

One of the loveliest of wildflowers here in the South Central United States is *Liatris pycnostachya*. It is a truly beautiful plant that flowers at a most welcomed time in midsummer to early fall. Its color is a radiant purple, with flower heads with crowded small composite flowers, thickly arranged on a stem from eighteen inches to well over three feet tall, the lower part with thick narrow leaves from two to three inches long and the purple flowers amassed in the upper half, coming from green recurved bracts. The meaning of *Liatris* is unknown, but *pycnostachya* is a Greco-Latin contraction of *pychnos*, dense, and *stachys*, a spike. The wildflowers have dense spikes that resemble bottle brushes. It has quite a few common names, including button-flower, snakeroot, gayfeather, and blazing star; common names which this species shares with perhaps forty other species of *Liatris*. This must have been a much used herb by the American Indians and early pioneers who had only plants, usually, as a medicine source. Apparently, it was used to treat snakebites, but many wild plants are called snakeroot. Most of the *Liatris* comes from a corm and this species is no exception. The corm is present in all seasons and perhaps it was the part used medicinally. It is easily transplanted into the garden or grown from seeds and is a wonderful perennial for a flower bed. It is one of the finest wildflowers to attract almost any kind of showy butterfly into the garden. This plant will grow in not-so-well drained roadside ditches to somewhat dry, but not the driest roadsides. It, like so many other composites, needs full to light sun to prosper. Where it prospers, it will self-sow and make a beautiful display. To grow in grassy spots, late fall and winter are the seasons to mow the area to keep woody plants under control. Some hand-pulling of unwanted vegetation is required. It is one of the finest flowers to put into arrangements as its vase life is well known. Most of the florists bouquets purchased now have some species of *Liatris* in it. Another unique quality of the flowering stem is that it begins blooming at the top rather than the bottom. Some of the corms have become staples of Dutch bulb merchants, but so far, *Liatris pycnostachya* is not one of them so featured. In looking through regional floras, I find that most often authors of Louisiana and Arkansas field guides feature this species by name. I find it unusual such a beautiful flower is not universally recognized in its region. All parts of the eastern United States feature some species of *Liatris*. Recently, on the LNPS field trip to Corney Lake in North Louisiana, Dr. Dale Thomas pointed out to me that most all the descriptions of *Liatris pycnostachya* state that the plant stems and leaves are hirsute(hairy). Those plants growing about the very shady parts of Corney Lake were smooth.

This is a plant that is sure to satisfy any wildflower enthusiast. It is easy to grow, easy to keep, showy in flower, and is the plant to have to photograph visiting bugs, bees, and butterflies. Almost any species of *Liatris* will fill that requirement and such considerations make these flowers one of the most overlooked of our wildflowers. Carl Amason is a superior plantsman who lives and gardens near Calion, Arkansas.