

Blue Wild Indigo

Baptisia australis

Blue Wild Indigo is a beautiful native perennial of eastern North America. A member of the pea family, it is prized for its airy foliage and its 3-4 foot-tall spikes of vivid blue flowers that bloom late in spring or early summer.



Rising 3–5 feet from woody stems, Blue Wild Indigo forms an upright, shrubby bush at maturity. The stems are light green with alternate, clover-like leaflets along the entire length of the stems. The leaflets, about 1" long, are egg-shaped with toothless margins and prominent central veins. The root system consists of a deep branching taproot that often forms clonal offsets.

The flowers have a typical pea-like structure, with an upright banner and a pair of forward-projecting wings that enclose the reproductive organs. About 1' long, they can range in color from light blue to deep purple.

The flowers develop into kidney-shaped seed-pods about 2" long and 1" across, with slender beaked tips. When mature, the pods turn black, hardened, and split to release 25-50 small seeds. Long ago, Native American children used the dried pods with loose seeds as rattles.

Native Americans also used this plant as a source of blue dye for clothes. Early European settlers copied this practice, since the true indigo plant (*Indigofera tinctoria*) from India was expensive. That is why this plant is also commonly known as "Blue False Indigo."

Blue Wild Indigo can be found in wet meadows, along tree lines of open prairies, and bordering riparian areas. It prefers full sun, and gravelly or sandy well-drained soil. It will adapt to fertile loamy soil in gardens, but in natural settings, has difficulty competing with other plants. Occasional wildfires probably help this plant by reducing competition.

Bees are the primary pollinators of the flowers. Other insects feed on the leaves and developing seeds, including the larvae of butterflies, moths, and weevils. In fact, Blue Wild Indigo often has difficulty seeding itself due to weevils that enter its pods and drastically lower the number of viable seeds. Seeds collected from the wild should be sorted before bringing indoors. Mammals rarely graze on this plant because of its somewhat toxic foliage.

In its first years, Blue Wild Indigo develops mostly underground and may not flower for 2-3 seasons. As the plant matures, the blossoms get showier and the shrub form becomes more developed. Once established, this plant is long-lived and very drought-tolerant. Like many legumes, its roots bind nitrogen to the soil, thus requiring no fertilizer. The blue-green foliage makes a nice backdrop for other flowering plants throughout summer. In late fall, the plant turns silvery-gray and features its attractive seed pods. Frost hardy, this plant is often green well into November.

For more information and photos:

http://www.plants.usda.gov/plantguide/pdf/cs_baau.pdf

http://www.illinoiswildflowers.info/prairie/plantx/bl_indigox.htm

<http://www.missouribotanicalgarden.org/PlantFinder/PlantFinderDetails.aspx?kempercode=b660>