

# VERBENACEAE

## *VERBENA, VERVAIN*

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## INTRODUCTION

The plant family Verbenaceae (VUR-be-NAY-see-ee) is in the order Lamiales, or, the mint order. Familiar members of this family are lemon verbena (*Aloysia citriodora*), lantana (*Lantana camara*), and Vervain (*Verbena officinalis*). The origins of Verbenaceae range from tropical America to Europe and Asia.

## Characteristics

Plants in the family verbenaceae are largely perennial, though they are sometimes grown as annuals. Dicots, with tubular flowers generally flaring into 4 or 5 near equal lobes aggregated in

spikes, clusters, or racemes, (ex. snapdragons), verbenaceae present opposite or whorled leaves. The vibrantly colored flowers attract pollinators. Many cultivars also fruit with dark berries that are poisonous to humans but safe for birds.

## Environment

Largely hailing from tropical regions, Verbenaceae prefer hot weather, full sun, and moderate water once established, even displaying some drought tolerance. Well-draining soil is ideal to avoid root rot. These plants will grow well along driveways and paved pathways.

## Pests & Diseases

All of the familiar backyard garden pests are drawn to Verbenaceae; aphids, scale, mites, caterpillars, leaf miners, spider mites, thrips, white flies, gall midges, leaf spot, powdery mildew, and root and crown rot.

## Pruning & Invasive Watch

Verbenaceae can spread beyond their desired placement and threaten surrounding plants with their vigor. Pruning to maintain control of spread is recommended. *Lantana camara* is invasive and is snubbing controls in Australia, India, and South Africa. In the U.S. it is invasive in Florida and Hawaii while being observed in California for invasiveness by the non-profit organization California Invasive Plant Council. There is no current CDFA (California Department of Food and Agriculture) rating.

## Common Applications

The Lantana mentioned above is frequently found in California landscapes for evergreen leaves and near year round vibrant blooms. Lemon verbena is used for culinary flavoring, tea, and herbal remedies. Teak (*Tectona grandis*) from southeast Asia is used in the timber industry. Vervain has a variety of medicinal applications including stimulating the digestive system and calming an anxious mind as well as a rich history of lore.

## Folklore & Magic

Early Egyptians believed Vervain to have been created from the Goddess Isis's tears as she wept for Osiris. Ancient Romans burned Vervain in their temples, scattered it on their altars, and their soldiers carried sprigs for protection as it was considered the "altar herb" or holy herb, believed to ward off evil and evil spirits. In medieval times Vervain was even used to protect Anglo-Saxons from plague. In Celtic history, Vervain was burned in Beltane fires for livestock protection and other blessings.

A diverse family of vines, ground covers, and shrubs, Verbenaceae offers us industrial utility, landscape beauty, medicinal remedies, and magic.