BEE BALM

and other mints

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Illustrated by Lucile Walton

THE mints, or Labiatae, comprise a large, cosmopolitan family with some two hundred genera and about three thousand species. The plants characteristically have square stems and opposite leaves, and are usually pleasantly aromatic. Economically the family is important as a source of aromatic oils and garden ornamentals. A majority of the savory herbs which we use in the kitchen belong in the family—sage, thyme, marjoram or oregano, hyssop, rosemary and mint itself. Many are used in the flavoring of medications and confections; for example, peppermint, spearmint and horehound, Marrubium, ingredient of old-fashioned horehound candy. In this country, Lamium amplexicaule (henbit) can be eaten as a pot-herb, and Stachys or woundwort has a crisp, white tuber which may be eaten raw or cooked as a vegetable. Many mints are cultivated for their showy flowers and/or scent such as lavender, salvia and species of Monarda, Scutellaria, Nepeta, Teucrium, Coleus and Pycnanthemum.

In the U.S. the showiest of the wild mints is Monarda didyma, known variously as Oswego tea, bee balm, horsemint, mountain mint, fragrant balm and Indian's plume. Unfortunately it is not very common in Virginia, being found only in the highest mountain areas such as around Whitetop and Mount Rogers in the southern part of the state. Its range extends to moist, shady, hilly localities from Georgia north to Canada and west to Michigan. It will grow well at lower elevations if transplanted carefully, and many people cultivate it in their flower gardens. Traditionally every old farmstead would have a riot of color along the front fence consisting of hollyhocks, nasturtiums, jewelweed, sweet william, petunias, scarlet sage and big clumps of bee balm, brilliant at the height of summer.

Monarda didyma is a rather coarse perennial herb which grows about 2-3 feet high. There is a single dense head of scarlet flowers at the tip of each stem, surrounded by a circle of bright reddish, drooping bracts which add to the general colorful show. The dark green leaves are thin, oblong lance-shaped and sharply toothed with hairy leaf stems or petioles. Each pair is offset from the adjacent pair so that mutual shading is minimized. The conspicuous funnel-shaped corolla is two-lipped. The erect, slender upper lip is arched and sharp-pointed; the large, spreading lower lip is three-lobed with the center lobe longer than the rest and often notched at the apex. Two long anther-bearing stamens extend beyond the corolla, a feature which gives the plant its specific name. Didymus means 'twin' and was used by Linnaeus for plants bearing stamens in pairs. There is a single pistil also protruding from the flower. The incurved green calyx is slightly hairy in the throat. The plant blooms from July to September and is a treat to find here, though in mountainous West Virginia and further north it is commoner along roadside banks and in woody thickets. The Indians and early settlers made tea from its leaves; hence the name, Oswego tea.

A closely related member of the same genus which is much commoner in our area is Monarda fistulosa, the wild bergamot. The plant is smaller and more slender than bee balm. The flowers are lavender, purplish or pink and sometimes white. It grows in much drier localities and is frequently found at the edges of woods, in clearings, and along roadsides. Near Mountain Lake there are several cleared areas in the woods where originally a mountain farm stood. Nothing remains but a few old apple trees and some rotting timbers from the buildings, but in midsummer the clearings are literally carpeted with wild bergamot of all shades.

The genus Monarda was named for Nicholas Monardez, a Spanish physician and botanist who wrote many tracts on medicinal and other useful plants in the late sixteenth century.

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