

Mountain Mints are Worth the “Buzz”

By Susan Camp

Since we like to plant perennials in the fall, Jim and I try to stop in at two or three local native plant sales in September and October. Gloucester Master Gardeners increase our stock of native plants each year, but it’s fun to check out the plants that other groups are selling.

A few years ago, we purchased several mountain mints at one nearby plant sale. Mountain mints (*Pycnanthemum* spp.) are members of the mint family (they have square stems) and leaves that emit a delicate minty fragrance when rubbed. Despite their common name, about 20 species of mountain mints are native to most of the eastern half of the United States and Canada, including mountainous, Piedmont, and Coastal areas.

Mountain mints require full sun to part shade. They grow well in average to fertile clay, loam, or sandy soil with good drainage and an acidic to neutral pH. The velvety green leaves vary in size and shape depending on the species, and may have a whitish appearance. The tiny, tightly clustered, bracted, two-lipped flowers bloom profusely from July to September. Flowers are fragrant, and vary by species in color from white to pink to lavender. Mountain mints require almost no maintenance, but their best feature is that they are super-pollinators. Bees, butterflies, and other pollinating insects flock to the plants.

Most *Pycnanthemum* species reach heights of 1 to 3 feet at maturity, but some will grow taller. All are drought tolerant to some degree. Deer dislike the minty fragrance, so *Pycnanthemums* can be planted in unfenced areas.

Mountain mints are attractive and useful additions to pollinator and native gardens and meadows or naturalized areas near ponds and streams. They spread by rhizomes, but not as aggressively as some other mint species.

You can make a tea with the leaves and use them in recipes that call for the addition of mint as a flavoring or garnish. Native Americans used the plant parts as medicine.

Our purchase consisted of three spindly stalks labeled “*Pycnanthemum tenuifolium*—Narrow-leafed mountain mint.” All species of mountain mint have several common names, possibly due to the fact that they are so widespread over a large area; thus *P. tenuifolium* is also called slender mountain mint.

Our mountain mints looked pitiful, so I decided to wait until spring to plant them in a brick circle that holds our sundial. By midsummer, the three mountain mints had grown to 3 to 4 feet in height and totally obscured the sundial. I didn’t have the heart to cut them back because they were filled every day with buzzing bees and fluttering butterflies. There they have remained, only now they fill the entire circle. They are, after all, members of the mint family. Fortunately, they have not ventured beyond the brick boundary, but I am vigilant about watching for escapees.

The curious thing about my narrow-leafed mountain mints was that they never looked quite like the photos online; the leaves on my plants are too broad. During the Plant Extravaganza, Master Gardener Rose Sullivan noticed that a plant labeled narrow-leafed mountain mint probably was Virginia mountain mint (*P. virginianum*), also known as American or common mountain mint.

I soon forgot Rose's comment and didn't check the leaves on my mountain mints until several days ago. They are definitely *P. virginianum* with characteristic lance-shaped leaves. The leaves of *P. tenuifolium* are almost needle-like. Both species bear clusters of pinkish-white flowers that often have tiny purple dots.

Another mountain mint made the news this week: *Pycnanthemum muticum* (clustered, blunt or short-toothed mountain mint) has been named the 2025 Perennial Plant of the Year by the Perennial Plant Association, a non-profit trade group. A popular species, *P. muticum* may attract more pollinators than any of the others.

NCSU Extension Gardener Plant Toolbox offers a general article on *Pycnanthemum* plus articles on eight species.

Give mountain mints a try. You can always Chelsea chop them if they grow too tall.