



Redwood Barn Nursery

1607 Fifth Street Davis, California

A Sprig of Mint

One of my early childhood memories is from our family cabin in the Black Hills of South Dakota, where my mother grew up. The water for the cabin comes from a spring on the property. The purest water you can imagine comes out of the ground at 42 degrees F, running in a little stream under the house. My grandfather built a box in which you could suspend fresh produce to keep it crisp and cold in this mountain water. You'd buy fresh corn at the produce stand along the highway and suspend it in the box while you brought a pot of water to a boil. Pick, chill, cook and eat right away; that was the rule for sweet corn!

All along the tiny stream grew a pungent sweet herb that my grandmother would pick and add to ice water. She called it pennyroyal, but grandmother wasn't a botanist: more than likely it was field mint, also called wild mint (*Mentha arvensis*). Fifty years later the smell of wild mint evokes memories of sweet corn and cucumbers and pan-fried trout in a South Dakota summer.

Good cooks know that smells stimulate emotions, memories and appetites. Probably no plant family does that more than *Lamiaceae*: the mint family, which includes most of our important kitchen herbs used for their resins and oils and volatile compounds that make the kitchen smell wonderful and food taste good. They're also great garden plants, easy to grow. Some perhaps too easy!

Mint itself is in the genus *Mentha*, and there are many species and hybrids. The most popular are spearmint and peppermint. Mints naturally grow in moist soils but can tolerate dry conditions, and they spread rapidly by rhizomes which root readily at each node. They can become garden thugs, so are best planted in containers unless you have lots of room to spare.

"Garden thug" is a delightful British gardening term for any plant which grows beyond bounds and is hard to get rid of. Not technically invasive, since we reserve that term for plants which might escape into the wild and displace native species. Just vigorous and nearly ineradicable, spreading either by runners or by reseeding. The best definition I've found for a garden thug comes from David Stuart, garden columnist for the UK Guardian (referring to *Acanthus mollis*): "It is a magnificent thing if you know you will never, ever need the space for something else."

So most people confine their mint to containers to pick sprigs for drinks and recipes, but if you have the space and inclination to let mint run amok, you will be rewarded with masses of summer flowers and you can watch as they draw bees, butterflies, and many other beneficial insects in great abundance. If your mint plant gets overgrown, just cut the whole patch back – literally mow it to the ground, you can't hurt it!

But don't let the thuggish qualities of *Mentha* put you off of the other members of the family. It's hard to think of a plant family with species that span as many garden and landscape use categories.



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By the way, I learned the family as *Labiatae* (still an accepted Latin name), and happen to prefer that because it actually describes the flowers: they have two “lips” (labia), lower petals that are bigger than the upper petals. So flowers in the mint family are called bilabiate (two-lips). Beginning botany students also like to look for the characteristic square stems that help to identify the family.

Incredible diversity!

Whether you prefer Lamiaceae or Labiatae, the family includes:

- showy flowering annuals (scarlet sage), perennials (anise hyssop, bee balm, catmint, and many, many more), and flowering shrubs (lavender, germander, sages).
- the familiar kitchen herbs: basil, marjoram, oregano, rosemary, sage, thyme.
- herbal teas (mint, lemon balm).
- herbs for ritual (white sage) and euphoriants (not telling).
- plants with oils that have been tested and marketed as herbicides (thymol) and insect repellents (menthol).
- natural food preservatives (rosemary).
- edible seeds (chia is a type of sage, *Salvia hispanica*) and shopping channel kitsch (Chia pets!).
- cat toys (catnip).
- houseplants (Coleus, Swedish ivy).
- landscape shrubs well-adapted to low-water yards.

Mint family members help gardeners by creating habitat and providing food sources for good insects. The flowers of these plants draw many beneficial insects, especially bees, and hummingbirds, and the plants are mostly very easy to propagate: roots initiate quickly and easily from nodes on the stems or rhizomes.

Kitchen herbs

Herbs are very easy to grow. In fact, an herb garden is a great starter project for kids and novice gardeners. All you need is a sunny location, and even partial sun can be acceptable. You can crowd the plants together in a large pot, pinching and trimming them as you use them to keep them from competing with each other. They can be planted on the edge of the vegetable garden to draw beneficial insects that help control pests. Or you can just plant them among your flowers and landscape plants. The culinary herbs mostly come from Mediterranean climates that are very similar to ours, thriving in dry heat and tolerating considerable drought. And except for basil, which is frost-tender, herbs can be planted year-around.

In the landscape

For folks replacing your lawns, many of the shrubs and perennials in this group are especially drought tolerant and showy, providing some of our most important low-water landscape plants. Here are some selections.

- I've mentioned the salvias in many previous columns, including native and introduced species. Ornamental sages have showy flowers that draw



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- pollinators, and many have fragrant foliage as well. Blue, purple, red, and pink forms are especially attractive to hummingbirds.
- Catmints (*Nepeta* species and hybrids) are relatives of catnip, low-growing shrublets with pungent foliage and showy flowers. I've been increasingly impressed by how tough these little plants are, as well as by their long season of bloom (spring through summer).
 - Germanders (*Teucrium* species) are gradually becoming better-known and deserve wider usage. Clean, tough shrubs and ground covers that are very drought tolerant, they have flowers in shades of blue to magenta and bloom over a long period, many with silver-grey foliage. Growth habit ranges from very low ground covers to large background shrubs.
 - There are dozens of varieties of lavenders available in the nursery trade, from the early-blooming Spanish types (*Lavandula stoechas*), the robust French species (*L. dentata*), to the well-known English species and hybrids used for perfume. I have a large bed of lavender that I water about once a month. Lavenders make great fillers in a new landscape, giving lots of bloom for several years before they get woody. Look for Goodwin Creek for a big background plant; Grosso, Phenomenal, Provence, and others for exceptionally fragrant flowers. There are also dwarf types for smaller gardens or pots.
 - Rosemary is a very tough plant with blue flowers in winter and spring. Some types grow low to the ground, while others are large, upright background shrubs. Small songbirds like the cover they provide, and bees love the flowers.

These are all hardy plants that love full sun, aren't fussy about soil, and can be watered minimally once established. Some can tolerate light shade. Select winter-blooming rosemary, spring-flowering native sages, the many summer-blooming family members such as bee balm and hyssop, and cultivars of autumn sage (*S. greggii* and *S. jamesonii* hybrids), and you can have flowers and fragrant foliage all year around in a low-water landscape. And a pot of mint on your back step, for sprigs to flavor your favorite summer beverage.



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Probably the most popular member of the mint family, basil is a very easy summer herb. Plant in full sun (part shade is ok, though not optimal). Not fussy about soil. You can even grow basil in a pot. Hint: cut the plant back about fifty percent in late summer for a last flush of foliage to use before frost. Basil freezes or dries well for winter use.



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We always recommend pinching off basil flowers to keep the plants producing foliage for the kitchen, but if you have a few extra plants you can let them flower for the bees.



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One of my favorite garden thugs! Himalayan silver mint has silver-blue foliage and a mass of pinkish flowers in summer. My single plant has spread about twenty feet. In fact, it is so vigorous that my herb supplier has stopped growing it, so be forewarned. Shown here are sunflower bees (a type of digger bee) clinging to the blossoms in early morning. By mid-day the plants are swarming with several species of very docile, happy bees and butterflies.



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Catmint flowers showing the typical bilabiate (two-lips) blooms of the mint family. Catmints are in the same genus as catnip, but don't appear to have the same narcotic effect on cats. Fragrant foliage, long season of bloom on low shrubs with tight growth habit. Very drought tolerant.



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Photographed here in mid-November, rosemary has a long season of bloom through the winter and spring. Varieties differ as to how pungent the foliage is (all can be used as seasonings), how intensely blue the flowers are, and whether they grow prostrate or upright. Shown here is the variety Irene, a semi-trailing type with especially vivid flowers.



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Germanders are diverse and under-utilized members of the mint family. The species of *Teucrium* range from large shrubs to use in the background, to cute creeping ground covers like the *Teucrium polium* shown here. Flowers of germanders are blue to magenta-pink. Very tolerant of drought and hot sun.