

Where to See Bergamot

You'll find wild bergamot blooming in uplands throughout most of Virginia from July well into September along trails, roadsides, in abandoned fields and pastures, and along power lines and railroad rights of way. Its range extends from southwestern Quebec and western New England west to Manitoba and British Columbia, south to Georgia, Louisiana and Arizona. Several forms have been described on the basis of variations in hair and leaf shape and length of petiole. In Virginia, most plants have soft, incurved hairs, deltoid leaves and petioles approximately one-half inch long. According to the Atlas of the Virginia Flora (1992), wild bergamot can be found in all counties in the Commonwealth, except the easternmost areas of the coastal plain. It is common in the piedmont, along the Blue Ridge, or in the pastures, roadsides and edges of woods in the Shenandoah Valley and southwest Virginia.



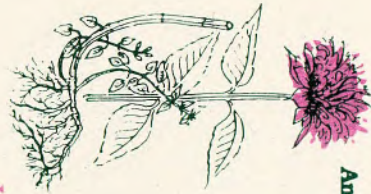
Late summer wildflower walks sponsored by chapters of the Virginia Native Plant Society often pass through wild bergamot habitat. Check your local newspaper for notices of walks in your area, or write VNPS at the address below for information.

Catharine Tucker, Author
Drawings by Barbara Stewart

Gardeners should be sure that wild bergamot and other native plants purchased for home gardens are nursery propagated, not wild collected. For a list of retail sources of nursery propagated plants and responsibly collected seed, send a self-addressed stamped envelope to the address below.



Virginia Native Plant Society
P.O. Box 844
Annandale, VA 22003



1993 Virginia Wildflower of the Year
Wild Bergamot
Monarda fistulosa

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Virginia Native Plant Society
Conserving Wild Flowers and Wild Places

Wild Bergamot

Monarda fistulosa



1993 Virginia
Wildflower of the Year

Wild Bergamot

Patches of wild bergamot drift across fields and meadows and form mists of lavender-pink along roadsides, fence rows and forest edges from mid-summer to early fall in Virginia. Under the warm summer sun, a hint of mint hanging in the air and traveling far downwind is often the first clue to its presence.

Wild bergamot is a perennial member of the mint family, included in a group called the "horse mints" coarser than those generally used in herbal cooking. Growing two to three feet high with multiple stems from a spreading rootstock, these plants have square stems and opposite leaves typical of the Mint Family. The light bluish-green leaves with half-inch petioles are about twice as long as wide, broadly rounded at the base, tapering to a pointed tip, and toothed. Stems, leaves and flowers have soft, spreading hairs, some plants being "fuzzier" than others.

The lavender-pink flowers are borne in a tightly clustered head, or cyme, at the top of the plants. Leaves, or bracts, clustered just beneath the flower head are often tinged with pink. Each tubular blossom extends from a tubular calyx edged with five evenly spaced erect white hairs. The strongly two-lipped corollas have only two stamens (four stamens is typical of mints) which project beyond the upper lip of the flower along with the pistil. These exerted stamens and pistil and the beard of hairs on the upper lip of each flower lend the heads a fringed appearance. Flowers opening from the center of the head outward result in the progressive development of a "bald" center surrounded by pink fringe, appearing almost daisy-like from a distance.

Both bees and butterflies pollinate wild bergamot. When the fruits mature in the fall, four small nutlets form in the base of each calyx tube. The dry heads persist into the winter looking like coat buttons on the head of a knitting needle, and strewing seeds from the calyx cups as they wave in the wind.

Wild bergamot was named by early plant collectors for the similarity of its fragrance to the bergamot orange, a small orange-lemon hybrid from the region around Bergamo, Italy which was used in perfumery as early as 1688. The Latin name is *Monarda fistulosa*. Linnaeus named the genus in honor of the Spanish physician Nicholas Monardes who published several books in the 16th century on medicinal plants, especially those of the New World. The species name, *fistulosa*, means hollow or reed-like, referring to the hollow stem. Virginia's additional monarda species include Oswego tea or beebalm (*M. didyma*) and horsemint (*M. punctata*) and basil balm (*M. clinopodia*).

... In the Wild

Watch for patches of tall lavender-pink, wild bergamot in the upper coastal plain, piedmont and mountains wherever pastures have returned to meadows, and roadsides and fence rows are not mowed. The plants tolerate a range of soils from sandy clay to shallow mountain loam; in general they prefer moderately dry sites, in either open sunny places or light shade. On richer sites, the plants will be more robust and taller. Where mowing has been done, plants may be much shorter with multi-branched stems, each tipped with a small flower cluster.

The flowers may vary from deep pink to palest lavender or even, rarely, white. The nectar attracts bees, butterflies and hummingbirds as well as smaller insects which can crawl into the flower tube but are not large enough to pollinate the flowers. Walking through stands of these plants, summer or winter, and brushing them will release the volatile oil that produces the characteristic

fragrance, a little stronger than peppermint and slightly different. Standing in a patch of wild bergamot in full bloom on a warm summer day is a heady experience. Picking the flowers carefully for bouquets will not harm the plants; they will bloom again if flowers are picked early in the season. However, the flowers wilt fairly quickly on a warm day if not put immediately into water.

Finding the dry, button-like heads in the winter is especially fun for children because they can readily identify the plant by crushing the heads to release their characteristic odor. Small seed-eating birds like goldfinches and field sparrows perch precariously on swaying stems and pick out the seeds. Dry stalks provide both textural contrast and light fragrance in winter bouquets and pleasant tea can be made from dried or green leaves and seed heads.

... In the Garden

Wild bergamot provides an excellent background or mass of color in the perennial garden, especially when mixed with purple coneflower, lavender, phlox, black-eyed Susan and asters. Not a fussy plant, wild bergamot will grow well in sandy clay to light loamy soil, in fairly well drained, sunny locations. It tolerates drought and light shade, and is not bothered by insect pests.

Too much care, in the form of fertilizer and water will overwhelm these plants. Their one disadvantage is a tendency to mildew, but this may be controlled by watering at the roots, or early in the day, so that the foliage dries by evening. Spacing plantings for optimum natural air circulation is also beneficial.

Bergamot will spread outward from the center of the root clump, forming masses, but sometimes dying out in the center. Every two to three years, the clumps should be divided and re-planted. Divide them in late winter or early spring before new shoots appear. Plants can be grown from seed sown outdoors in the fall or indoors in

January. Stems with green but mature seed heads can be cut and placed in water to ripen, or seeds can be collected from dry heads.

Wild bergamot was grown in the gardens of colonial Virginia, including those in Williamsburg and at Monticello. Taken to England from Virginia by John Tradescant in 1637, it became a favorite in English gardens and now comes back to us in many horticultural varieties.

