

unsung Beebalm

For the gardener willing to look beyond the familiar cultivars, the genus *Monarda* contains several little-known species worth knowing and growing.

BY JESSIE KEITH



The two *Monarda* species most familiar to gardeners are *Monarda didyma* and *M. fistulosa*. Clump-forming *M. didyma* produces an abundance of summer flowers in shades of pink, purple, or the above scarlet. The later-blooming *M. fistulosa*, right, bears pink or purple blooms. A number of excellent hybrids have resulted from crosses of these species.



IN MY alter ego as a superhero promoter of underdog plants, I envision myself donning a mighty green mask and chlorophyll-enriched cape to shine a dazzling spotlight on the lesser-known members of the genus *Monarda*.

Okay, so maybe that's a *little* over-the-top, but apart from the two species that most gardeners grow—*M. didyma* and *M. fistulosa*, which together comprise nearly 100 recognized cultivars—*Monarda* is a truly ornamentally under-used genus. There are 19 distinct and wonderful *Monarda* species—known by evocative common names such as beebalm, Oswego tea, wild bergamot, ponymint, and horsemint—indigenous to North America. It's time a few of these other species get a little of the limelight too.

My appreciation for the overlooked members of the genus came while researching them for my master's thesis at Michigan State University in East Lansing. The university's research greenhouses were filled with a bevy of different species and I had two years to become familiar with their different features, cycles, and cultural preferences. All possess showy flowers, attractive growth habits, and spicy scented foliage.

My conversion to a monardaphile was completed after field-collecting many more and growing them in my own garden. Some are perennials and others annuals, but all are easy to cultivate as long as their cultural requirements are met. And, aside from a few that have very specific bloom times—such as *Monarda bradburiana*, which blooms in late spring to early summer—most monardas flower continuously from summer to fall.

In my opinion all 19 *Monarda* species are pretty in their own right, but for the purposes of this article I am going to highlight the 10 most garden worthy that I have grown and enjoyed. Not all of them are widely commercially available or bred to perfection yet, but I'm working on that!

FABULOUS FLOWERS

Monardas are members of the mint family (Lamiaceae), and like most mints they have fragrant flowers designed to attract and facilitate a variety of pollinators. Their sweetly scented, colorful, nectar-rich tubular flowers come fully equipped with nectar guides and prominent lower lips that serve as perfect landing platforms.

Apart from the two large red-flowered hummingbird-pollinated species *M. didyma* and *M. pringlei*, all are pollinator generalists, meaning they attract butterflies, moths, bees, beetles, and even wasps to their flowers.

Botanists have divided the genus into two groups, or subgenera, based on distinct flower types, growth habits, and life cycles. The 19 species are split almost evenly between the subgenera.

Species in the subgenus *Monarda* have single, terminal flower clusters atop (subtended by) one row of bracts. Individual flowers have prominent straight upper lips. Plants in this subgenus are all herbaceous perennials that—under the right conditions—spread by rhizomes (underground roots) to form clumps. Some may sometimes stray beyond the bounds you intended, but they are not hard to keep in check.

The subgenus *Cheilyctis* includes a combination of annuals and perennials distinguished by multiple elongated tiers of flower clusters, each subtended by a row of bracts. The flowers have curved upper lips. These plants form taproots and don't spread like their rhizomatous counterparts. Most are herbaceous, but one or two develop woody stems and shrubby habits.

SOUTHERLY MONARDAS

Three of the plants on my top-10 list are tough Texas natives that are able to shine in the summer heat and two are equally resilient species from eastern Mexico. Because of their southern heritage, none will reliably survive northern winters, but this does not mean that they aren't useful garden plants in the north. As with other popular tender perennial mints, like certain sages (*Salvia* spp.) or *Agastache* spp., all bloom first year from seed, so they become bushy blooming plants only a few months after germination.

One of the prettiest monardas, *M. fruticulosa* (USDA Hardiness Zones 8–11, AHS Heat Zones 12–1) is technically a shrub; its specific epithet refers to its shrublike (fruticose) habit. Silvery linear leaves, a neat habit, and crisp white flowers lined with pink or white bracts distinguish this species. In the wild it is only found growing in the deep sands along the southern tip of Texas, so it's drought tolerant to boot.

Like most monardas, *M. fruticulosa* requires well-drained soil



In her Delaware garden, the author combines *Monarda fruticulosa*, foreground, with *Rudbeckia triloba*, *Panicum virgatum*, and a dark-leaved heuchera for a pleasing contrast of color and textures.

and a site in full sun, and does best with moderate to low watering. If these requirements are met, it will do well in any garden—mine have performed wonderfully in Delaware, Michigan, and Indiana—and should reliably survive winters in USDA Zone 8. In colder zones, plants can also be potted and overwintered in a dry cool location if not allowed to become bone dry. *M. fruticulosa* is mildew resistant and blooms all summer.

A NEW-WORLD HERB GETS AN OLD-WORLD NAME

Native Americans have used *Monarda* species medicinally and in cookery for thousands of years. *Monarda punctata* was used to relieve fever and stomach ailments, *M. fistulosa* to remedy colds and flavor meats, and *M. didyma* to make a tea. Colonists learned the utility of *Monarda* from Native Americans, and by the 17th century were growing these species as garden plants.

An early account of *Monarda* collection and cultivation occurred when American botanist John Bartram collected *Monarda* near Fort Oswego in upstate New York. These were later cultivated and used to make a spicy tea—hence the common name “Oswego tea.” As with many traditional medicines, the merit of *Monarda* has since been substantiated. The plants contain substantial concentrations of thymol, an important antiseptic and local anesthetic used in mouthwash, toothpaste, and lip balm.

Monarda fistulosa was the first member of the genus to be described by Jacques Cornut, a French physician with an interest in New World plants. Cornut included it in his 1635 North American plant treatise, *Historia Canadensium Plantarum*. At that time, the genus *Monarda* had not been established, so Cornut called it *Origanum Fistulosum Canadense*, likening it to its European relative, oregano.

More than 100 years later, Carolus Linnaeus characterized the genus *Monarda*, which he named after Nicholas Monardes (1493–1588), a Spanish botanist and physician, who composed the first volume on New World plants, *Joyfull Newes out of the Newe Founde Worlde*, in 1569.

By 1970, all but one currently accepted *Monarda* species had been described. Alan Prather, an assistant professor of plant systematics at Michigan State University, and I named the most recent formally recognized species, the New Mexican endemic, *Monarda humilis*, in 2003.

—J.K.

Two other great Texas natives are *M. viridissima* and *M. maritima*, which are both semi-woody perennials. *M. viridissima* (Zones 7–10, 12–1) is an exceptional garden plant with bright green linear leaves, white flowers with magenta spots and rich pink bracts. Like tender *Salvia leucantha*, both bloom from late summer to frost. In the wild it is restricted to a belt of sandy soils, called the Carrizo sands, which cut through east-central Texas, but they have thrived in my loamy soils in northern Delaware.

M. maritima (Zones 8–10, 12–1) is equally nice in the garden with its woolly white stems, and white flowers that have sharply toothed pink or white floral bracts and bloom from late summer to frost. Mature specimens have the added interest of smooth, tan, semi-woody stems that develop cream-colored striations. In the wild these plants only grow within a 100 mile strip of deep coastal sands off the Gulf of Mexico.

M. viridissima and *M. maritima* have the same cultural requirements as *M. fruticulosa*, but their hardiness is unconfirmed. By planting them in very free-draining soils, I have had several overwinter in Delaware (USDA Zone 7). Unfortunately, neither species is available in the trade, which is a real shame considering how well-behaved and pretty they are.

In my garden, I have intermixed both of these late-season bloomers beside complimentary perennials like silvery *Artemisia versicolor* ‘Seafoam’, the purple and rose-hued *Sedum telephium* subsp. *ruprechtii*, magenta *Callirhoe involucrata*, and bright yellow *Solidago rugosa* ‘Fireworks’.

There are several tender perennial monardas from south-of-the-border that are as lovely as they are heat tolerant and easy to grow. Among these Mexican beauties are the large-flowered species *M. bartlettii* and *M. pringlei*.

Monarda bartlettii (Zones 8–11, 12–1) is fantastically showy with its thick, almost succulent, dusty dark green to purple foliage, purple stems and prolific magenta flowers. This tender perennial can also take plenty of heat and humidity. In fact its resilience and horticultural merit won it a 2003 “Classic City Garden Award” after a run through the University of Georgia Trial Gardens.

It is easy to grow from seed, which is fortunate because at the moment it can only be obtained through select seed sources. In my garden I have had great success mixing this species with other



photo of *M. bartlettii* to come from Allan Armitage

M. viridissima, top, is a well-behaved garden perennial that blooms in late summer. *M. bartlettii*, above, received the 2003 Classic City Garden Award after trials at the University of Georgia.

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Sources

Easyliving Wildflowers, Willow Springs, MO. (417) 469-2611. www.easywildflowers.com. Catalog online.

Hamilton Seeds Go Native, Elk Creek, MO. (417) 967-2190. www.hamiltonseeds.com. Catalog online.

Seedhunt, Freedom, CA. www.seedhunt.com. Catalog online.

Sweet Briar Nursery and Gardens, Belton, TX. (254) 780-4233. www.vvm.com/~reid/seeds.htm. Catalog online.

heat-tolerant, ever-flowering garden favorites like *Salvia coccinea* ‘White Nymph’, tangerine-colored *Agastache aurantiaca*, and subdued *Cuphea ignea* ‘Lutea’.

The large bright crimson flowers of *M. pringlei* (Zone 8–11, 12–1) challenge those of even the best *M. didyma* cultivars. This hummingbird magnet has thick dark green leaves and shares the same cultural requirements as *M. bartlettii*. Its only downfall is that it is difficult to find through plant and seed catalogs, however it has become a favored garden plant in Texas and can be easily found in garden centers there—not necessarily good news for the rest of us. Still there is hope; with so many Texas nurseries carrying it, it’s bound to make it to a mail-order plant catalog soon. For floral magma, plant *M. pringlei* with the orange-flowered, purple-foliaged *Dahlia* ‘Ellen Houston’, golden *Crococsmia x crocosmiiflora* ‘George Davison’, and lantanas.

NORTHERLY MONARDAS

The northerly *Monarda* species are either prairie or woodland natives with far more expansive natural distributions than their exclusively southern counterparts. Most are also perennial, hardy, and capable of naturalizing, if given the chance.



With its showy bracts and late-summer flowers, *M. punctata*, native to coastal grasslands and prairies, is a good choice for dry, sandy soils.

A QUICK GUIDE TO MONARDAS

SUBGENUS CHEILYCTIS

Name	Height (in.)	Flower/Bract Color	Foliage Color	Origin	USDA/AHS Zones
<i>M. citriodora</i>	12–30	white-pink/pink	medium green	south-central U.S.	6–9, 10–1
<i>M. fruticulosa</i>	15–40	white-pink/pink	silver green	southern Texas	8–11, 12–1
<i>M. maritima</i>	40–43	white-pink/green-white-pink	pale green	eastern Texas	8–10, 12–1
<i>M. punctata</i>	12–40	yellow-white/pink	light to dark green	coastal to eastern U.S.	4–9, 9–2
<i>M. viridissima</i>	24–30	white and purple/purple	bright green	east-central Texas	7–10, 12–1

SUBGENUS MONARDA

<i>M. bartlettii</i>	24–36	magenta/red-tinted	dark green/purple	northeastern Mexico	8–11, 12–1
<i>M. bradburiana</i>	12–20	white/purple-green	medium to dark green	south-central U.S.	6–9, 10–1
<i>M. clinopodia</i>	20–50	white-green/green	medium green	eastern U.S.	3–9, 10–1
<i>M. didyma</i>	28–45	red/purple-green/pink	medium to dark green	eastern N. America	4–10, 10–1
<i>M. fistulosa</i>	20–45	purple-pink/purple-green	light to medium green	eastern N. America	3–9, 9–1
<i>M. pringlei</i>	20–40	crimson/purple-green	dark green/purple	northeastern Mexico	8–11, 12–1

Monarda punctata (Zones 4–9, 9–2), commonly known as horsemint, is one of the most complex and poorly understood species in the genus. Presently it is comprised of eight different varieties, which may be described as either perennials or annuals depending on the variety and the reference you consult. Overall I have found that most horsemints have yellow flowers with maroon spots, pink to white-green bracts, and northerly selections are short-lived perennials that survive for three to four years.

Common to coastal grasslands and prairies, *M. punctata* is a heavy bloomer that makes an impressive addition to both formal and naturalistic gardens. Last summer I created a naturalistic bed in my backyard where I've encouraged a locally gathered seed strain of *M. punctata* to proliferate among a bevy of native grasses, sedges, and asters.

Monarda citriodora (Zones 6–9, 10–1) is most easily characterized by the pungent citrus scent emitted when its leaves are



The lemon-scented foliage of *M. citriodora* provides a pleasing foil for its spring flowers and showy bracts.

crushed. It has an upright habit, purple to white flowers, and greenish-white to pink or even dark purple bracts. Like horsemint, *M. citriodora* is comprised of several varieties, and it may be listed in references as either an annual or perennial. In my garden, most have acted as annuals, with the exception of a few that survived single winters. Seed can be easily obtained through many garden seed catalogs, and this hardy, heat-tolerant plant will bloom as quickly as two months after sowing. I am growing this species in my herb garden among thymes, sages, and tarragon.

WOODLAND MONARDAS

A few monardas are adapted to light shade and woodland environments, and two of the nicest and easiest to find are *M. bradburiana* and *M. clinopodia*. *Monarda bradburiana* (Zones 6–9, 10–1) is a clump-forming species with purple-tinged green foliage that is acclimated to the open woodlands of the Midwest and south. In late spring to early summer it becomes covered with delicate white flowers with rose-purple spots.

Sometimes called basil beebalm, *M. clinopodia* (Zones 3–9, 10–1) prefers the moister soils and open woodlands of the eastern United States and tends to spread with gusto. Its subdued greenish-white flowers have purple spots and green bracts and look pretty against the plant's crisp green leaves. Both species are best suited to naturalistic gardens and pair well with other lively woodland favorites like the ruby red *Spigelia marilandica*, brazen *Tiarella* 'Iron Butterfly', and textural green *Heuchera richardsonii*.



M. clinopodia tends to spread and is well suited for naturalizing.



'Raspberry Wine' is one of several *Monarda* hybrids that offers improved resistance to powdery mildew, a common affliction of the species.

FAMILIAR BEEBALMS

The monardas most familiar to American gardeners are Oswego tea (*M. didyma*, Zones 4–10, 10–1) and wild bergamot (*M. fistulosa*, Zones 3–9, 9–1), both of which have broad natural ranges in eastern and central North America. They do have some of the largest, most brightly colored flowers in the genus and look great in the garden when healthy, but many selections are susceptible to powdery mildew, and some are aggressive spreaders with ungainly growth habits.

Fortunately, diligent breeding has done much to squelch these ornamental maladies. In fact many outstanding cultivars have been developed through selection and interspecific hybridization. Also, extensive trials have aided in the identification of the least invasive, most mildew-resistant cultivars with pleasing habits and extended bloom-times. Many popular selections, like 'Garden-view Scarlet', 'Raspberry Wine', and 'Blue Stocking', have come through such trials with high marks.

Other good selections have been products of extensive *Monarda* breeding programs such as the one founded by the late Henry

Marshall at the Morden Research Centre in Winnipeg, Quebec, in the early 1970s. Many revered mildew-resistant varieties were developed there, including the purple-flowered 'Marshall's Delight' (30 inches) and rose-pink dwarf 'Petite Delight' (12 inches).

More recently, Morden has introduced two more of its best, the dark-leaved, rose-flowered *M. didyma* Coral Reef™ ('Baileef'), and lavender-flowered, mound-forming 'Grand Parade'. Two additional notables to hit the market are the cute bushy dwarfs 'Fireball' and 'Pink Supreme', both developed by Dutch plant breeder and nurseryman Herbert Oudshoorn.

CULTIVATION AND CARE

In addition to being easy to grow, monardas are a breeze to propagate from seed or cuttings. On average, their seeds germinate within a week if surface sown and kept evenly moist at temperatures between 70 to 75 degrees Fahrenheit. Under the same conditions, cuttings will take within a couple of weeks if lightly dipped in rooting hormone and set in evenly moist, sterile growing medium.

Generally speaking, all monardas are happiest in well-drained soils and sun, but some, like *M. clinopodia*, can take a little more moisture and the woodland species can take a little more shade. In my experience, monardas seem to thrive in poorer soils and require little or no supplemental feeding. After flowering has begun, be sure to deadhead spent inflorescences to keep plants looking clean and flowers coming. At season's end, leave a few flowerheads standing for winter interest and food for birds.



Thinning out dense clumps of monarda maintains air flow, which discourages powdery mildew.

that are worth looking and asking for. By bringing them to light, I hope more gardeners and plantspeople will take the time to investigate and refine their landscape potential. Once that's accomplished, I'll be off to champion the cause of yet other underappreciated plants.

Powdery mildew is the main disease problem to watch out for—particularly with plants in the subgenus *Monarda*. Because powdery mildew only inhabits leaf surfaces and thrives when conditions are hot and dry, it simply helps to keep plants well watered and infected stems pruned out. Maintaining good air circulation is also important, so place plants in open areas and thin out clumps when they become too dense.

The extended members of the genus *Monarda* are untapped garden wonders

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