

Mint



Spearmint

Mentha spicata

Photo: katrinket, 9/20/06



Peppermint

Mentha x piperita

Photo: emeraldimp, 8/12/05

Scientific Classification

Mentha, the genus classification for mint, contains many species. Here we will focus on spearmint, *Mentha spicata*, and peppermint, *Mentha x piperita*,¹ the most frequently cultivated varieties.

Peppermint is a cross between spearmint and watermint, *Mentha aquatica*. When first discovered, peppermint was classified as its own species, but is now most commonly thought of as a hybrid.

Description

The plants generally grow to be one to two feet tall and emit a fresh aroma. The leaves and stems tend to be slightly hairy. Leaves generally grow to be one and a half to three and a half inches long and a half an inch to one and a half inches wide. Peppermint has purple flowers.¹

Peppermint is best known for the oil that can be extracted from the plants. The oil can be used for both medicinal and culinary purposes. When placed on the tongue, it produces a hot, tingly sensation, which fades into a cooling feel. The cooling is due to the menthol which makes up a majority of the chemical composition of the essential oil extracted from the plant. According to J.R. Lazutka et al.² peppermint oil is made up of 59.17% menthol.

An essential oil can also be extracted from spearmint. It is less potent than peppermint's essential oil and is mainly used for cooking. Its main component is carvone,³ a type of terpenoid.⁴

Cultivation and Harvesting

Peppermint and spearmint grow best in rich soil containing lots of water, located in cool climates.³ Both can usually be found growing naturally along the shore of a body of water or in swamplands where the soil is naturally drained.⁵

It is best to plant mint in the in a cold damp situation.⁵ Ideally some should be planted in a shady location, and one in a sunny location. This will allow for an early harvest, from the shady location, and late harvest, from the sunny location. This perennial spreads easily and can be divided and replanted.

The area where mint is planted need to be kept rich in nutrients and minerals. The best way to do this is by spreading manure and keeping the area free of weeds. Weeds are the main threat to mint because they take nutrients from the soil.

Mint should be cut just before flowering. It is believed that the oil from the plant should be taken from freshly cut plants. The cut stalks can also be dried for other purposes.

The quality and exact composition of the oil from the mint depends on a variety of factors. Oils produced in America, England and Japan all have different tastes and aromas.

Origin

Mint of *Mentha* dates back to Greek mythology where it was grown across expanses of land fields.³ In Greek mythology, Menthe was a nymph loved by Pluto, God of the Underworld. Proserpine, Pluto's first love, was so jealous of the beautiful nymph that she morphed her into a plant so she would be trampled upon in the pathways of mortals on earth.⁵

History

Mint originated in the Mediterranean and was later introduced to Britain and eventually America. It dates back to Ovid. In the mythological story of Baucus and Philemon Ovid notes that the two lovers placing mint on eating surfaces underneath the food for the gods because of its attractive smell. The Ancient Greeks used its appealing aroma as perfume by rubbing it on their arms. The Greeks and Romans commonly used peppermint in meals as flavorings in sauces, as perfume infused in wine, and also to decorate their tables. Chaucer also refers to the use of mint growing wild in pathways and it was also mentioned in other literary works as well as plant catalogues dating back to the ninth century.³

When the pilgrims landed in America, mint was one of the plants they brought on their journey overseas. In addition to being grown in American gardens for hundreds of years, it is “so universally esteemed, that it is to be found wild in nearly all the countries to which civilization is extended.”³

Geographic Distribution across America

Today, the most popular types of mint are peppermint and spearmint. They are found growing commercially most commonly in southern California, Michigan, northern Indiana, the Pacific Northwest as well as in Europe and other areas commonly along stream banks or in waste lands with damp soil. Michigan is the most popular production location of peppermint oil in the United States.⁵

Uses

Culinary

In cooking, various types of mints were used often as flavoring. Spearmint is primarily used for culinary purposes.³ The fresh sprigs are often used raw in potato salads or in fowl stuffing. They are popular grated atop fresh green peas or in pea soup. In Wales, they are used while boiling cabbage and in Germany dried powdered mint leaves are often used to top pea and bean purees.

In 1887, Fanny Lemira Gillette wrote the *White House Cook Book: A Selection of Choice Recipes Original and Selected, During a Period of Forty Years' Practical Housekeeping* that was a popular cookbook for decades. It contains cooking tips, table etiquette, health facts in addition to a broad collection of recipes. The “Roast Quarter of Lamb” recipe contains a roast served with lettuce, green peas, and a mint sauce. The mint sauce calls for the leaves of a fresh spearmint plant removed from the stem. After the leaves are washed and dried, they are finely chopped, placed inside a gravy dish with two tablespoons of white sugar. After a few minutes to soak mix the oils of the mint leaves and the sugar, six tablespoons of white-wine vinegar are added. Gillette comments that the sauce has a more concentrated mint flavor if it is made a few hours before it is used on the lamb.⁶ Fanny Lemira Gillette, Chicago: R.S. Peale & Co. 1887. In the form of a

mint sauce, the mint aids in the digestion of the lamb in making tough fibers of the meat easier to digest. The oils of the mint leaves also stimulate the digestive system and prevent gaseous changes in the intestines. Mint jelly and mint vinegar are common as accompaniments to vegetables and meats.³

In addition to being used in sauces, meat dishes and as vegetable accompaniments, mint was used in desserts. Eleanor Parkinson was an acclaimed cook in Philadelphia in 1864. The Parkinson family was “America’s foremost confectioners.”⁷ In *The Complete Confectioner*, Parkinson offers various recipes for desserts and other sweets. In a recipe for “Peppermint Candy”, Parkinson advises the use of raw or refined sugar. The sugar is boiled and spread onto a stone surface covered with oil or butter to prevent sticking. Peppermint oil is spread on top for flavoring. She notes that the sugar mixture must remain white without any coloring. When the mixture is malleable, it is attached to hooks on the wall to stretch and roll in a cylinder. The round is then cut into small pieces with scissors.⁷

Medicinal Uses

Peppermint oil is most commonly used medicinally. According to Bass, it is the most popular medicinal mint. The oil counters body aches and pains with its anti-spasmodic nature. It also alleviates the body of flatulence, colic and other abdominal pains. It is also beneficial as an agent that raises internal temperatures thus to induce perspiration. Peppermint leaves are infused in teas to attack colds or influenza.⁸

Peppermint leaves are also found useful in treating insomnia for their sedative qualities. One ounce of the leaves cut finely is combined with half an ounce of rue and wood betony. The herbs are then steeped in hot water and are to be consumed before going to bed to aid sleep.⁸

¹ "Peppermint." Wikipedia. February 23 2008. 23 Feb 2008

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peppermint#_note-harley>.

² Lazutka, J. R., et al. "Genotoxicity of Dill (*Anethum Graveolens* L.), Peppermint (*Mentha×piperita* L.) and Pine (*Pinus Sylvestris* L.) Essential Oils in Human Lymphocytes and *Drosophila Melanogaster*." *Food and Chemical Toxicology*, 39.5 (2001): 485-92.

³ Grieve, Margaret. "A Modern Herbal-Mints." *Botanical.com*. 23 Feb 2008

<<http://botanical.com/botanical/mgmh/m/mints-39.html#specul>>.

⁴ Simonsen, J. L. (1953). *The Terpenes*, 2nd edition 1, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 394-408.

⁵ Miloradovich, Milo. *Growing and Using Herbs and Spices*. Courier Dover Publishing, 1986.

⁶ Gillette, Fanny Lemira. "White House Cook Book: A Selection of Choice Recipes Original and Selected, During a Period of Forty Years' Practical Housekeeping." *The Historic American Cookbook Project*. 23 Feb 2008

<http://digital.lib.msu.edu/projects/cookbooks/html/books>>, 159

⁷ Parkinson, Eleanor. "The Complete Confectioner." The Historic American Cookbook Project. 23 Feb 2008 <<http://digital.lib.msu.edu/projects/cookbooks/html/books>>).

⁸ Crellin, John K. & Philpott, Jane, Herbal Medicine Past and Present. Duke University Press: Durham, 1990.