

Baby's Breath

Gypsophila muralis, *Gypsophila paniculata* (Caryophyllaceae)

Fast Facts:

Number of Growers: 35-50 Acres in Washington: 1,154 in 2006
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Description of crop:

Gypsophila is a genus of about 100 species of flowering plants. Many species don't like acid soils and are found on calcium rich soils that are high in gypsum hence the name of the genus. Baby's breath can be both an herbaceous annual *Gypsophila muralis* and a perennial *Gypsophila paniculata* that is able to withstand periods of short-term drought. The plant grows 12-18" tall and has leaves that are narrow, up to 4" long and sickle shaped. It has slender stems that are openly branched and a deep taproot. Baby's breath has flowers that are small, white, and dense. These delicate clusters have five white or pink petals. It can produce over 13,000 seeds per plant. Baby's breath has a long blooming time, lasting from early summer to early autumn. It doesn't transplant well so seeds are usually sown in the early spring. Baby's breath likes partial shade to full sun. It seems to do best in areas where the annual precipitation ranges from 25-112 cm and does well in coarse soil where it develops a deep root system. Two popular varieties are Bristol Fairy and Pink Fairy.

Baby's breath often grows wild in waste areas and is often seen growing along roadsides. It is grown for dry land wildflower mixtures and used in gardens as both a flower and as ground cover. Florists use it extensively in the cut flower industry as filler in bouquets. Baby's breath can also be easily dried and used for decorative purposes. It is hand harvested and can be cut fresh or left to dry in the fields. Pickers often harvest and bundle it with rubber bands. To dry baby's breath it should be stored in a dark, airy place. If cut fresh, growers can dip the stems in colored glycerin and color its flowers. In Europe the root of baby's breath is used for its saponin content. Saponin is a plant chemical that forms soapy lathers when agitated with water and can be used in detergents, and emulsifiers.

In Washington State, *Gypsophila paniculata* is a class C noxious weed and is invasive in some situations. Baby's breath is grown in Washington both in fields as a crop and is also collected in the wild. An actual acreage count in Washington is difficult for the collection of wild baby's breath since most is not reported. However, the collection and sales of cultivated baby's breath is a multimillion-dollar industry in the state. Wild baby's breath grows throughout the arid region of the state all the way from the Canadian border to the Oregon border.

Key pests:

The main insect pests for baby's breath are aphids. Diseases that affect baby's breath are aster yellow and gray mold. Weeds are rarely a problem as baby's breath is a very hardy plant that easily competes with weeds.

Key pesticides:

Aphids are controlled with Lannate. Gray mold and aster yellow are controlled with Captan. Weeds can be controlled with Round-Up or Treflan if they are a problem.

Critical pest

control issues: Infected plants should be removed and disposed of.

Expert contacts: Theresa Koenig

Horticulture and Landscape Architecture Department
WSU, Pullman 99164
509 335 3462

