Who are the Mints?!

Lamiaceae, commonly referred to as the mint family, is a family of plants found worldwide, especially in warm, temperate regions. They may commonly be called the “mint” family, but they are MUCH more than just the spearmint you’re thinking of. In fact, there are almost 250 genera and over 7000 individual species in the family Lamiaceae. They can be herbaceous or woody shrubs and trees (like Teak, *Tectona grandis*), but they all share important characteristics that make them easily identifiable:

1. **Square Stems**- twirl a stem between your fingers, and you will feel each corner stop between your fingertips

2. **Bilabiate (two-lipped) Flowers**- three petals fuse together to form a bottom lip, and two petals fuse to form a top lip.

3. **Flowers ovary is segmented in four lobes**- when fruit ripens, it will produce 4 nutlets

4. **Fragrant, Opposite Leaves**- two leaves emerge on either side of the stem at each node. Leaves also have many different scents caused by oils produced by the plant

While many other plant families have one or a few of these traits, most members of Lamiaceae will have a combination of these traits.

Humans have enjoyed the fragrances from these plants for over 4000 years. These scents are caused by different combinations and concentrations of secondary metabolites within oils in the leaves and flowers. These oils are expressed through cells called glandular trichomes for a number of reasons, such as disturbance (such as heat or touch). Scents are also produced to attract pollinators. While these smells and flavors usually deter herbivores and bacteria from damaging the plant, we have evolved to enjoy the taste, and have used the family Lamiaceae throughout time (making tasty dishes, cleaning our homes and ourselves, as medicines, and for deterring pests, to name a few).
Having an herb garden full of members of the mint family not only gives you a fragrant, green space in your yard or home, but can also be a great resource for endless amounts of herbs for cooking and activities! They’re great because you can clip a few leaves or flowers for your use, and the plant will continue to grow. They are extremely low maintenance, requiring very little water, and will leave you with a garden that smells wonderful, looks beautiful, and will attract friendly pollinators!
Meet the Mints!

These are the 10 best members of Lamiaceae to grow in your garden. These species were selected because they are easy beginner plants to grow and have many different uses in your home!

Basil
*Ocimum basilicum*

Why we Like it: Linalool and eucalyptol give basil a floral, slightly spiced aroma. Estragole gives a piney, anise smell.

How to Grow it: Best grown in hot, dry conditions with well-drained soils and full sun. Basil does best outside or on sun-facing windowsills away from cold drafts. Basil is not tolerant of frost, so cover your plant or bring them inside before cold weather comes.

Recipes: Used in many Italian and Southeast Asian dishes, especially many Chinese and Thai soups and chicken meals. Many recipes add basil at the end so cooking does not destroy the flavor.

Fun Fact: Basil has been used for at least the last 5,000 years, and has had many uses worldwide, from therapies and medicines in China to embalming mummies in Egypt and in sacred Hindu traditions. However, in Ancient Greece and Rome it was seen as a bad omen!

Lavender
*Lavandula angustifolia*

Why We Like It: Linalyl acetate and linalool give the plant a fresh, floral, slightly citrus flavor.

How to Grow It: Does not grow well in continuously damp soil, and will benefit from great drainage using inorganic mulches, such as gravel. Lavender is low maintenance, needing six hours full sun and little water.

Recipes: Use the flowers (where most of the essential oils are) in soups, salads, meats, desserts, cheeses, baked goods, lotions, bath oils, and cleaning products.

Fun Fact: Lavender has been used for at least 2500 years. Ancient Romans would use it to scent their bath houses, and it was later used as a medicinal plant.
Lemon Balm  
*Melissa officinalis*

**Why We Like It:** Citronellal, the most prominent compound, citral, and linalyl acetate give this mint its characteristic lemon and citrus scent.

**How to Grow It:** Great in rich, well-drained soils. It is advised to grow in pots as this plant spreads vigorously. While spearmint and peppermint overgrow by the roots, lemon balm spreads by seeds. If you see your lemon balm blooming, it is advised you remove the flowers.

**Recipes:** Used in teas, fruit dishes, candies, ice cream, meats, pesto, and extracted in oil. Can also be used in toothpastes and cleaning supplies and to attract bees to your garden for honey.

**Fun Fact:** In Ancient Turkey, bees were considered to be descended human souls, and many farmers relied on lemon balm to keep their bees happy and their honey and wax farms running. Lemon balm was also used in sacred rituals for the goddess Artemis.

Marjoram  
*Origanum majorana*

**Why We Like It:** Warm, slightly bitter taste from the carvacrol, thymol, limonene, borneol, and caryophyllene. Eugenol gives a clove-like spice.

**How to Grow It:** Marjoram is frost-sensitive, growing as an annual plant in temperate climates. Grow marjoram in dry-to-medium, well-drained (slightly sandy) soils in full sun.

**Recipes:** Seasoning soups, meats, lentils, pizzas, salads, and sauces, especially French and English dishes. Marjoram is best when added after all heating is completed, as heating will alter the flavor of the marjoram.

**Fun Fact:** Historically, marjoram was associated with love, happiness, and healing. People would carry it in their purses or place it around the house for a calming feeling, and it was originally added to beers before the use of Hops.
Oregano
*Origanum vulgare*

Why We Like It: Warm, slightly bitter taste from carvacrol, thymol, limonene, pinene, ocimene, and caryophyllene, but in slightly higher doses than *Origanum marjorana* (marjoram). Also contains linalool, which gives a slight floral scent.

How to Grow It: Unlike marjoram, oregano is a bit heartier and can withstand cooler temperatures, growing as a perennial plant in temperate and warmer climates. However, it does best in warmer regions with full sun and good drainage.

Recipes: Used commonly in Italian-American foods, such as roasted, fried or grilled veggies, meats, and fish. Also used in Turkish meats and kabobs and in many dishes from the Philippines and Latin America.

Fun Fact: Originating in Ancient Greece, Oregano was seen as a symbol for the goddess Aphrodite. Oregano became very popular in both cooking and medicine in Ancient Rome, Medieval Europe, and China, helping with everything from toothaches and coughing to fever and vomiting.

Peppermint
*Mentha piperita*

Why We Like It: Menthol and menthone give cool, minty flavors when interacting with the protein TRPM8 in your mouth. Menthyl acetate is also responsible for the characteristic smell and taste of peppermint. Pulegone gives a minty smell and has anti-herbivory properties.

How to Grow It: Prefers moist, shaded habitats. Peppermint grows by runners, so it is advised to grow in containers with plenty of drainage.

Recipes: Teas, ice cream, candy, fruit preserves, gum, toothpaste, and soaps.

Fun Fact: In Ancient Rome, peppermint was planted along footpaths so when people brushed near them, a wonderful, fresh aroma would surround them.
Rosemary
*Rosmarinus officinalis*

Why We Like It: a-Pinene gives pine smell and the “rosemary” flavor. Eucalyptol and camphor gives slightly spicy, cool flavor.

How to Grow It: Grows in crumbly, loam soil with good drainage in open, sunny areas. Rosemary is drought-tolerant and is used in xeriscaping often. Best grown in pots, as they tend to spread wide.

Recipes: Fresh or dried leaves used in Mediterranean cuisine for a bitter, astringent taste and characteristic aroma. Used in flavoring in stuffing and meats, herbal teas, and cleaning products.

Fun Fact: Rosemary was believed to cure memory issues and could ward off negativity and evil spirits during the Medieval Times. It was also used to honor the deceased dating back to Ancient Egypt.

Sage
*Salvia officinalis*

Why We Like It: Manool gives a savory, peppery flavor and eucalyptol gives a slight spicy flavor. Sage also has high levels of camphor, which is responsible for the slightly spicy, cool flavor.

How to Grow It: Prefers sunny and dry areas and may die in cold, wet winters. Be sure to have well-drained soils for your sage.

Recipes: Savory and slightly peppery, sage is included in many Italian dishes and sometimes in Chai. Also great in pasta and sauces with lemon.

Fun Fact: Ancient Romans believed that sage had medicinal properties in settling stomachs, and began cooking fatty meats with it to aid in digestion. It has also been shown to help preserve meats. The practice of including sage on meats has continued to this day.
Spearmint  
*Mentha spicata*

**Why We Like It:** R-(-)-Carvone, menthol, and menthone gives spearmint its easily recognized minty smell. Spearmint also contains limonene, which gives it a somewhat cool, citrus scent, and eucalyptol, which give a hint of a spicy scent and has been known to repel insects.

**How to Grow It:** Grows well in temperate climates in partial shade to full sun. Gardeners grow it in planters due to invasive rhizomes. Leaves lose aromatic appeal after flowering.

**Recipes:** Used heavily in Morocco. Great in teas, mixed drinks, confectionery, and cleaning products.

**Fun Fact:** The smell of spearmint has long been considered refreshing to the mind and body, and people would wear spearmint sprigs to calm themselves and enhance their minds. Aristotle even disallowed soldiers from wearing mint, as it would make them too calm less willing to fight. Mint was also used for medicinal purposes, especially stomach and tooth aches.

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Thyme  
*Thymus vulgaris*

**Why We Like It:** Thymol gives subtle, dry, minty flavor. Also contains carvacrol, giving a pungent, warm smell, and linalool, giving a floral, spiced scent.

**How to Grow It:** Prefers full sun and hot, dry conditions and well-drained soils. Thyme does not grow very tall, but needs about 6 inches between plants. Harvest just before plant flowers.

**Recipes:** Used in Mediterranean cuisine, especially with meats (such as lamb), and to flavor lentils, cheeses, eggs, and tea. Also can be used in adult beverages.

**Fun Fact:** During the Middle Ages, women would give knights thyme as a symbol of courage. Thyme was also placed in coffins to assure passage to the afterlife.