

Mint

Mint is an herb with many beneficial attributes - whichever way one uses mint - eat it, flavoring food or drink with it, or simply smell it!

Just hearing the words 'fresh mint' on a warm summer day, I immediately think of the American South cocktail drink *mint julep*: a long sprig of fresh mint submerged in a frosty high ball glass; or plates of mixed green salad with a few torn fresh mint leaves. Then when the cold weather settles in, mint changes its look and is seen in mint sauce or mint jelly accompanying the steaming family roasts dinner.

Mint belongs to a large family with over 30 species, the most common being peppermint and spearmint. Native to the Mediterranean and Western Asia, mints interbreed often, making it difficult for even an expert to distinguish all the varieties. The plant is part of Greek mythology. Legend has it that the nymph 'Menthe', Pluto's lover, angered Pluto's wife, Persephone, who, in a fit of rage, turned Menthe into a lowly plant to be trod upon. Pluto, unable to undo the spell, but was able to soften it by giving it a sweet scent, which would perfume the air when the leaves were stepped on. I guess that is why people plant mint along walkways, where their clothes can brush softly up against it as they pass by, or they can step upon its perfumed leaves and release refreshing mint fragrances into the air. On warm summer evenings these aromas are enchanting.

Mint is almost exclusively perennial, rarely annual. Its seeds can be sowed in pots or in the ground. Once the herbs take hold in your garden, it is very easy to propagate them by cuttings and transplanting after the root system is well established. Mint needs humid soil and moderate sunshine. It will grow in, out and around all garden plants; this herb is tenacious and dedicated to spreading. The trick is to continuously cut it back to restrict its growth otherwise its strong willed runners will spread like wild fire through your garden. In late autumn, cut back to the ground and if winters are severe, cover with mulch.

Mint varieties come in a number of good and useful flavors. There is Chocolate mint to be used in desserts, Spearmint and Peppermint for drinks and desserts, Pineapple mint for salads, plain common garden mint for general use, in cooking or in salads. To reduce the effects of tannin and caffeine in your tea, use fresh mint sprigs in your teapot, just snap a few leaves off, wash, and add to your teapot, steep for a couple of minutes, longer for a more potent flavor. Many cooks like to add chopped mint leaves to scrambled eggs and omelets. It is a good idea to add mint at the end of cooking, as too much heat will turn the herb bitter. Fresh mint leaves are very refreshing in salads. In cooked vegetables, the herb is commonly used with peas, carrots, potatoes, eggplant, beans, corn and etc. to pep up the flavor.

Recipe for traditional mint juleps: A few fresh mint leaves plus one fresh sprig for garnishing
1 1/4 teaspoon caster sugar
2 tablespoons water
Finely crushed ice
Bourbon to your taste (10-20ml)

Place the mint leaves, sugar and water in a tall tumbler. With the back of a spoon, lightly crush the mint, and then stir until the sugar dissolves. Pour in the bourbon and pack the glass tightly with crushed ice. With a long-handled spoon, gently jiggle the mixture to mix the ice and bourbon together until the outside of the container becomes frosted. Garnish with a sprig of fresh mint before serving for the finishing touch. A traditionalist and true julep connoisseur would remove the crushed mint leaves before serving.

Mint is one of the oldest and most popular herbs still used for its aroma and health benefits in both alternative and traditional medicine. It has been in limelight since many centuries due to its detoxifying effects and antimicrobial and anesthetic properties. Thanks to its anesthetic action, menthol, the main component of mint has been used to treat colds and flu, providing relief of nasal congestion and sore throats. The ancients believed mints could clear the voice and cure hiccups. The antimicrobial properties of menthol help prevent the spread of viral diseases. The volatile oil menthol gives the herb that characteristic cooling, cleansing feeling. In recent times, peppermint oil tablets are used for treatment of irritable bowel syndrome. Peppermint is used extensively in pharmacology, toothpastes, candies, chewing gums, liquors, and also in soft drink recipes.

