



Mint Rules

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In the herb garden, the mint family pretty much runs the neighborhood. Looking out my kitchen window, I can see oregano, marjoram, lavender, summer savory, basil, perilla, sage, rosemary, anise hyssop, thyme and lemon balm. All these are members of a family botanists call the Lamiaceae, or Labiatae, a huge aggregation of some 7,000 species.

What connects all of them are certain structural features, most notably flowers whose petals are fused into an upper and lower lip, and leaves placed opposite one another, or in whorls, on stems that in section are square rather than round. Their foliage often contains aromatic oils, which is why so many convert part of their gardens into herb territory.

Not all members are edible, though. My flower garden has hosted numerous mint relatives: bee balm, lamb's ears, lamium, ajuga, physostegia, coleus, catmint, calamint, bells of Ireland, perovskia, endless salvias and even a few shrubs such as caryopteris. There are thousands more I may never try, such as splitlip hempnettle and San Mateo thornmint.

Plant families, and the subgroups into which they are divided, are organized according to flower form. Knowing about this system helps you to keep the plant world straight and often gives a gardener clues to plant care. If something is a mint relative, you should check whether it is invasive in moist soil, as are bee balm and physostegia, though not all share this trait.

The major botanical families tend to be named for a distinguished, familiar plant: The rose rules the Roseaceae, the lily the Liliaceae, the aster the Asteraceae. So where is the mighty eponymous kingpin of the mint family when I look out on my herb plot and see its relations duking it out with Umbelliferae such as cilantro, fennel and dill? Banished to a mucky slope just above a drainage ditch, where its runners can range widely, far from the house.

It is hard to grow just a little mint, though you can try confining it to a sunken pot -- until it escapes through the drain hole in the bottom. But history has celebrated mint for its great fecundity. Prized equally for its wonderful aroma, flavor and tummy-soothing, itch-quelling coolness, it is still ascribed magical powers. What other plant can make you think a menthol cigarette is good for you? Commercially, it is harvested as "mint hay," then distilled to obtain that potent oil.

I, too, reap it by the armload and dry it for mint tea in wintertime. But I also like to snip it in a hurry, right now, to put in cut-up fruit dishes, summer salads, yogurt raitas and cooling drinks. That's why I'm grateful for its family. Anise hyssop stands in for mint beautifully with fruit, lemon balm with salads and, for that indispensable mojito on the terrace at sunset, basil comes through with a bang.

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