

WILD BERGAMOT

By Shirley Froehlich, BSA

Wild Bergamot is one of those wildflowers that puts on a stunning display in the garden. Whether growing in a flower bed or a prairie, they add lots of colour with masses of large, 5 cm, pink/purple flowers. If you stroll through your garden late in the day, you will find these picturesque flowers seem to glow at dusk.

Bergamot tea for breakfast, a salad at lunch garnished with edible pink flowers, turkey dressing for dinner seasoned with the leaves and a bouquet of fresh cut flowers for the table. These are all uses for the citrus/mint scented leaves and flowers. And that is just for people! Hummingbirds, butterflies and bees love to visit the long tubular flowers for their abundant nectar. This may be the reason for one of its nicknames, Beebalm.

The scent of Wild Bergamot leaves has a note of citrus so it was named after the oranges (*Citrus bergamia*) grown in Bergamo, Italy by one of King Charles I's gardeners. Earl Grey Tea is flavoured with Oil of Bergamot, however, it is not the prairie plant used in the tea. The flavouring is actually from oranges.

Bergamot was used medicinally in the past too. Native people drank Bergamot tea for stomach aches. Boiled leaves were used to treat acne and fresh crushed leaves were applied to soothe insect bites.

DESCRIPTION

Wild Bergamot *Monarda fistulosa* grows 60-90 cm tall (2-3 feet). The beautiful pink/purple flowers appear in July and last for 3-4 weeks. The pom pom shaped flowers each have 20-30 long tubular florets, each containing lots of nectar. This member of the mint family spreads to form attractive clumps and is not invasive. The plant has square stems and very fragrant leaves.

NATIVE HABITAT

Wild Bergamot has quite a wide native range, from Quebec west to Alberta and throughout the mid western U.S. It grows on the open prairie. It can be found in many parts of southern Manitoba including Bird's Hill and Spruce Woods Provincial Parks as well in Riding Mountain National Park and the prairie preserve near Tolstoi.

CULTURE

In the garden Wild Bergamot is quite adaptable. It grows in dry to moist, well drained soil. Wet feet will lead to poor growth or death of the plant. Full sun is best. If grown in too much shade, powdery mildew will occur on the leaves.

Wild Bergamot is great when massed in flower beds or it can be mixed with other wildflowers and prairie grasses to create a colourful, carefree prairie meadow.

Plants can be set out in the garden in spring after the danger of frost is past or in summer. If you wish to grow them from seed yourself they are quite easy. You will have to squeeze the seed heads vigorously for the seed to be released. Then sprinkle seed thinly on trays and cover lightly with media. Germination occurs in 6-9 days. Plants seeded in late March will be ready for the garden in late May.

Wild Bergamot is a feast for the senses, both in the garden and in the kitchen. It also provides a banquet of seed and nectar for creatures sharing our gardens with us. And it's so beautiful!

Shirley is the owner of Prairie Originals, a nursery specialising in wildflowers and native prairie grasses near Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada. www.prairieoriginals.com