Vinca major* 'Variegata') and gold wintercreeper (*Euonymus fortunei* 'Emerald 'n Gold'). Yet in summer, 'Quicksilver' puts forth a spray of fuchsia-colored blooms, generating contrast that is truly startling.

To see and learn more about this marvelous genus, visit the Australasian section of the E. H. Lohbrunner Alpine garden at the University of British Columbia Botanic Garden in Vancouver. *Hebe* is one of only two southern hemisphere evergreens featured there, one deemed hardy enough to face off the privations of Fraser River cold spells. For more growing information or identification, you can also visit the *Hebe* Society Website at <http://www.hebesoc.org/>.

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