

The Herb Society of America's Notable Native 2013 - Wild Bergamot

Monarda fistulosa L.



Monarda fistulosa, wild bergamot
Photo: Kirti Mathura

History

The plant was named by Carl Linné for Nicholas Bautista Monardes (1493-1588), a Spanish physician and botanist. The specific epithet “fistulosa” refers to the hollow tubular shape of the corolla.

Monarda fistulosa was used in many of the same ways as the sometimes more familiar *M. didyma*, but with a broader growing range and availability to greater numbers of people, proved far more useful as an herb. It was used as a personal and home fragrance, was valued as a flavoring for food and beverage, and as a preservative for meats. The chemistry of wild bergamot gave rise to the many medicinal uses over the years.

Monarda fistulosa var. *menthifolia* contains additional essential oils. The leaves of this plant have a more pronounced floral/minty flavor and fragrance, which made it a frequent choice for tea. It was also used as a flavoring in the making of sausage.

Family: Lamiaceae

Latin Name: *Monarda fistulosa* L.

Common Name: wild bergamot

Growth: Herbaceous perennial, 2-4 feet tall, lavender to pink flowers

Hardiness: Zone 3b—9b

Light: Full to partial sun

Soil: Well-drained loam, sand or clay, but will tolerate poor soils

Water: Dry to moderate moisture

Use: Tea, flavoring, medicinal, cut flower

Propagation: Seed, division, cuttings

Description

Wild bergamot is a clump-forming herbaceous perennial that reaches 2 to 4 feet in height with a 2 to 3 feet spread. Typical of the mint family, square stems produce round heads of two-lipped tubular flowers. These vary in color from pale to deep pink or rosy-lavender, set atop a whorl of pink to red-tinted leafy bracts. Bloom typically occurs from May to July in the southern part of its range, and July into September in northern areas. Foliage is greyish-green to dark green, lance-shaped with toothed margins, with a hairy or smooth surface. Depending on the chemistry, they may have an aroma ranging from thyme to oregano, mint, or rose geranium.

Culture

Wild bergamot is found in open woods, prairies, fields and roadsides. It ranges across most of North America, including all of the United States except Alaska, California and Florida. Of the different varieties of *M. fistulosa*, some are found

only in limited areas, while others such as *M. fistulosa* var. *fistulosa* are widespread.

This *Monarda* can be grown in gardens throughout the U. S. (in some areas as an annual). Full to partial sun is preferred by wild bergamot. It will tolerate a range of soils, with well-drained loam the best. Clumps of spreading rhizomes can be divided every few years to enhance plant



Monarda fistulosa
Photo: Linda Wells

vigor. This species is less prone to powdery mildew than others, but adequate air circulation and soil drainage are necessary.

Wild bergamot is an important pollinator habitat plant. Nectar feeders include butterflies, moths, hummingbirds, bees, wasps, and flies. Insects feeding on the pollen include beetles, flies and bees. Specific bees are the actual pollinators. It can be used in butterfly, hummingbird, native, and rain gardens. Mammalian grazers (deer and rabbits) avoid this plant, primarily due to its strong flavor.

Propagation

Harvest seeds when the capsules of the flower head turn tan. Seed easily germinates when lightly covered, in warm conditions. Divide large clumps in spring or fall. Stem cuttings can be rooted during the growing season.



M. fistulosa seed
Photo: Kirti Mathura

Uses

Depending upon the variety of wild bergamot, flavor varies. Those with high thymol content are used as a thyme substitute, but the *Monardas* do not have GRAS status (FDA generally recognized as safe). Pleasant teas are made from leaves or flowers. Current medicinal uses are much the same



Monarda fistulosa
Photo: Kirti Mathura

as historic applications. Wild bergamot is used for aromatherapy and fragrance, and flowers are included in fresh bouquets or dried for crafting.

Harvesting

Harvest leaves when plants have reached full size for the season, but before they begin to decline. Cut entire stems just after morning dew has evaporated to maximize the essential oils. Leaves can be dried on the stems or removed before drying. Harvest individual flower heads just before peak of bloom.

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.umn.edu>

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