

YUMMY NORTHWEST

MARY ROSEWOOD, EDITOR AND PUBLISHER
LESLIE PHILLIPS, COPY EDITOR
SERVING IDAHO, MONTANA, OREGON, AND WASHINGTON

Mmm. . .mint

Wrigley's chewing gum is flavored with mint grown in the Pacific Northwest, and in fact much of the mint used in the United States comes from Idaho, Montana, Oregon, and Washington. The optimal amount of sunlight at latitude 40 degrees, combined with moist weather, provides perfect growing conditions for mint.

Lamiaceae is the name of the general mint family and includes the genus *Mentha*, which we usually think of as mint. But it also includes catnip (*Nepeta*), lemon balm (*Melissa officinalis*), and many common herbs such as basil, lavender, and thyme.

But we'll concentrate on common mint here with some catnip thrown in. It all smells good, so enjoy!

It'll grow on you

Be careful how you plant it – in the perfect Pacific Northwest climate, mint will REALLY grow. But it is nice to have around.

This fragrant herb has been used medicinally for at least 4,000 years. While Greek mythology attempts to pinpoint its spiritual origins, mint is indigenous to much of Europe and Asia. Evidence shows Native Americans long used mint in rituals, so it is likely to have been growing in North America before colonists brought plants with them.

Along with being a flavoring, peppermint is most widely used in medicines, often as a treatment for intestinal problems, vomiting, and colds. Pennyroyal also has many medicinal uses similar to peppermint. In addition, pennyroyal oil can be used to dispel (but not kill) moths and other pests.



More about mint

Mint Festival

July 18-19 2008
Jefferson, Ore.
mintfestival.com



According to Greek mythology, mint is a symbol of hospitality.



The world is like a little marsh filled with mint and white hawthorne.

– Mary MacLane

It is the destiny of mint to be crushed.

– Waverley Lewis Root

Plant a little mint, Madame, then step out of the way so you don't get hurt!

– British gardener

As for the garden of mint, the very smell of it alone recovers and refreshes our spirits.

– Pliny

Catnip contains an ingredient that repels mosquitoes better than commercial insect repellants, but although it safe to use, it does not work well on skin.

The aromatherapy properties of mint are self-evident. When you are stressed, breathe deeply near some mint and relax. Studies have shown that the scent of mint helps people perform better during prolonged tasks that require intense concentration.

If you use mint in home remedies, don't gather it from the wild. Mint easily hybridizes and unless you are certain it is "pure" mint, consumption of it can have uncertain, perhaps harmful, results.

Another warning: Do not give the herb peppermint to children under 4 years old; it can irritate a young stomach. Substitute the milder spearmint, or even catnip (*Nepeta cataria*), which has no menthol at all.

The menthol content of mint, especially in peppermint, is the source of its warming properties. But mint is at the same time cooling, making hot mint tea refreshing in summer or winter.



The flowers of catnip look like miniature orchids.

Edible mint

For additional flavor, rub rim of glass with mint leaf.

Mint Simple Syrup

1 cup water
1 cup sugar
10 fresh mint sprigs

Bring water to a boil, then stir in sugar. When sugar is dissolved, remove from heat. Add mint, let cool, put in glass jar, and refrigerate. After 24 hours, discard mint. Will keep about 1 week refrigerated. Or freeze as ice cubes to add to ice tea.

Mint Julep

3 fresh mint leaves
1 tablespoon Mint Simple Syrup
Crushed ice
1 ounce (2 tablespoons) bourbon

Put mint leaves and syrup in 8-ounce glass. Gently press leaves against glass with spoon, then pack with ice. Add bourbon.

Mojito

6 mint leaves
1/2 lime cut into quarters
2 ounces (4 tablespoons) light rum
2 tablespoons Mint Simple Syrup
2 drops bitters
Crushed ice
3 ounces (6 tablespoons) club soda

Mix and crush mint and lime in a tall glass. Add rum, syrup, and bitters. Fill glass with ice, then top with soda. Stir or transfer to shaker and shake.

Mint Tea

Handful of mint leaves – mix 2–4 varieties
Mint Simple Syrup

Steep fresh (or dried) crushed mint leaves in boiled water for about 5 minutes. Strain out leaves and pour tea into a mug. Add Mint Simple Syrup if you want it sweet.

For an iced version, steep leaves in 2 ounces boiled water and then pour into an 8-ounce glass filled with ice. Add sweetener as desired.



Types of mint

There are 25 species in the *Mentha* genus and hundreds of varieties. Here are a few of the more interesting common mints.

apple mint

Mentha suaveolens

banana mint

Mentha arvensis

basil mint

Mentha cv.

chocolate mint

Mentha x piperita
'Chocolate'

curly mint

Mentha spicata crispata

English pennyroyal

Mentha pulegium

grapefruit mint

Mentha suaveolens x piperita

lavender mint

Mentha piperita cv.

orange mint (also known as **bergamot mint**, **lemon mint**, **lime mint**, and others)

Mentha x piperita 'Citrata'

pineapple mint

Mentha suaveolens
'Variegata'

spearmint

Mentha spicata

Minty bouquets

Place a small bouquet in various places around the house. Keep one by the sink and after washing your hands, rub a leaf between your fingers. (Putting mint in water also preserves it for culinary uses.)

Sew a square of muslin or cloth into a pouch and add crushed mint leaves. Use this to freshen drawers, closets, suitcases, or your car.

You can also use this sachet to scent bathwater. Hang the bag where the hot water can flow through it as the tub fills. Or just toss crushed leaves into your bathtub to steep while you soak.

Here is another tip from a reader:

I love my mint plant. It has wintered over in a pot on the deck for a couple of years now. I use long stems of mint in small flower arrangements to add a touch of green and for the lovely addition of the minty fragrance. Heck, I put rosemary and lavender in bouquets, too. Many of the flowers I grow don't seem to have much fragrance, like snapdragons and petunias.

Minty breath

You can chew on mint leaves to freshen your breath, or you can create a mouth rinse by making a very strong mint tea and storing it in the refrigerator.

This strong tea can also be used as a refreshing foot soak.

Resources

Mint by Kate Ferry-Swainson
mojitocompany.com
southernliving.com

Learn more about growing and using mint from The Growing Gardener at yummynorthwest.com.



About Yummy Northwest

Each monthly issue highlights an edible delight available in the Pacific Northwest and Montana.

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