

Mint



Photo of Mint taken at our Demonstration Herb Garden

The word “mint” evokes a world of responses, depending on the context. For those who like chewing gum, mints are essential. Some of us may recall an old TV commercial where an argument raged over whether a certain lozenge was a breath mint or a candy mint. Antacids are frequently mint flavored, which almost disguises their chalky taste and texture. Herbalists use mints for various medicinal purposes; how many of us have sipped a cup of peppermint tea to settle an upset stomach?

Horticulturally, mint is a collection of aromatic plants in the genus *Mentha*. The most familiar ones, peppermint and spearmint, are only a couple of its members. Quite a few are delicious, pretty and underused, with flavors of chocolate, ginger, lemon and pineapple. Pennyroyal is an effective insect deterrent, but so toxic that its potential for harm may outweigh any benefits.

Many aromatic plants are in the same family, related less closely than true mints. These include culinary herbs such as basil, sage, thyme, oregano, and rosemary. In general, the plants of this family have square stems, which is handy for identification. If you look closely at their flowers, you will see that they have a similar shape. They have five petals, with two fused into an upper and a lower “lip”. That is the source of the original family name, Labiatae.

Gardeners generally have mixed feelings about mint. It is hard to dislike a plant that grows so enthusiastically with so little coddling. On the other hand, it can be hard to like a plant growing so enthusiastically that it invades all the territory surrounding it. For many mints, simply give water and barely-fertile soil and it will grow, and grow. Many of these plants produce underground runners, called rhizomes, which create new plants without the bother of seeds. Propagating peppermint merely requires taking a cutting and rooting it.

No garden is complete without at least some mint. Usually, only an inexperienced or careless gardener would plant it directly into the ground, unless they had a very large area for it to overrun.

Many of the mints are terrific plants for containers or their own little raised beds. Look at some of the varieties available in catalogs, or find a neighbor who will be more than eager to share their bounty. A number of references suggest planting the containers into the ground. If this seems like an idea to try, place a couple of layers of shade cloth on the bottom of the pot to

prevent the runners from growing through the holes. The cloth permits water to drain, which is essential.

Some have less of a territorial imperative than others, and these can have similar aromas and other properties. Blunt mountain mint, *Pycnanthemum muticum*, for instance, is native to the eastern United States. It forms a perennial clump that gets as big as three feet by three feet. Compared to some of its cousins, it barely spreads.

Mint plants can serve as ornamentation, flavoring, even medicine. A little forethought will keep them from becoming a nuisance.

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