

MINT, WATER



Mentha aquatica

[MEN-thuh a-KWA-tee-kuh]

Family: Labiatae

Names: Bergamot Mint, Eau-de-cologne Mint, Horsemint, Lemon Mint, Orange Mint, Su Nanesi, Water Capitate Mint, Water Mint, Wild Water Mint

Description: It grows to 1-2 feet or more tall with toothed, oval leaves 1-3 inches in length, which are often purple-flushed. The whole plant smells strongly of peppermint. In summer, tiny lilac flowers open in whorled spikes. It is hardy to zone 6 and is not frost tender. It is in flower from July to October, and the seeds ripen from September to October. The scented flowers are hermaphrodite and are pollinated by bees.

Cultivation: Succeeds in most soils and situations so long as the soil is not too dry. Grows well in heavy clay soils. A sunny position is best for production of essential oils, but it also succeeds in partial shade. Plants can grow in water up to 15cm deep. 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. The whole plant, especially when bruised, has a pungent aroma of bergamot. The flowers are especially attractive to bees and butterflies. A good companion for brassicas. 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. Root system is invasive and should be confined.

Properties: Anodyne; Antiseptic; Antispasmodic; Astringent; Carminative; Cholagogue; Diaphoretic; Emetic; Refrigerant; Stimulant; Stomachic; Tonic; Vasodilator.

Medicinal Uses: A tea made from the leaves has traditionally been used in the treatment of fevers, headaches, digestive disorders and various minor ailments. It is also used as a mouth-wash and a gargle for treating sore throats, ulcers, bad breath etc. 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.

Culinary Uses: Leaves are eaten raw or cooked. A strong distinctive peppermint-like fragrance. Used as a flavoring in salads or cooked foods. The leaves are too pungent for most people to use as a flavoring. An herb tea is made from the fresh or dried leaves by pouring $\frac{3}{4}$ pint of boiling water over them. Let steep 5 minutes and after straining, serve with a slice of lemon or orange and sweeten with honey.

Other Uses: The plant repels flies, mice and rats. It has a pleasant, fresh scent and was formerly used as a strewing herb and has been strewn in granaries to keep mice and rats off the grain. The plant, harvested before flowering, yields about 0.8% essential oil. The fresh or dried plant is very good when used in herbal baths and can also be used in herb pillows.

Recipes

Cucumber and Water Mint Soup

2 medium-sized cucumbers or 1 large one
1 small onion
2 cloves garlic
5 large sprigs water mint
salt and pepper
15 oz carton natural yogurt
 $\frac{1}{2}$ pint cold chicken stock and milk, mixed
double cream
mint leaves to garnish

Wipe but do not peel the cucumbers. Grate them. Peel and grate the onion and press the garlic to extract the juice. Mix cucumber, onion and garlic together. Strip the washed mint leaves from the stem and chop them finely. Combine the cucumber mixture and mint with the yogurt and stock. Chill in the refrigerator for at least an hour and serve in chilled bowls each with a swirl of cream and a mint leaf to garnish. (Food from the Countryside)

Water Mint Ice Cream

1 handful of water mint
 $\frac{1}{2}$ pint milk
yolks of 6 eggs
 $\frac{1}{2}$ pint heavy cream
3 oz sugar
green food coloring
2 oz chocolate chips

Wash and chop the mint coarsely and put with the milk in a pan. Bring to the boil, cover and leave to infuse for 10 minutes off heat. Strain the milk, throwing the mint away. Beat together the egg yolks and sugar, mix with the milk and stir over a low heat (preferably in a double boiler) until thick. Remove from heat and continue to stir for a minute or two, then set aside to cool. Whip the cream until thick and fold into the cold mint custard. Color pale green with food coloring and add the chocolate chips. Put in freezing trays and place in the freezer, stirring once or twice during freezing to break up the ice crystals. (Food from the Countryside)

References:

Food From the Countryside, Avril Rodway, Grange Books, 1988; 1-85627-276-1
Plants for a Future Database

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