

MINT, RIVER



Mentha australis

[MEN-thuh aw-STRAL-iss]

Family: Labiatae

Names: Native mint, native peppermint, Australian mint.

Description: Sprawling plant with horizontal and erect stems up to 80 cm high with a spread of around 1 m. The quadrangular stems are often tinged purple and may be smooth to densely hairy, especially on the younger parts. The opposite leaves are shortly stalked or almost sessile and are lanceolate, or less frequently ovate, up to 5 cm long and 15 mm

wide. The margins are smooth or faintly toothed. The upper surface of the leaves may be glabrous or with short hairs, with the lower surface pubescent. The numerous white, or rarely mauve flowers on very short stalks are crowded into false whorls of up to twelve per cluster. They are borne in the axils of the uppermost leaves and appear in summer and autumn. It has a strong peppermint-like odor.

Cultivation: Succeeds in most soils and situations so long as the soil is not too dry. Prefers a slightly acid soil. Grows well in heavy clay soils. A sunny position is best for production of essential oils, but succeeds in partial shade. Most mints have fairly aggressive spreading roots and, unless you have the space to let them roam, they need to be restrained by some means such as planting them in containers that are buried in the soil. Hybridizes freely with other members of this genus. Members of this genus are rarely if ever troubled by browsing deer. Sow seed in spring in a cold frame. Germination is usually fairly quick. Prick out the seedlings into individual pots when they are large enough to handle and plant them out in the summer. *Mentha* species are very prone to hybridization and so the seed cannot be relied on to breed true. Even without hybridization, seedlings will not be uniform and so the content of medicinal oils etc will vary. When growing plants with a particular aroma it is best to propagate them by division. Division can be easily carried out at almost any time of the year, though it is probably best done in the spring or autumn to allow the plant to establish more quickly. Virtually any part of the root is capable of growing into a new plant. Larger divisions can be planted out direct into their permanent positions. However, for maximum increase it is possible to divide the roots up into sections no more than 3cm long

and pot these up in light shade in a cold frame. They will quickly become established and can be planted out in the summer.

Properties: Abortifacient; Antiseptic; Carminative; Febrifuge.

Medicinal Uses: The river mint is widespread in inland areas of Australia and was used as a medicinal plant by the Aborigines. It was boiled in water and used for the relief of coughs and colds. It is recorded the plant was used by the Aborigines to induce abortions. It was also used by early settlers as a tonic. A tea made from the leaves of most mint species has traditionally been used in the treatment of fevers, headaches, digestive disorders and various minor ailments. The leaves are harvested as the plant comes into flower and can be dried for later use. The essential oil in the leaves is antiseptic, though it is toxic in large doses and can cause abortions.

Culinary Uses: An Australian native mint with a delightful peppermint flavor. Can be made into a most uplifting pick-me-up tea. Use one or two sprigs of fresh leaves per cup. Pour on boiling water and let stand 5-10 minutes. It can also be used in jellies, desserts and sweet sauces especially those based on chocolate.

Other Uses: Rats and mice intensely dislike the smell of mint. The plant was therefore used in homes as a strewing herb and has also been spread in granaries to keep the rodents off the grain.

References:

The Book of Mint, Denise Greig, Kangaroo Press, 1989; ISBN: 0-86417-220-6
Plants for a Future Database

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