

Plant "Imagination"

A Prairie Native You Should Have



'Lunar Eclipse' photo courtesy of Chicago Botanic Gardens

Looking for a fuss-free perennial that's attractive, dependable, deer-resistant, multiseasonal and extremely long-lived? Meet baptisia—a prairie native whose beautiful spires are reminiscent of the beloved lupine, minus the maintenance.

Baptisia (also called false indigo) provides showy 10- to 12-inch spikes of pealike blossoms in late spring and early summer followed by 2- to 3-inch ornamental seedpods. Foliage remains lush blue-green or silver-blue from the time the plant emerges in spring into fall. Additionally, the plant attracts butterflies and birds, but not grazing deer.

If you're not sold yet, there's more. Highly flexible, baptisia grows best in a sunny spot, though it will tolerate partial shade if you don't mind diminished blooms. It grows slowly the first year or two but is drought-tolerant once established. Like many prairie plants, baptisia has long tap roots, so you won't need to worry about dividing. Choose a site where it can grow undisturbed for decades.

Considering all these attributes, your main issue with baptisia may be narrowing down your choices. Most baptisia have a 4- to 5-foot height and spread, although new hybrids provide shorter varieties. Here's a sampling to get you started:

1 'Lunar Eclipse' New for 2015, this latest introduction from the Prairieblues series by Jim Ault, director of ornamental plant research at the Chicago Botanic Garden, is a knockout. Unlike other baptisias, 'Lunar Eclipse' fades from white to purple, creating a multicolor appearance. "The joy of plant breeding," Jim says. "I certainly never thought I was going to get flowers that changed color so dramatically." Limited stock is available this year. Hardy in Zones 4–8.

2 'Twilite' Another hybrid from the remarkable Prairieblues series, this is a profuse bloomer with purple-violet flowers that have two lemon-yellow petals. Plant in Zones 4–8.

3 'Screaming Yellow' As the name implies, neon flowers shout for attention on this 2-foot baptisia. Best suited for Zones 5–8.

4 Blue false indigo (*Baptisia australis*) and baptisia minor (*B. australis minor*) The most common species, blue false indigo makes a good shrub substitute at 3 feet tall and 5–6 feet wide. *Baptisia minor* rarely exceeds 18 inches. Both are hardy in Zones 3–9.

5 & 6 'Dutch Chocolate' and 'Cherries Jubilee' Part of the Decadence series by breeder Hans Hansen, director of new plant development for Walters Gardens in Zeeland, Michigan, these hybrids grow a compact 3 feet and have fuller leaf coverage on lower stems. 'Dutch Chocolate' is a rich cocoa purple. 'Cherries Jubilee' is reddish orange with yellow edges. Grow in Zones 4–9.