

Evaluation of Veronica and Veronicastrum

Chicago Botanic Garden (CBG) has released the results of a 10-year study of speedwells (*Veronica* and *Veronicastrum*) in its 33rd issue of **Plant Evaluation Notes**, “**A Comparative Study of Veronica and Veronicastrum**.” Between 1999 and 2009, 64 taxa of *Veronica* were evaluated by Richard G. Hawke, Plant Evaluation Manager. The goal of the comparative trial was to recommend outstanding speedwells for northern gardens. Many of the speedwells received four-star good ratings or higher (out of possible 5) for heavy flower production, robust plant habits, disease and pest resistance and winter hardiness. Speedwells are typically grouped into two habit types: prostrate mat-forming and upright clump-forming species.

Speedwells (*Veronica* spp.) are notable for their graceful and bountiful flowers, as well as their reliable nature. These long-blooming, easy-care perennials offer a range of plant types with a distinct verticality prized by gardeners. Throughout spring and summer their spiky flowers rise like sentinels in the sunny garden. Whether at the front, middle, or back of the border, their slender wands enliven the garden with color and attracting lots of butterflies and bees. Many hybrid cultivars with new flower colors and improved plant forms have been introduced in recent years.

Veronica, known commonly as speedwell or bird’s-eye, is a large genus in the figwort family (Scrophulariaceae). There are approximately 250 herbaceous species of *Veronica* native to temperate regions of the Northern Hemisphere, found in such diverse habitats as alpine meadows, grasslands, oak forests, and riverbanks.

Although speedwell flowers may be white, pink, violet, or purple, it is the sumptuous shades of blue which are particularly coveted by gardeners. The small, five-petaled blossoms feature a pair of conspicuously protruding stamens and may be loosely or densely clustered in vertical inflorescences in leaf axils or at the tips of stems. While commonly referred to as a spike, the inflorescence is technically an indeterminate raceme. Flowers open from the base upward, which causes the main axis of the raceme to elongate throughout the long bloom period.

Speedwells are generally easy to grow and prefer sunny locations in moist, well-drained soils. Plants grown in less light will not bloom as profusely and may become lax or open in habit. Speedwells can be long-lived provided that garden soils drain freely, which is especially important during winter months.

Many speedwells drop their lower leaves in summer, resulting in bare stems and spindly habit. A midsummer shearing after the first bloom promotes healthy new basal foliage and encourages late summer flowering. Deadheading throughout the bloom cycle produces many new, albeit shorter, floriferous spikes later in the season. Taller speedwells may require staking, especially in overly moist or fertile soils.

Dividing crowns in early spring is beneficial for plants that have lost vigor with age. A number of foliar diseases may affect plant health, including powdery mildew, downy mildew, leaf spots, and foliar rust.

In the CBG trial, maintenance practices were kept to a minimum to simulate home-garden culture, thereby allowing plants to thrive or fail under natural conditions. Water was provided as needed and mulch consisting of shredded leaves and wood chips helped with water conservation and weed

suppression. Moreover, plants were not fertilized, winter mulched, or chemically treated for insect or disease problems.

Seven speedwells received good-excellent ratings for their overall performance, including *Veronica* 'Fairytale', *V.* 'Giles Van Hees', *V. austriaca* 'Ionian Skies', *V. longifolia* 'Blue John', *V. spicata* 'Baby Doll', *V. spicata* 'Ulster Blue Dwarf', and *V. wormskjoldii*. These top-rated speedwells exhibited strong habits and excellent flower production throughout the evaluation period. The lack of any serious pest or disease problems, along with good winter survivability, contributed to their high ratings. Additionally, 18 taxa received four-star good ratings for similarly strong performances.

Among the top-rated plants were outstanding ground-hugging speedwells such as: *Veronica* 'Blue Reflection', *V. gentianoides* 'Pallida', and *V. prostrata* 'Mrs. Holt'; as well as exceptional upright clumpers such as *V. austriaca* 'Ionian Skies', *V. longifolia* 'Blue John', and *V. spicata* 'Baby Doll'. Regardless of their stature or habit, all speedwells exhibit spiky inflorescences rising from several inches to a foot or more above the foliage. Speedwells were generally long blooming plants, often flowering from June into September, although not continually during that time.

Most upright speedwells respond to being sheared back to the ground at the end of the first bloom period. All are extremely cold hardy, but crown loss or plant death may occur in wet soil conditions in winter. Powdery mildew and leaf spot can be a significant problem, usually not severe.

Notes and Credits: East Tennessee and Chicago do not share a similar climate and soils. However, CBG continues to be a valuable source for perennial plant evaluations. Generally, plant disease pressure is more severe here in Tennessee compared to the Midwest region. This is a summary of the 8 page CBG report (Issue 33, 2010) authored by Richard G. Hawke.

Go to the Chicago Botanical Garden website to read the full report and for other great gardening information.

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