

Ed. note: The bulk of this article appeared in May 1997 in Bill's weekly column in the Lafayette Advertiser.

Within the mint family, three separate genera exist whose leaves give off minty fragrances when bruised: the *Menthas* ("true" mints), the *Pycnanthemums* ("mountain" mints), and the *Monardas* ("horse" mints and beebalms). Within the genus *Monarda*, several species whose ranges encompass the southeastern U.S., Texas, and even northern Mexico have been widely used as medicinal plants; and it is only recently that their value as garden plants has been discovered and promulgated. *Monarda* blooms are by far the showiest of any of the mint genera. The thing that gardeners need to remember about *Monardas*, and most of the other mint family plants for that matter, is the fact that they spread rather thickly through underground stolons and/or ever-increasing root crowns. In short, they're vigorous plants.

For the past 15 or so years, *Monarda didyma*, called beebalm or red beebalm, has been heavily promoted by mail order wildflower nurseries and gardening catalogues on the east coast and upper south - and rightly so. Possessing one of the most delicious of the mint scents available, and blooming from spring through summer, beebalm is the toast of many New England and Piedmont gardens. The problem is that *M. didyma* refuses to bloom in the vast majority of Gulf coast gardens. Vegetatively, it will thrive in most any garden down here, producing a near-endless supply of fragrant leaves for teas and potpourris. Apparently, this plant obviously carries some sort of "bloom chill" requirement. Down here in zones 8-9, it will only bloom if overwintered outdoors in a container, thus exposing its roots/root crown to lower temperatures than if it were in the ground itself. Even then, it will not bloom near so well as it routinely does within its native range.

Thankfully, we've got several more species of *Monardas* whose native ranges extend down into the Gulf rim itself. Two species with the most extensive eastern U.S. ranges are wild bergamot, *Monarda fistulosa* and horsemint, *Monarda punctata*. Locally, I've seen wild bergamot in a remnant coastal tallgrass prairie strip between Opelousas and Eunice. Years ago, Theresa Grissom gave Lydia a start of wild bergamot that she had collected somewhere in east Texas. We still have that one growing strongly in my "wildflower wheel." Both the "Cajun prairie" strain (genotype) and the east Texas strain possess pale mauve/lavender blooms; while a plant given to us by Covington landscaper/nurseryman John Mayronne a few years ago possesses "hot magenta" flowers. Wild bergamot blooms from May through June, and its leaves smell (to me) just like oregano. Rather than loosely spreading over a relatively large area like beebalm, wild bergamot forms a very dense, 3-4' diameter colony that rises 18-24" in height when blooming.

The aptly named horsemint, is a very tough, coarse plant with a strong, almost pungent aroma. This species can be seen blooming from mid to late summer throughout much of northern and central Louisiana, especially along non-herbicide roadways such as US 71 between Alexandria and Shreveport. Too, I remember stumbling upon a large colony of it along a utility line right-of-way in the Atchafalaya Basin during an especially intrepid hike I took one August day with Jim Whelan and Bill Vermillion. While wild bergamot possesses almost demure-looking whorls of filmy or "tissuey" blooms, horsemint flowers are husky, with prominent pink sepals and thickened petals that are (get this) yellow with purple polka-dots ("dot", I understand; but what exactly is a "polka dot"?).

Bloomwise, perhaps the most beautiful of all native U.S. *Monardas* is *M. citriodora*, called "lemon beebalm," with its signature, lemon-scented foliage. Unlike the others, lemon beebalm is an annual;

which, to me, is very frustrating since I'm not too good about collecting seed and re-sowing it each year in order to keep a plant in my garden. That's too bad, because if there ever was a native annual worth keeping around, it's this one. Depending on genetic strain, both the sepals and corolla of this species can range between pink and purple in color - often times, mixed! Additionally, it's only about half the height (10-14") of the others when in bloom. Since our Louisiana Project Wildflower planting at the juncture of I-10 and I-49 in 1986, I've noted a rather persistent colony of lemon beebalm that established along the southbound lane of I-49 just north of I-10. So persistent it is, that you'd swear the thing was a perennial.

Five years ago, Texas plantsmen Will Fleming (Tomball) and Tim Kiphart (Brenham) supplied Lydia and I with our first starts of *Monarda lindheimeri*, a pure-white blooming, east Texas species that occurs in western Louisiana. Possessing leaves that are similar to, but narrower than *M. fistulosa*, I expect that this species is a very close relative - if not an outright ecotype - of wild bergamot. In any case, it is a beautiful addition to our hummingbird garden. It blooms at the same time as *M. fistulosa*. But the real prize that these two guys supplied us with is *Monarda pringlei*, a red-blooming Mexican species, which we promptly planted in our driest garden locales (as we did for *M. lindheimeri*). In spring of 1997, we received our first bloom activity out of this species, and man were we excited. Since it has already survived 16°F (plus 48+ consecutive hours below freezing) in February of 1996, I believe that *M. pringlei* will eventually supplant *M. didyma* as the red beebalm of choice in Gulf rim gardens. More recently, we have acquired another Mexican species, *M. bartlettii*. It differs from *M. pringlei* in two important ways: 1) it possesses a magenta bloom color (blooms in April/May), and 2) its leaves, while possessing a "drought-busting" thickness similar to *M. pringlei*, are somewhat wider than the latter; more like those of *M. fistulosa*. Unlike any of the other *Monardas* mentioned here, both *M. pringlei* and *M. bartlettii* possess reddish stems. Down here in extreme South Louisiana, we seem to be having better luck with *M. bartlettii* over *M. pringlei* in terms of longevity in the garden. *M. pringlei* may resent rain-soggy soils to a greater degree than *M. bartlettii*.

*Monardas* are tough, drought-tolerant, but very showy plants that hummingbirds and butterflies adore. If you've got the space, consider giving them a spot in your wildlife garden. Bill Fontenot is the author of *Native Gardening in the South*. He and his wife, Lydia, own and operate Prairie Basse Nursery near Carencro. He is past president of the LNPS, and curator of the Acadiana Park Nature Station in Lafayette.