

The World of Mint

There are more than 600 varieties of mint, each having a range of flavor. Some are quite similar and can be used interchangeable in cooking. Many have distinguishing flavors such as: Spearmint, pineapple, orange, chocolate, lavender, calamint, grapefruit, basil, ginger, pennyroyal, licorice, and more.

Applemint:

This variety of mint features a milder, sweeter flavor than many others in its family. The flavor, not surprisingly, is reminiscent of apples. Use it in salads, sprinkle it over cut-up fresh fruits, and add its leaves as a garnish to drinks.

Peppermint:

Stronger in flavor than spearmint, peppermint is used primarily in the form of extract. The oil has an intense peppermint flavor and is added to candies and chocolates, as well as to liqueurs. Seeds are not available on the market, but cuttings are. The reason for this is explained in information from University of Ohio. (See information below)

Basil Mint:

Basil can be a fussy herb to grow unless the growing conditions are perfect for it. Basil Mint, by contrast, is easy. You can dry the beautiful, scented flowers or use the leaves in your favorite pesto recipe, as you would basil. Harvest throughout the summer while maintaining a flowerless plant if you are growing for the leaves. After your last cutting, let the flowers bloom and dry them for ornamental use.

Varied Mints:

Ginger and Pineapple mint are beautiful as variegated plants especially for added color in hanging baskets or in an arrangement of annuals. Ginger mint has an exceptional flavor. The scented tall lavender flower spikes of Licorice mint are ideal for drying and are very similar to Anise Hyssop, another very dryable, licorice flavored herb.

Unusual Mints:

Chocolate mint, with its beautiful dark green leaves, is a real find. It has an exceptional chocolate liqueur scent and is absolutely irresistible, if you like chocolate. Orange mint is another heady scent, on par with Chocolate and Ginger as winners in the mint scent race. Grapefruit and Chewing Gum mints have their own distinguishing scents.

Warning:

Mint has a vigorous root system and can take over if allowed and can become invasive. If you prefer not to spend your time removing rampant growth, grow your mint in containers. Ohio State University Extension recommends burying an open bottom container with the lip at least 1" above the ground. This greatly reduces the chance of the area becoming a mint patch. Additionally, maintain enough space between different flavors so they will not cross pollinate. This will help forestall the different flavors from blending together.

“Japanese mint (*M. arvensis* var. *Piperescens*), peppermint (*M. xpipita*), and spearmint (*M. spicata*) are the species mostly cultivated. All mints can be propagated by cuttings or seeds except peppermint, since it is a sterile F1 hybrid of *M. aquatica* and *M. spicata*. Peppermint does not produce seeds and can only be propagated by cuttings. Mints can be planted in full sun or partial shade, and require rich, well-drained soil with a soil pH of 6.5. Mint can be harvested almost as soon as it comes up in the spring. Young, tender leaves and stems are the best. Mint is susceptible to verticillium wilt, mint rust, and mint anthracnose. The pests that could bother mint include spider mites, loopers, mint flea beetles, mint root borers, cutworms, root weevils, and aphids,” (Ohio State University Extension).

Purchasing Mint:

Look for Latin names on the markers if you are buying flavored mint. Pennyroyal and Corsican mint are non-edible. To ensure a true flavor and to protect yourself, seek out the Latin name.

Disclaimer: Although the herbs discussed here may have medicinal value, University of California Cooperative Extension does not advise using them as such.

Ramona Frances of Madera is a University of California Master Gardener. She can be contacted by e-mail at garden@psnw.com. This column is provided by the University Cooperative Extension Master Gardener Program in Madera County. The Master Gardener program extends research based information in home horticulture and pest management, verified by University of California experts to the citizens of our state. Call you U.C. Cooperative Extension Office in Madera with your gardening questions at 559-675-7879 Ext.204 to leave a msg, or stop by the office on Mondays from 1:00 - 3:00 p.m. to speak to a Master Gardener in person.