Family: Lamiaceae  
Latin Name: Pycnanthemum spp.  
Common Name: Variations of Mountain Mint  
Growth: Herbaceous perennial  
Hardiness: Zones 4-9, by species  
Light: Full to partial sun or light shade  
Soil: Well-drained, sandy to loamy  
Water: Dry to moderate moisture  
Use: Pollinator; fragrance; not GRAS for consumption  
Propagation: Seed, division, cuttings

**History**

Mountain mint is the commonly accepted name for roughly 20 species of *Pycnanthemum* native exclusively to North America. French botanist André Michaux called the fragrant plant mountain mint after encountering it while exploring for useful plants in Pennsylvania around 1790. The generic name *Pynanthemum* is from the Greek *pyknos*, dense, and *anthos*, flowers, which refers to the plant’s crowded flower heads.

**Description**

Typical of the Lamiaceae family, *Pycnanthemum* species have square stems, many bearing a covering of fine trichomes, opposite leaves, and head-like inflorescences from white to purple-spotted to pale lilac. They are most often branched perennials, some rapidly forming colonies. Speciation, or the process by which new species arise, occurs in *Pycnanthemum* by two methods: hybridization, the union of two species, and polyploidy, the doubling of chromosomes. Rachel Williams received an Herb Society of America research grant in 2003 to study these processes.

**Culture & Habitat**

Mountain mint’s common name can be deceiving in telling us about where it grows naturally and how we should cultivate it in our own gardens. As a group, you will find the mountain mints in open, mesic meadows, thickets and on the edges of woods. Their preferred soil type ranges from sandy and freely draining in coastal flatlands to gritty loam on the upper to middle part of a slopes. Exceptions include *Pycnanthemum californicum*, *P. setosum* and *P. virginianum* which can be found along streams and wet meadow habitats, but the soils are still well-drained.

In the garden this translates to “no wet feet” in an area that is full to part sun. The species that prefer wetter soils are more drought-tolerant once they are established. During the first year in the garden, keep the soil moist, but not wet around the plant. By the second year, mountain mint will not need to be watered unless there is an extended dry period – more than four weeks.

Some species will grow into large clumps and have been called weedy, but mountain mint is easily kept in a reasonable size through division.

**Uses**

The essential oil content of *Pycnanthemum* varies by species and ranges from the pleasant floral and mint to pulegone, the

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*Pycnanthemum tenuifolium*, narrowleaf mountain mint, c. Susan Betz  
insect-repellent-quality that renders plants undesirable for culinary purposes. Studies on the toxicity of pulegone continue, with recommendations for limiting exposure especially when combined with menthofuran.

Other oils, in varying amounts and types by species, include carvacrol (oregano-like), menthone (minty), isomenthone (refreshing mint fragrance), beta-elemene (floral, attractive to insects), limonene (citrusy), piperitone (minty and camphor-like), and germacrene d (woody, green).

Some species have been used as an insect repellent by rubbing leaves and flowers on clothing to repel chiggers and ticks. Aromatic leaves and flowers are added to potpourris and moth deterrent sachets.

Native American’s used the buds and flowers of some species to season meat and broth and to make tea.

Leaves were used as hunting and fishing aids, and to scent mink traps.

Leaves were used medicinally for coughs and fevers, and as a stimulant for mental fatigue. Some Native American medicine men believed fresh cut flowers stuffed into the nose of a person near death would revive them.

*Pycnanthemum* species are great pollinator plants, attracting native bees, flies, butterflies, moths, and birds.

**Propagation**

Propagation of mountain mint is primarily done by seed and division. It is difficult to propagate stem cuttings as the shoots quickly develop into woody stems. However the emerging herbaceous stems can be propagated as cuttings. (Peter Borchard, Companion Plants, personal communication, February, 2015). Mountain mint is easily divided in late spring into summer and the divisions can be quite small and still survive. It can self-seed in the garden, but seedlings are easily identified by their fragrance and can be removed if they are overabundant or in the wrong place.

**Plant and Seed Sources**

Plant Information Online is a source to links to North American seed and nursery firms. It is a free service of the University of Minnesota Libraries. http://plantinfo.unm.edu

Seeds only:

www.americanmeadows.com
www.illwildflowers.com
www.ionexchange.com
www.johnnyseeds.com
www.richters.com
www.seedaholic.com

Seeds and plants:

www.abnativeplants.com
www.grownnative.org
www.northcreeknursuries.com
www.plantdelights.com
www.prairiemoonnursury.com
www.wildflower.org

*Each source carries a selection of various *Pycnanthemum*(s) & no single source carries all known species.

**References**


Personal communication with Debra Knapke. Peter Borchard, Companion Plants, Athens, OH. http://companionsplants.com/


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Dava Stravinsky
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