

The Herb Society of America's Notable Native 2016 - Mountain Mints



Pycnanthemum Michx.



Family: Lamiaceae

Latin Name: *Pycnanthemum* spp.

Common Name: Variations of Mountain Mint

Growth: Herbaceous perennial

Hardiness: Zones 4-9, by species

Light: Full to partial sun or light shade

Soil: Well-drained, sandy to loamy

Water: Dry to moderate moisture

Use: Pollinator; fragrance; not GRAS for consumption

Propagation: Seed, division, cuttings

Pycnanthemum tenuifolium, narrowleaf mountain mint, c. Susan Betz

History

Mountain mint is the commonly accepted name for roughly 20 species of *Pycnanthemum* native exclusively to North America. French botanist Andre Michaux called the fragrant plant mountain mint after encountering it while exploring for useful plants in Pennsylvania around 1790. The generic name *Pycnanthemum* is from the Greek *pyknos*, dense, and *anthos*, flowers, which refers to the plant's crowded flower heads.

Description

Typical of the Lamiaceae family, *Pycnanthemum* species have square stems, many bearing a covering of fine trichomes, opposite leaves, and head-like inflorescences from white to purple-spotted to pale lilac. They are most often branched perennials, some rapidly forming colonies. Speciation, or the process by which new species arise, occurs in *Pycnanthemum* by two methods: hybridization, the union of two species, and polyploidy, the doubling of chromosomes. Rachel Williams received an Herb Society of America research grant in 2003 to study these processes.

Culture & Habitat

Mountain mint's common name can be deceiving in telling us about where it grows naturally and how we should cultivate it in our own gardens. As a group, you will find the mountain mints in open, mesic meadows, thickets and on the edges of woods. Their preferred soil type ranges from sandy and freely draining in coastal flatlands to gritty loam on the upper to middle part of a slopes. Exceptions include *Pycnanthemum californicum*, *P. setosum* and *P. virginianum* which can be found along streams and wet meadow habitats, but the soils are still well-drained.

In the garden this translates to "no wet feet" in an area that is full to part sun. The species that prefer wetter soils are more drought-tolerant once they are established. During the first year in the garden, keep the soil moist, but not wet around the plant. By the second year, mountain mint will not need to be watered unless there is an extended dry period – more than four weeks.

Some species will grow into large clumps and have been called weedy, but mountain mint is easily kept in a reasonable size through division.

Uses

The essential oil content of *Pycnanthemum* varies by species and ranges from the pleasant floral and mint to pulegone, the



Pycnanthemum incanum, hoary mountainmint.
Courtesy: James H. Miller & Ted Bodner,
Southern Weed Science Society, Bugwood.org

insect-repellent-quality that renders plants undesirable for culinary purposes. Studies on the toxicity of pulegone continue, with recommendations for limiting exposure especially when combined with menthofuran.

Other oils, in varying amounts and types by species, include carvacrol (oregano-like), menthone (minty), isomenthone (refreshing mint fragrance), beta-elemene (floral, attractive to insects), limonene (citrusy), piperitone (minty and camphor-like), and germacrene d (woody, green).

Some species have been used as an insect repellent by rubbing leaves and flowers on clothing to repel chiggers and ticks. Aromatic leaves and flowers are added to potpourris and moth deterrent sachets.

Native American's used the buds and flowers of some species to season meat and broth and to make tea.

Leaves were used as hunting and fishing aids, and to scent mink traps.

Leaves were used medicinally for coughs and fevers, and as a stimulant for mental fatigue. Some Native American medicine men believed fresh cut flowers stuffed into the nose of a person near death would revive them.

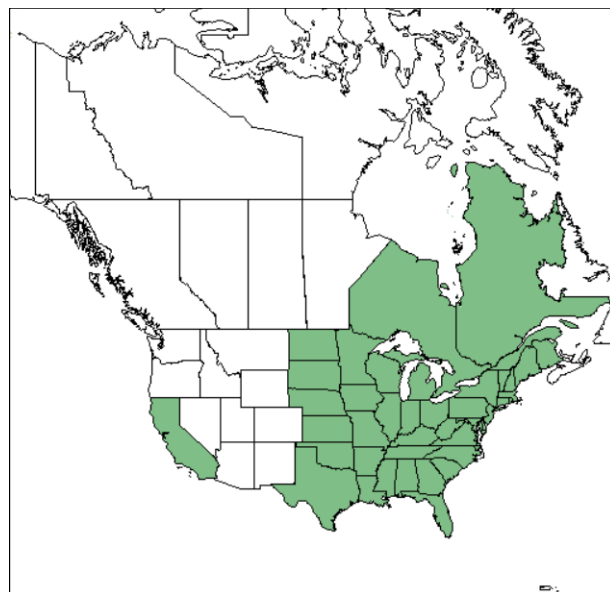
Pycnanthemum species are great pollinator plants, attracting native bees, flies, butterflies, moths, and birds.

Propagation

Propagation of mountain mint is primarily done by seed and division. It is difficult to propagate stem cuttings as the shoots quickly develop into woody stems. However the emerging herbaceous stems can be propagated as cuttings. (Peter Borchard, Companion Plants, personal communication, February, 2015). Mountain mint is easily divided in late spring into summer and the divisions can be quite small and still survive. It can self-seed in the garden, but seedlings are easily identified by their fragrance and can be removed if they are overabundant or in the wrong place.



Seed size. *Prairie Moon Nursery*



Native range for the various species of *Pycnanthemum* found in the U.S. *USDA Plants Database*.

Plant and Seed 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>

Seeds only:*

www.americanmeadows.com

www.illwildflowers.com

www.ionexchange.com

www.johnnysseeds.com

www.richters.com

www.seedaholic.com

Seeds and plants:

www.abnativeplants.com

www.grownative.org

www.northrecknurseries.com

www.plantdelights.com

www.prairiemoonnursury.com

www.wildflower.org

*Each source carries a selection of various *Pycnanthemum*(s) & no single source carries all known species.

Gratitude to contributors:

Susan Betz
Debra Knapke
Kathy Schlosser
Dava Stravinsky
Linda Wells

References

- Bown, "Deni" *The Herb Society of America. Encyclopedia of Herbs and Their Uses*, Dorling Kindersley Publishing Company, New York, 1995
- Brandenburg, David. *Field Guide to Wildflowers of North America*. NY, Sterling Publishing Co. 2010.
- European Commission, Health & Consumer Protection. Opinion of the Scientific Committee on Food on pulegone and menthofuran (expressed on 2 July 2002). http://ec.europa.eu/food/fs/sc/scf/out133_en.pdf
- Hognadottir, A., and Rouseff, R.L. 2003. Identification of aroma active compounds in orange essence oil using gas chromatography - olfactometry and gas chromatography - mass spectrometry. *J. Chromatogr. A*. 998:201-211.
- Horn, Dennis and Tavia Cathcart. *Wildflowers of Tennessee, the Ohio Valley, and the Southern Appalachians*. Alberta, CA, Lone Pine Publishing and the Tennessee Native Plant Society, 2005.
- Moerman, Daniel E. *Native American Ethnobotany*, Portland/London: Timber Press, 1998
- Personal communication with Debra Knapke. Peter Borchard, Companion Plants, Athens, OH. <http://companionplants.com/>
- Pleasant, Barbara, Herb to Know: Mountain Mint, *Mother Earth Living, Natural Home, Natural Life*, June /July 2008 <http://www.motherearthliving.com/plant-profile/herb-to-know-mountain-mint.aspx>
- Tucker, Arthur O. and Thomas DeBaggio. *The Big Books of Herbs*, Interweave Press, Loveland CO, 2000.
- Williams, Rachel. 2005. The phylogeny of *Pycnanthemum*: hybridization and polyploidy in a taxonomically confusing genus. *The Herbarist*. 71:35-41.

Medicinal Disclaimer – It is the policy of The Herb Society of America not to advise or recommend herbs for medicinal or health use. This information is intended for educational purposes only and should not be considered as a recommendation or an endorsement of any particular medical or health treatment.

Visit www.herbsociety.org for information on joining The Herb Society of America
9019 Kirtland Chardon Rd. Kirtland, Ohio 44094 440.256.0514, herbs@herbsociety.org

©2015 The Herb Society of America