

Mint

Mint is one of the most useful herbal invaders in the garden. Left uncontrolled, it will spread throughout a herb bed. Despite this, gardeners, cooks and medicine men have eagerly sought it out since Egyptian times. More recently during the Second World War, a Surrey woman scoured the countryside for peppermint to be used medicinally: "At the beginning of the war, I was put in touch with Messrs Brone and Schimner, druggists in London, who supplied hospitals. We gathered the plants, dried them and sent them off in sacks."

Why is it valued so much? We gardeners enjoy its fragrance and appreciate how its flowers attract butterflies and beneficial insects, like hoverflies, but it has long been used for its medicinal properties, helping digestion and reducing headaches. It's found in toothpaste, indigestion tablets, mouthwash, shower gels, sweets, drinks and of course, on our dinner plates, so one way or another, we all rely on it.

Botanists now identify 14 or 15 different species of *Mentha* in the UK, though in his survey of British mints in 1798, William Sole identified 25 species, including Corn mint, *Mentha arvensis*, which he said smelt as a 'fullsome mix of mellow apple and gingerbread', a more appealing description than Geoffrey Grigson's, who commented that it smelled of "wet, mouldy gorgonzola."

Whatever you're nasal senses tell you, there are 3 wild species native to Scotland: Sole's corn mint, *Mentha arvensis*; water mint, *M. aquatica*; and whorled mint, *M. aquatica x M. arvensis*. This last one shows just how hard it is to define and classify mints: they hybridise madly, so it's difficult to know whether you're dealing with a discrete species or one of many hybrids. The New Atlas of the British and Irish Flora comments that mint is "taxonomically difficult and rather unpopular with recorders." This is fortunately a problem that shouldn't worry too many gardeners.

We divide this great raft of mints into broad categories. The first, spearmints, *M. spicata*, is used for savoury dishes, like mint sauce, raitas and stews, as well as for lemonade and even in Pimms. The variety I prefer is Moroccan mint, largely because it's a better behaved one so is less likely to romp all over the garden.

Peppermints are certainly one of the most widely grown groups and are normally used in sweet dishes, like chocolate mousse or cake, tea and strawberries. When we ran our demonstration garden, chocolate mint proved by far the most popular. I had planted it close to a bench, so as folk were resting their weary limbs, they could gently touch the plant and enjoy that mouth-watering aroma of 'After Eights'. Children went mad over it.

The third group is perfumed mints, like eau-de cologne or Grapefruit. You pick a bunch and put in a bath or use in a shower. My wife likes to put some on the window sill to combat what I would describe as the delightful malty smell of a fermenting home brew. I must say, I would always prefer to sup a glass of beer to a cup of mint tea, but I guess it takes all kinds. On the other hand, when pineapple or grapefruit mint is slipped into a fruit salad, I offer no complaint.

Mints come in so many types and have a wide range of uses. I can only dip into a few examples here, but Pennyroyal, *M. pulegium*, certainly worth mentioning. It is native to the UK, but only grows wild in southern England where it's becoming quite rare. Although Pennyroyal has been used in pot pourris and as flavouring for black pudding, it's normally known for its medicinal properties. It reputedly worked well as an abortifacient, so should obviously be used with caution.

When selecting mints for the garden, we have a wonderful choice, even if nursery plant labels aren't always very helpful. I once came across 'Green Mint', for example and began to look around for shades of pink or red. Another beauty was 'English Lamb Mint', a term that wouldn't endear the nurseryman to butchers here, I suspect. On the other hand, a good garden centre might have a special 'tasting stand' to let you know what you're buying, so have a nibble, as you would test the cheddars in a cheese shop.

Mints need to be planted in damp soil in a sunny spot to bring out the volatile oils. My herb garden is divided into 3 blocks, with a random stone path arranged to let us pick any of the herbs without getting muddy shoes. The hottest bed is reserved for sun-worshippers like rosemary, the middle one hosts the likes of marjoram and chives, while the mints are assembled in the lowest, but still sunny plot. Because it enjoys the sun for a shorter part of the day, the soil will be a little damper. Another way of ensuring the ground can retain moisture is to make sure it has a good structure. Thymes and rosemary will happily thrive in thin soil, but an occasional dressing of compost is essential to build up good humus for mints.

Herbs will readily spread more widely than you want. A variety will sometimes be described in the garden centre as having 'an indefinite spread'. Be warned, it certainly will. This is the reason I lump all my mints in the same bed, and though some, like spearmint, are more thuggish than say apple mint, the more well-behaved varieties will, with a little help from the gardener, still hold their own.

The safest tack is to keep mints in a pot which you sink into the ground to give the appearance of being planted normally and, more importantly, to keep the roots cool and moist. But, given the plant's wanderlust, the rim should be kept at least 5cm above ground level. Again, no matter how much space you give the herb, it will spread sideways and leave a bare bit in the middle. Divide it into 3 or 4 sections and start again. Like so many of our plants, you get much more out of mint by regularly dividing them.

Mint is undoubtedly an asset in the garden, but like any unruly child, does need to be kept in its place

Harvesting and preserving mint

Herbs have better flavour before they come into flower. Choose a dry morning to prevent the mid-day sun from evaporating the essential oils. Cut the stems as close to the ground as possible to prevent a forest of short stalks that would otherwise lacerate your fingers later on.

Freeze mint leaves to prevent them from turning black and losing flavour. Strip good quality leaves from the stems, place in a plastic bag, lightly tie it and put in the freezer. When you remove the bag from the freezer, all you need to do is crumble the leaves into whatever dish you're making. You can also preserve mint in oils, vinegars, butter and even make mint sugar if you want to use it quite quickly.

Fresh mint will always have more flavour, so pot up a root of your favourite variety in June and cut the stems right back. Keep it well watered and bring it into a greenhouse or conservatory at the end of September. It should stay fresh and delicious longer than the plants in the open and will start to regrow earlier in the spring. This way you'll enjoy the taste of fresh mint for much longer.