

The Herb Society of America

Cunila origanoides

Notable Native Herb — 2015



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Cunila origanoides

Courtesy Britton & Brown Illustrated Flora
2nd Edition (1913). An Illustrated Flora of the Northern
United States and Canada Volume III

History

The genus name *Cunila* is from the Greek *konilee* for marjoram and the species name *origanoides* is from *Origanum*, resembling oregano. The common name, dittany, is from the similarities between this plant and *Origanum dictamnus*, dittany of Crete. *O. dictamnus* is quite similar in size and appearance, including delicate purple to pinkish flowers and fragrance. According to James Duke, the “aromatic chemicals in frost flowers share the essences of European oreganos, savory, and thyme...”

(Duke, p.134)

The current name was published in the *Memoirs of the Torrey Botanical Club*, Vol. V, Missouri Botanical Garden, 1895, published for the Club Dec. 1893-1894, (page 278).

The leaves and flowers of *Cunila origanoides*

Family: Lamiaceae

Latin Name: *Cunila origanoides* (L.) Britton

Common Names: Common dittany, Maryland dittany, Frost flowers, Fairy skirts, Stonemint

Growth: Perennial subshrub to 18 inches

Hardiness: Zones 5 – 8, See distribution map —

<http://www.plants.usda.gov/core/profile?symbol=CUOR>

Light: Full sun to part shade

Soil: Dry, rocky, shallow

Water: Moderately dry, tolerates drought once established

Use: Traditional medicinal and beverage plant; ornamental

Propagation: Seed, division, spring and summer stem cuttings

were offered for sale in Shaker catalogs from 1830 to sometime after 1880. The first of these catalogs (Catalog of medicinal plants and vegetable medicines, 1830, Cleveland, Western Reserve Historical Society) asked on its cover:

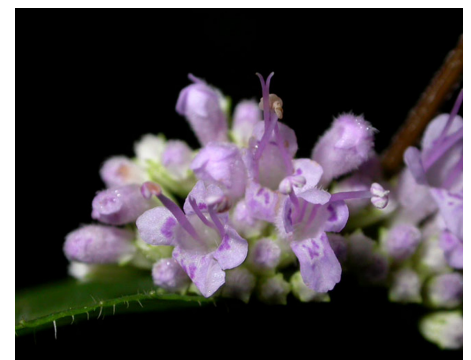
“Why send to Europe’s bloody shores
For plants which grow by our own doors?”

Description

Cunila is a branched subshrub with square, erect, wiry stems, appearing woody at the base. Leaves are opposite, pointed-oval, nearly stalkless and slightly serrated, and 1 to 1.5 inches long. The purplish lavender to rarely white tubular flowers on this monoecious plant appear in clusters at the tip of the stems and in the leaf axils, generally beginning in August and blooming through September. The corolla consists of an upper lobe notched at the apex with three lobes below, all nearly the

same length, with two long protruding stamens and pistil. The tubular calyx is glabrous with five lobes, each flower less than one-half inch long. Dark brown nutlets, to .05 inches, glabrous, form in late fall. The entire plant is pleasantly fragrant.

Beyond the unusual (for North American native herbs) fragrance is the habit of



Cunila origanoides

Photo courtesy Patrick Alexander

Cunila to form frost flowers. Frost flowers are the thin, undulating eruptions of ice crystals in bands or ribbons in early winter when the ground is not yet frozen but the air temperature has quickly fallen below freezing. In *C. origanoides*, these formations look like white flowers emerging near the base of the stems of the plant on an early morning under frost conditions. As the sun rises and the day warms, they melt and disappear.

Research ecologist and author D. Bruce Means wrote in a 2004 *Natural History* magazine article: "On close inspection, I saw that the "petals" of my ice flowers push their way through the vascular bundles of the dead stems. Water from the roots is drawn up the stems (either as part of the plant's natural transportation system or through capillary action) and expands as it freezes, breaking the stem walls and creating a flow of ice. The leading edge of the ice freezes to the stem's papery bark, as the ice grows it is lifted upward by the attached bark, forming delicately curved, lacy ribbons."

Habitat

The airy appearance makes this an often overlooked plant on dry forest floors, usually under deciduous trees. *Cunila* makes its presence known when brushed against, releasing its startling fragrance with a high thymol content. When in bloom, it is also eye-catching, with abundant clear lavender flowers. It favors dry, rocky soil in mostly Eastern U.S. states. This is not a threatened or endangered plant, but it is surprising to run across it while out hiking, requiring close attention to the small plants of the forest floor.

Propagation

Propagation of dittany is seldom covered in

popular books or in the body of academic literature. The seeds, which are extremely small, are rarely for sale. If you collect the seed, be prepared for containing what has been described as dust-like seed. However, being a mint, it is easily propagated by stem cuttings in the spring and summer. You should see root initiation in 7 to 10 days. A low concentration of rooting hormone may be used, but it is not necessary. It is also easily divided in the summer. It will self-seed in the garden much like its namesake, oregano, but the seedlings are easily removed and transplanted or composted. (Peter Borchard, pers. comm., Feb 28, 2014. D. Knapke)

Uses

Historically, the plant was used as a stimulant and tonic to act on the nervous system. The Cherokee used the plant as an analgesic for headache, a cold remedy, snakebite remedy, febrifuge and as a gynecological aid (Moerman, p. 188). Its history of use for inducing menstruation should be a reminder that those who are pregnant should not consume this plant. It also does not have Generally Recognized As Safe status from the FDA. Duke reminds us that "Even GRAS herbs should be used in moderation." (Duke, 134).

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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Cunila origanoides
Photo courtesy <http://www.tropicos.org/Name/17601960>

Cunila origanoides frost flowers
Photo courtesy Betty Hall Photography

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