

BWSR FEATURED PLANT

WILD BERGAMOT *Monarda fistulosa*

Family: Mint

Publication Date: 12-13-13

Midwest Region
Wetland Indicator
Status: FACU



Perhaps no prairie forb has been planted more often and in a wider distribution across the United States than wild bergamot. Part of the reason that it is so popular is that it establishes reliably from seed and is adapted in a wide range of environmental conditions, helping ensure its success in plantings. It is also an important species for pollinators and provides plant community structure for birds and animals. The plant is also used in gardens and has a long history of use for its healing properties.



Native bee on wild bergamot

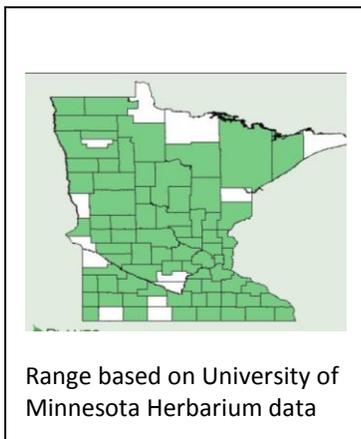
Identification

Like other species in the mint family wild bergamot has a square stem and opposite leaves. The leaves are somewhat triangular in shape, are coarsely toothed and have a distinct rich oregano-like smell. The leaves commonly develop a white coating called powdery mildew in areas of poor air flow. Tubular, pink to purple flowers are clustered in groups of 20-50 flowers. The individual flowers have an upper lip, and a lower lip that pollinators use as a landing pad. The flowers bloom from mid-June to mid-September. The stems grow to around three to four feet tall. The plant spreads from creeping rhizomes and can sometimes spread aggressively over large areas.



Square stem and opposite leaves of wild bergamot

Range



Range based on University of Minnesota Herbarium data

Wild bergamot can tolerate a wide range of soils from sands to clay and can grow in old fields, dry and mesic prairies, savannas and wet meadows. The plant is widely distributed in Minnesota and is also found across the United States (with the exception of California and Florida) and most of Canada. Several varieties have been identified across portions of its range. In Minnesota there are two varieties, *var. fistulosa* that is widespread across the state, and *var. menthaefolia* that is shorter and found in a few western counties. Dotted mint is another



The species thrives in mesic prairie plantings

Monarda species (*Monarda punctata*) this is found in dry prairies in more southern parts of Minnesota. This species has staggered clusters of flowers where leaves attach to the stem. *Monarda didyma* is a species from the eastern United States that is often called "bee balm" and commonly planted in gardens. Around 50 cultivars have been developed of this species for the horticulture trade with different flower colors including red, blue and white.

Uses

Wild bergamot has been widely used to make tea, often to treat respiratory ailments. The plant has also been used as an antiseptic, for skin infections, wounds, and as the primary ingredient in mouthwash. The leaves have also been used in cooking wild game, and the essential oil from leaves and stems have been used in making soaps and lotions.

Primary Uses:

- Pollinator Habitat
- Songbird Habitat
- Shoreline Stabilization
- Invasive Species Competition
- Medicine



Ecologically, the species is a seed source for songbirds and is a nectar and pollen source for hummingbirds, butterflies, long-tongued bees and native flies. Wild bergamot plants have rhizomes that spread near the soil surface, as well as deep fibrous roots that are used for obtaining water and nutrients. This combination makes the plant effective at stabilizing streambanks and shorelines. Plants can spread aggressively, so they may not be well suited to small perennial gardens. The species is avoided by deer as it likely gives them indigestion.

A combination of rhizomes and fibrous roots make the species effective at stabilization

Planting Recommendations

The species is easy to start from seed and does not require cold stratification. Seeds ripen about two months after the plant blooms and the seedhead turns brown as the seeds ripen. The seed can easily be collected by hand by collecting the entire seedhead. The seedheads should be dried on screens or on tables in rooms with good air circulation. The seedheads can be shaken in bags to release seed. Some seed will likely remain in seedheads, so these seedheads can be spread in a field or crushed mechanically or by hand to release the remaining seeds. A screen or a sieve can also be used to help separate the seed from the chaff.



The small seeds should be broadcast on the soil surface. Light harrowing or rolling can be beneficial after seeding to ensure good seed to soil contact. The seed should not be buried deeper than two times the width of the seed.

Plants can also be grown in flats and then transplanted into containers. As the seed is easy to germinate this can be a good activity for school kids. The containers will require 6-8 hours of sunlight (or sun lamps) per day with good air flow for sufficient growth. Plants can be moved into the field when their roots fill containers. Clumps of bergamot can also be effectively transplanted in the spring or late fall from areas on-site. Transplanting often helps improve the vigor of existing clumps.

Additional References

UW-Steven's Point Freckman Herbarium

<http://wisplants.uwsp.edu/scripts/detail.asp?SpCode=MONFISsFIS>

Minnesota Wildflowers: <http://www.minnesotawildflowers.info/flower/wild-bergamot>

Illinois Wildflowers: http://www.illinoiswildflowers.info/prairie/plantx/wld_bergamotx.htm

Strength of the Earth, The Classic Guide to Ojibwe Uses of Native Plants, Frances Densmore, 2005

Planting Methods:

- Broadcast seeding
- Containers
- Transplanting