

# The Wonderful World of Mints



by JILL HENDERSON

When one speaks of “mint” most people immediately envision sweet spearmint, sprightly peppermint, or one of the many other flavorful cultivars or subspecies of the genus *Mentha*. But in truth, minty *Mentha* mints make up a tiny fraction of plants that belong to the Mint family (Lamiaceae), which contains over 200 genera and more than 7,000 species. In fact, it might be surprising to learn just how many Mint family members actually reside in the average garden.

## IDENTIFYING MINT FAMILY MEMBERS

One of the easiest ways to identify Mint family plants is by feeling their stems. Most of the plants in this family have distinct, square (four-sided) stems. The easiest way to determine if a stem is four-sided is by rolling it lightly between your fingers. Thyme, for example, has smooth stems. And

just to confuse you a bit, some non-Mint family members have square stems.

Once you’ve found a square stem plant, take a look at its leaves. Mint family plants bear leaves that grow opposite one another along the stem. Leaves at the base of the plant are about the same size, but when the plant begins to generate flowering stalks, the leaves get progressively smaller toward the top. Of course, most Mint family members have aromatic or strong-smelling leaves, which can also help with identification.

The third most common characteristic to look for are tiny tubular flowers that consist of five petals fused together to give the appearance of a pronounced upper and lower “lip.” These flowers are clustered together in whorls, either in spikes of flowers only at the end of the stem or emerging from the leaf axils and occasionally both. And last, but not least, Mint family members have seed capsules

that are divided into conspicuous nutlets. On mints like marjoram and thyme, the flowers and seedpods are so small that you might need a magnifying glass to examine them closely.

But, once you know what to look for, finding Mint family plants in the landscape is pretty easy. Among the most common are basil, bee balm, catnip, horehound, horsemint, hyssop, lavender, lemon balm, marjoram, motherwort, oregano, peppermint (and their many cultivars), pennyroyal, perilla or shiso, rosemary, sage (and all salvias, for that matter), winter and summer savory, skullcap, spearmint, thyme and many, many others.

Not only do mints make up a large number of our common culinary herbs, but they also include a huge variety of wild and cultivated ornamentals, weeds and even shrubs, all of which are very attractive to pollinators, butterflies and hummingbirds.



All varieties of sage (*Salvia* species) belong to the Mint Family, including this beautiful ornamental variety, which has extremely showy flower spikes.



Holy Basil displays classic Mint Family flowers, opposite leaves, and four-sided stems.



The long whorled flower spikes of Apple Mint are typical of *Mentha* mints.

## GET GROWING!

Traditional Mint family members such as spearmint, peppermint, thyme, oregano, sage, basil and marjoram are among the easiest herbs to grow. Most herbs in this family prefer full sun and lightly moist to dry soil. When established, these herbs are relatively care-free, drought tolerant and rarely plagued by insects or disease.

Perennial members of this family such as oregano, rosemary and sage are best started by stem cuttings or division, while annuals such as summer savory and basil are easily started from seed indoors four to six weeks before the last frost and set out in the garden after all danger of frost has passed.

Members of the Mint family with reputations for being overly abundant and aggressive like mint, oregano and thyme are easily kept in check through regular pruning, division and harvesting of leaves before plants go to seed. Of course, traditional mints are the most aggressive – rapidly weaving their brittle, sprouting roots and stems throughout the top few inches of soil and mulch. These rambunctious creepers are most easily managed by growing them in tall pots or deep planters, or by enclosing them within an impermeable edging material buried at least 8 inches deep. My favorite answer to containing traditional mints is to give each variety a bed of its own somewhere where mowing or other frequent disturbances naturally keep them in bounds.

Most of the Mint family herbs also greatly benefit from a process known as pinching back. When you remove just a few pairs of leaves at the tip of each stem, the plant responds by dividing the single stem into two new ones. Herbs with more stems produce more leaves and the herb becomes bushier. As the term implies, the stem is pinched off between the fingernails or a small pair of scissors just above a pair of leaves. This method is most often employed when herbs are young and actively growing, but have not yet reached mature size for the season. For woody perennial herbs like sage, lavender and rosemary, pruning plants to about half their size in late winter encourages robust, leafy growth



It's easy to see the family similarities between this delicate Thai basil (*Ocimum basilicum*) and its cousin, classic garden peppermint.

come spring. The best part of pinching springtime herbs is that the trimmings are often the very first edible harvest of the season.

### MINTY MINTS

Now that we've covered the Mint family as a whole, it's only fair to give the *Mentha* mints their day in the sun. Minty mints such as spearmint and peppermint are the most well-known herbs in the entire Mint family.

Let's begin with the three most common *Mentha* mints. Spearmint (*Mentha spicata*), peppermint (*Mentha piperita*) and apple mint (*Mentha suaveolens*) are all renowned for their cool, spicy-sweet flavor and aroma. Yet, while very popular, there are many more recognized species of *Mentha* mints – as many as 18 different species at last count with an additional 40 or more natural and manmade hybrids and cultivars.

With that many varieties and hybrids of varieties, it's a sure sign that a lot of cross-pollination occurs within the genus and new hybrids are not an uncommon occurrence. The known exceptions in the *Mentha* mints are true peppermint and a few select hybrids of peppermint, which all produce seeds that are completely sterile. It's always advisable to take steps to prevent cross-pollination between wild and cultivated mints from the

same species because the seeds they produce will not come true to form.

In simpler terms, if mints are allowed to self-sow, the specific flavor of each variety will eventually be lost in a maze of new hybrids that are nothing like their parents. So, in order to keep your pineapple, spearmint and chocolate mints from blending into an unrecognizable fruit smoothie it is essential to either separate the different varieties by 20 feet or more, or ensure that the plants are never allowed to produce seed. The latter is accomplished by aggressively pruning mints before they ever get the chance.

With that in mind, avoid starting mint from seed unless they come from a respected seed supplier. I prefer to purchase nursery-grown plants or propagate existing plants with stem cuttings or root divisions. This way I know exactly what I'm getting. If you are offered a cutting of mint from another grower, be sure that you like the smell and taste of the leaves before adding it to your collection because those characteristics will not change or improve over time.

### A DELICIOUS HARVEST

Although mint leaves can be picked at any time of the year for fresh use, young leaves are best collected before or just as the flowers

## SMALL-SCALE SUCCESS

open. If your mint is well-established (more than 1 year old) and growing in excellent conditions, it is very likely that you can get as many as three cuttings per year.

Harvest mint using a pair of very sharp scissors. Cut the stems down to within 2 inches of the soil and prepare to dry them in one of two ways. The first is to simply hang cut stems in loose bunches in a warm, dry place until crumbly. The second is to remove all the leaves from the stems and dry them on screens or trays. To remove a lot of leaves quickly, loosely grasp the tip of the stem with your thumb, index and middle fingers and pull sharply downward from top to bottom. Once off the stems, the leaves can be dried on a tray or screen until they are crisply dry. Dried mint leaves should be stored in an airtight jar away from light and heat, which can degrade their longevity and flavor. It is possible to freeze mint leaves, but the flavor and texture will be affected. Mint flowers can be collected at the height of their bloom and dried for use in tea or potpourri.

### COOKING WITH MINT

Because of its sweet, mild flavor, spearmint is by far and away the most popular culinary mint, while peppermint is more popular for use as tea and in cold drinks. It can also be used as a culinary substitute for spearmint, when needed.

Mint is traditionally used in drinks such as hot tea, iced tea, fruit drinks, mint juleps and mojitos. The freshly chopped leaves add zest to fresh fruit and vegetable salads, yogurt, dressings, creamy dips and spreads. Mint is an important ingredient in ethnic dishes such as dolmas (stuffed grape leaves), tabbouleh and hummus. It also goes well with lamb, fish, chicken and rice, as well as vegetables such as new potatoes, tomatoes, carrots and peas. The leaves and flowers of mint can be candied or used as garnishes.

These days, mints aren't just minty. In fact, there are a vast array of tempting flavors to choose from including apple, banana, berries and cream, candied fruit, chocolate, cotton candy,

ginger, grapefruit, Italian spice, lemon, lime, margarita, marshmallow, mojito, orange, pineapple, sweet bay and pear. With all of these fantastic, taste-tempting flavors at your service, your food will be anything but boring.

### MINT IS MEDICINAL

Many gardeners already know and love the various mint varieties for use in food and to create soothing and flavorful teas, but mints are much more than fantastically edible – they are highly prized for their nutritive and medicinal qualities, too. And it's not just minty mints that are medicinal, either. Those are but a fraction of the medicinal plants in the mighty Mint family, which contains the largest number of aromatic, edible, cosmetic and medicinal herbs on the planet. Many Mint family members have their own special medicinal properties and specific uses.

Herbs such as basil, bee balm, catnip, horehound, hyssop, lavender, lemon balm, marjoram, oregano, rosemary, sage, savory, thyme and of course, mint, all have various levels of analgesic, antimicrobial, antiseptic, antispasmodic, diaphoretic, digestive, repellent and stimulant properties. Extractions of *Mentha* mints are used clinically to ease neuralgia induced pain and many of the Mint family plants are used in herbal remedies to treat headaches, migraines, fevers, sore throat and fungal infections like athlete's foot. They are also used in formulas used to treat nausea, digestive disorders and sinus and chest congestion and are known to inhibit minor infections and ease the heat and itchiness of bites, stings, rashes, hives, eczema and minor wounds. Used externally, many Mint family plants repel biting insects like mosquitoes and can deter chewing insects when decoctions are used as a spray on vegetable crops.

When it comes to the medicinal properties of *Mentha* mints, peppermint contains a higher percentage of volatile oils and is considered a much stronger medicinal than either spearmint or apple mint. And although the *Mentha* mints have GRAS (gener-

ally regarded as safe) status, everyone should keep these contra-indications in mind when using them in a medicinal fashion:

- Mints may slow lactation.
- The pure, essential oil of mint should never be taken internally or be used in any way by women who are pregnant or attempting to become pregnant.
- The pure essential oil of mint should always be diluted with water or oil before using externally. Do not take internally at any time.
- Ayurvedic practitioners sometimes suggest that mint be avoided by those with conditions of weakness or excessive sweating.
- Those using calcium channel blockers should consult a professional practitioner before using *Mentha* mints in medicinal doses.

For many, a cup of classic mint tea before or after meals is one of the most enjoyable ways to use the *Mentha* mints to maintain good health. Simply drinking a cup or two of tea a day can help ease the symptoms of indigestion and irritable bowel syndrome (IBS), such as heartburn, flatulence, cramps, bloating, diarrhea and nausea.

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It should be said, however, that some individuals actually have the opposite reaction to mint. Instead of soothing indigestion or heartburn, it actually stimulates it. Researchers are not yet sure why this occurs, but if classic mint tea seems to aggravate your digestive system, try using spearmint (not peppermint), lavender or basil instead.

Classic mint tea can be taken orally or used externally. Single servings of tea are made by steeping 1 to 2 teaspoons of dried leaves (double the amount if using fresh leaves) in 1 cup of just-boiled water for 10 to 15 minutes. Be sure to cover your tea with a saucer or lid while steeping. This helps preserve healthful volatile oils

from evaporating with the steam. A strong decoction is similarly made using more leaves and a longer steeping time and is the best choice for external applications such as stimulating baths to revive sluggish skin and hair follicles, relieve fever, to soothe dry or itchy skin and to generally calm the nerves. As a hair rinse, mint decoctions will leave your hair shiny and stimulate its growth. A decoction of sage will darken brown, auburn or black hair.

Mints are beautiful, flavorful and useful herbs that are not only easy to grow, but disease-resistant, drought-tolerant and deer-proof. Mint family members are perfect specimens for traditional herb and vegetable gar-

dens, but they also make useful and functional additions to wildflower gardens, native plant meadows, bee and butterfly gardens, xeriscape plantings and even perennial flower beds. And while you may need to give these plants a little more time and effort at the beginning, they will reward you with years of health, flavor and beauty.

Jill Henderson is an artist, author and organic gardener. She is currently the editor of Show Me Oz ([showmeoz.wordpress.com](http://showmeoz.wordpress.com)), a weekly blog featuring articles on gardening, seed saving, nature ecology, wild edible and medicinal plants and culinary herbs. She has written three books: *The Healing Power of Kitchen Herbs*, *A Journey of Seasons: A Year in the Ozarks High Country*, and *The Garden Seed Saving Guide*.