



Mentha Piperita

The plant and its uses

Mint...just say the word and cool, refreshing images come to mind: frosty glasses of lemonade garnished with curly sprigs of spearmint; the clean, chilling taste of a mint candy cane. Even chewing gum, mouthwash, and toothpaste companies use images of crisp, clean snowy slopes to let us know how refreshing their mint flavored products are. Delicious recipes for soups and deserts. Remedies for various health troubles and countless other uses.

■ **Mentha Piperita** (usually known as Peppermint). King of all mints. The potent taste of the leaves - very strong menthol - takes your breath away. Very cool and clean indeed. Peppermint is the mint that is most often used commercially -- in liqueurs, toothpastes, soaps, and mouthwashes -- because of its strong, pure qualities. In medicines, it is used not only as a pleasant flavoring, but also because it contains healing properties as well. Mint has been known as both a seasoning and a medicine for centuries. It is also being used for rubbing since the very early stages of human evolution.

Plant family: Lamiaceae (mint family).

Used plant part: Leaves.

Origin: Peppermint is a (usual sterile) hybrid from water mint (*M. aquatica*) and spearmint (*M. spicata*). It is found sometimes wild in Central and Southern Europe (where mint rubbing originated), but was probably first put to human use in England, whence its cultivation spread to the European continent and Africa.

Cultivation: Peppermint is much cultivated in many countries of Europe, Western and Central Asia for the production of menthol. Northern Africa is also a main cultivation area. In most of these countries, peppermint entered local cuisine, replacing in part native mints.

Sensoric quality: Characteristically pure and refreshing odour, pungent and burning taste. The typical 'mint scent' is most pure in peppermint, of all mints.

Main constituents: The essential oil of peppermint (up to 2.5% in the dried leaves) is mostly made up from menthol (ca. 50%), menthone (10 to 30%), menthyl esters (up to 10%) and further monoterpene derivatives (pulegone, piperitone, menthofurane). Traces of jasmone (0.1%) improve the oil's quality remarkably. Menthol and menthyl acetate are responsible for the pungent and refreshing odour; they are mostly found in older leaves and are preferentially formed during long daily sunlight periods. On the other hand, the ketones menthone and pulegon (and menthofurane) have a less delightful fragrance; they appear to higher fraction in young leaves and their formation is preferred during short days.

Mythology: Mint is even a part of Greek mythology. According to the legend, Minthe originally was a nymph, and Pluto's lover. When his wife Persephone found out, in a fit of rage she turned Minthe into a lowly plant, to be trod upon. Pluto could not undo the spell, but softened the spell by giving her a sweet scent which would perfume the air when her leaves were stepped upon.

Etymology: Latin *menta* and Greek *mínthee*, origin unknown. The species name *piperita* refers to the peppery and pungent taste. In the New Testament, the mint is called *heedýosmon* (see also pomegranate). This compound means "the sweet smelling one": heedýs "sweet, pleasant" (cognate to Latin *suavis*, German *süß* and English *sweet*) and *osmeé* "smell" (cognate to *odour*, cf. Latin *olere* "to smell"). It is not certain, though, whether this biblical plant is identical to any mint species.



Growing Mint

Growing mint is a simple proposition; it is keeping it from taking over the garden that takes work. Given medium rich, moist soil and shade to dappled sunlight, mint will thrive and soon form a lush, thick carpet. Keep it cut back, especially once it begins to bloom, otherwise it will become invasive. Since many of the varieties propagate from underground runners, you may have to just pull out wandering plants. Most mints thrive as house plants as well.

Mint - You can't live with it and you can't live without it.

Growing mint: Most of the time we are busy trying to just keep it tidy. The stolons of mint are some of the most aggressive in all the plant world. If you plant it in the ground, the first year you wonder what all the fuss is about. The second year you find a few stray sprouts and by the third year it is climbing in the bedroom window. Mint will grow 20 feet under weedblock and come out the other side and with no water in mid summer. Mint spreads two ways, by runners and by seed. Those sprouts that shoot up from the broadcasted seed will probably not be the same as the parent they came from. They will probably smell rank and taste worse.

Plant your mint where you can control it. Don't think just because you put it in a pot that is sufficient. Keep your eye on the pots too: mint can crack clay pots and escape into the neighboring area. Unless you want mint everywhere, grub out all those pesky runners that find their way into the soil as soon as possible. Once those runner's roots really take hold and the other plants grow around them, that space will be mint for life. Don't put more than one kind of mint in a pot. If you mix your different kinds of mints up in the same pot, either one mint will smother the rest or they will get so mixed up, it will be difficult to tell them apart.

Mint likes full sun and lots of water. If you put your mint in the shade, it will grow floppy and the flavor will not be as strong as when you grow it in the sun. Mint is hardy to zone 5 and likes almost any garden soil. It enjoys a damp location, though, and rich soil. Mint planted outdoors should be mulched heavily to protect against frost. Mint is a perennial herb and when grown in pots needs to be divided every year.

Harvesting mint: When you cut Mint, cut all the way back to the ground. If you want to enjoy the many different colors of flowers, cut them off before the seed is ripe. Remember that when an herb is flowering it is not making lots of nice leaves to cook with. Shear your mint to the ground in the fall and it will emerge shining and ready for gourmand use in the spring.

When harvesting mint leaves, cut back alternate plants so you always have small tender leaves available. The peppermints or red mints are very strong flavored and should be dried before using or used sparingly if fresh.

Pests and Diseases: Caterpillars can usually be handpicked. They are repelled by wormwood spray or insect spray.

Rust appears as bright orange markings on the foliage of herbs such as mint and chives. Destroy all affected foliage. Do not place diseased plants or foliage in the compost bin. If a mild commercial copper spray does not curb the disease, destroy the plants.



Uses for Health

Peppermint is the mint of choice for medicinal purposes. Recently more and more health care professionals are acknowledging the health benefits of many herbs and essential oils. Studies have shown vast and consistent results that bear up the traditional use of such natural medicines. Researchers are ever searching for the cures for what ails us, and many drugs have their origins in ethnic medicinal practices. In fact, a quarter of all pharmaceuticals contain botanicals.

Traditionally, peppermint essential oil has been used to treat indigestion, headaches, colic, gingivitis, irritable bowel syndrome, spasms and rheumatism. This volatile and potent essential oil has very diverse uses because of its many properties. It relaxes muscles; has antiviral and bactericidal qualities; increases stomach acidity (to aid digestion); is an analgesic and counterirritant; and is a carminative (eases intestinal cramping).

Consider the following: The more we process foods, the more nutrients we take out and then need to replace by vitamin and mineral (and herbal!) supplements. Many refining processes send toxins in the air all around us that assault our immune system. Synthetics, likewise, can interfere with our immune systems. In other words, we are suffering from taking away "essentials" from resources to make products for some "convenience". Some would say "convenience" is killing us. We are also finding that overuse and misuse of some antibiotics have helped create some bacteria resistant to antibiotics.

On the other hand: True essential oils are the complex, volatile "soul of the plant". Scientists cannot duplicate it, and even yet don't fully understand all the functions these oils do for the plant itself. Distillation gently removes the health-giving properties we need from the plant--organic hormones, vitamins and other natural elements which work internally and topically. (Boiling the plant causes the essential oils to evaporate). These naturally counteract chemical effects, as well as the viruses and germs around us every day, through their ability to stimulate white blood cells and encourage them to scavenge. Because of the way essential oils naturally encourage our own bodies to work harder toward health, bacteria cannot become "resistant" to essential oils.

The molecules of the highly volatile essential oils are absorbed into the olfactory nerves of the nose and then into the blood stream via the lungs; they also affect the limbic system. (The respiratory system is especially affected when the molecules are inhaled through the mouth). When used in massage or a bath, the molecules enter through the skin and circulates the whole body system.

Therapeutic actions: Analgesic (topical), antiinflammatory, antiulcer properties, blocks calcium influx into muscle cells causing inhibition of isolated contractions, calms and strengthens nerves, calms an upset stomach, decreases flaccidity in the GI tract, digestive aid, dissolves gallstones, eliminates heartburn, improves solubility of bile, increases bile acid and lecithin levels in the gallbladder, inhibits and kills micro-organisms (Candida albicans, Herpes simplex, Influenza A viruses, Mumps virus, Pseudomonas aeruginosa, Streptococcus pyogenes, Staphylococcus aureus), inhibits constipation, inhibits diarrhea, inhibits hypercontractility of intestinal smooth muscle, mild anaesthetic to stomach wall, normalizes gastrointestinal activity, prevents congestion of blood to the brain, reduces bile cholesterol levels, stimulates circulation, stimulates contractile activity and bile secretion in the gallbladder.

Clinical indications: Candidiasis, Cholecystitis, Cholelithiasis, Crohn's disease, Dysmenorrhea,

Herpes simplex, Irritable bowel syndrome, Memory loss, Otitis media, Peptic ulcer, Ulcerative colitis, Anxiety, Cellulitis, Colic, Common cold, Constipation, Cramps, Diarrhea, Enteritis, Fatigue, Flatulent dyspepsia, Gastritis, Heartburn, Indigestion, Influenza A virus, Migraine headache - associated with digestion, Mumps, Senility.

Contraindications: Acute gallstones due to the choleric effect, early pregnancy, hiatal hernia, due to relaxing effect of lower esophageal sphincter. Small children should not inhale essential oil. Whenever highly concentrated menthol is used, one must consider that menthol is toxic to infants and can induce apnoea.

Drug/Nutrient interactions: No interactions have been reported.

Chemical constituents: Azulenes; Bitter principle; Carotenes; Choline; Essential oil containing: Alpha- and beta-pinene, Cineole, Jasmone, Isomenthol, Isomenthone, Ledol, Limonene, Menthofuran, Menthol, Menthone, Menthyl acetate, Neomenthol, Piperitone, Pulegone, Viridiflorol; Flavonoids: Menthoside, Rutin; Rosmarinic acid; Tannins.

Toxicity. Hypersensitivity signs: Bradycardia, heartburn, muscle tremor, skin rash.

Peppermint's many health uses include the following:

- The menthol in peppermint soothes the lining of the digestive tract and stimulates the production of bile, which is an essential digestive fluid. A hot cup of herbal tea is an excellent way to settle your stomach after a big meal.
- There is a very good reason that peppermint is the flavoring of choice for toothpaste. Peppermint is an excellent breath freshener. When using peppermint tea as a breath freshener, increase the effectiveness by adding a pinch of anise, caraway or cinnamon. Mint is also a good remedy for gingivitis.
- Peppermint is reputed to have the calming, sedative effect.
- Peppermint and its relatives are mostly known as a medicine and popular herbs for infusions. Menthol vapors are famous for relieving nasal, sinus and chest congestion. Remember those minty-smelling ointments your mother rubbed on your chest when you were a child with a cold? You can also get relief with a steaming cup of peppermint tea. For a more effective cold remedy, combine peppermint with elder flower and yarrow. For a hacking cough, drink 3 to four cups of cool peppermint tea throughout the day, taking a sip every 15 to 30 minutes.
- Digestion problems/ Nausea/ Excess Gas: One drop of essential oil in a glass of water, or on a sugar cube, taken orally.
- Colic: Traditional therapy is to make a peppermint tea, but be cautious with infants because the strong menthol could possibly cause a choking reaction.
- Tension Headaches: 1-2 drops in carrier oil applied to temples when headache starts and once an hour after, if needed. Some people might find it more effective to apply a drop behind each ear, depending on the type and cause of headache. If the headache is related to digestive problems, also drink a glass of (preferably warm) water with a drop (or 2) of mint oil in it.
- Mental Fatigue: Mint is a stimulant similar to caffeine, but won't cause jitters. Try a drop at the back of the tongue. Too much at once can be overwhelming; try a SMALL drop first. Mint is also known for lifting the mood, bringing cheer. Also throughout history has been used in cases of hysteria and shock.
- Mint contains Vitamin C and Vitamin A.

- Essential peppermint oil is anti-inflammatory, analgesic (pain-reducer), and a counterirritant. Essential oils promote formation of white cells and acts against microbial germs, while being completely harmless to skin tissue. All these factors are at work in healing skin conditions.

Disclaimer: This in no way replaces being seen and advised by your doctor. As with any new treatment, it is wise to monitor the first application for signs of sensitivity. Peppermint tea is considered safe, but remember that truly pure essential oil is 75 to 100 times more concentrated than dried herbs (as in tea bags). One-2 drops of oil in hot water is very powerful. Be sure not to get any into contact with your eyes. Allergic reactions to topical application are very rare, but there might be sensitivity, so diluting the pure essential mint oil with a carrier oil is recommended. 1-2 drops per tablespoon of carrier oil. Test by applying on a small area and leaving for a couple of hours.



Mint in the Kitchen

Mint has numerous applications in the kitchen, being used all over the world as flavoring as well as key ingredients to foods and drinks. Peppermint sprigs can be added to drinks and fruit dishes as a garnish. It also makes a refreshing tea. Peppermint makes an excellent flavoring for ice cream, chocolates, and other deserts.

Hints for using mint in the kitchen:

- **Spice Up Your Vegetables:** Put mint in water used to steam vegetables.
- **Mint tea:** To make peppermint tea, use 1 to 2 teaspoons of dried peppermint leaves per cup of boiling water. Steep for 10 minutes.
- **Minty potatoes:** Mix chopped mint with butter for boiled new potatoes (or with parsley or dill).
- **Minty rice:** Toss whole mint leaves in cooked rice before serving.
- **Mint Ice Cubes:** Freeze whole mint leaves in ice cubes for tea or lemonade.
- **Minty Salad Dressing:** Make salad dressing with mint, lemon juice, vinegar and a light oil.
- **Spice up your tuna:** Chop spearmint and mix with olive oil and use as a marinade for fresh tuna. Marinate 30 minutes, grill.

Uses around the globe: Fresh mint is essential to flavour a celebrated speciality of Carinthia, Austria's most Southern region bordering Italy, whence the art of noodle-making was imported. Kärntner Kasnudeln (meaning loosely Carinthian cheese-stuffed dumplings or Carinthian cheese-pasta) are basically large ravioli-type noodles stuffed with a mixture of cottage cheese, boiled potatoes and fresh herbs. The herb mixture contains chervil and a special Carinthian mint variety with caraway scent. Boiled or steamed Kasnudeln are served with a few drops of molten butter as a snack between meals, or for dinner.

Fresh mint leaves are often used in Turkish cooking together with yoghurt (see garlic for an example); similar concoctions are in use in Lebanon and Israel. All over Western Asia, grilled lamb (kabab) is flavoured with mint. Iranian cuisine knows several highly sophisticated recipes employing peppermint; some of these were later transferred to Northern India, e.g., moghul-style biriyani.

Mint is also extremely popular in Vietnam, where it is nearly always enjoyed fresh. Aromatic leaves are served as a garnish to nearly every Vietnamese dish, at least in the South; the most popular herbs (besides some that are not available in the West) for this purpose are coriander, Vietnamese coriander, long coriander, basil and mint.

An infusion of green mint is the 'national beverage' in Morocco and Tunisia.

Peppermint Balls Recipe

2 tablespoons cream cheese
1 teaspoon milk
1/2 cup powdered sugar
2 tablespoons finely crushed peppermint candies
1 drop red food coloring
1 cup butter
1/2 cup powdered sugar
2 1/3 cup flour
1 teaspoon vanilla
1/4 cup powdered sugar
6 tablespoons finely crushed peppermint candies

Combine room temp cheese & milk and add 1/2 cup powdered sugar slowly. Stir in 2 tablespoons candy & food coloring, set aside for filling. Cream butter, 1/2 cup powdered sugar, mix in vanilla, then flour. Knead dough into balls, make a deep well in center of each ball. Fill with 1/4 tsp of filling, shape a scant 1/4 tsp of dough into a flat round, lay on top of filling; press gently to seal. Place on ungreased cookie sheet, bake 350F for 12 minutes. Roll warm cookies in combined 1/4 cup powdered sugar & 6 tablespoons peppermint candy.



Mint Cocktail

There isn't a typical mint cocktail or certain ingredients that can be associated with mint cocktails, apart of mint, that is. The most famous mint cocktail is **Mint Julep**. In 1815 English captain Marryatt wrote about this famous drink. He wrote about his visit to wealthy Southern farm-owner. He was offered numerous different cold drinks made of Bordeaux, madeira etc., but there was one made of mint that he praised. He described its preparation in great detail:

"Into a stemless glass they put about dozen mint leaves and over them they pour fine sugar. On top of mint and sugar they pour either peach liquor or cognac so that the glass is filled about one third of its capacity. They then take cracked ice and fill the glass with it. The ones that want to indulge themselves moist the rim of the glass with pineapple and often the glass itself is frosted. When the ice has melted, the drink is ready to be enjoyed."

During the Civil War it became customary to use bourbon in Mint Julep and that custom has stayed.

Mint Julep Cocktail Recipe

fresh mint
1 tablespoon fine sugar
1 tablespoon water
2 fl oz (5.7 cl) bourbon whiskey

Place 4-5 leaves of mint in a highball glass. Crush the mint, sugar and water together until the sugar is dissolved and the flavour of the mint extracted. Add the bourbon and fill the glass with crushed ice. Stir until the outside of the glass is frosted. Decorate with a sprig of mint. Serve with straws.

Miscellaneous

Other applications of mint include:

Repellant: Plenty of mint in and around the house may repel ants. if you think you have mice sprinkle peppermint essential oil where they are. Mint plants help repel flies and make a good companion planting for cabbages to repel cabbage.

Concentration aid: Want to improve your concentration? Try putting a few drops of peppermint on a cotton swab and sniffing the scent occasionally. If you put it in a small plastic bag you can take it with you to use throughout the day.

Minty mouthwash: Steep 4 tbsp. of chopped fresh mint leaves in 1 qt. of boiling water. Let cool, and then refrigerate. Once chilled, strain the mixture and keep in a bottle in the refrigerator.

Cooling Mint Foot Bath: Add 2 drops of mint essential oil to a wide bowl of cool water. Relax while you soak your feet.

Peppermint Bath Fizz: Mix 3 oz. of baking soda with 1 tbsp. citric acid. Sprinkle 10 drops of mint essential oil and mix together. Sprinkle a handful directly into bath water.



Mint for Rubbing

One of the oldest uses of Mint is as key ingredient in Mint Rubbing. Discovered and practiced since the dawn of man, it has been enhanced ever since, with the goal of reaching perfection.

At work or at home mint rubbing is an excellent choice for spending quality time and for leaving worries and problems behind. Mint rubbing belongs to a larger group of time management techniques that includes gas burning, pulling the cat's tail, cutting leaves to dogs, laying with the belly towards the sun and others. There seems to be a wide variety of such techniques that are being researched and practiced at present.

Of all techniques and methods, mint rubbing is the most spread, used and loved. It has no negative impact on the environment, it is remarkably easy to learn and practice, it uses one of the most useful plants known to man as key ingredient, it poses no threats to health and it produces a nicely-scented byproduct.

It is believed that mint rubbing originated in South-Eastern Europe (where even now Peppermint can still be found in its wild form), in a geographical location known as Dacia (now Romania). The art of mint rubbing was quickly spread throughout the world by Romanian scholars.

At present mint rubbing is used on a large scale in every country. Recent studies have proved that there is no population on Earth that does not practice mint rubbing, even though most people aren't aware of their rubbing.

Sources: Linda Gilbert/Sally's Place, Sasky.com, Gernot Katzer's Spice pages, mint4health.com, Medical solutions, Mountain Valley Growers, Garden Guides, mybackyard.com, The Romanian Mint Rubbing Association. Disclaimer: for informative use only. ■

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