

Conservation Corner

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June 22, 2016

*The quality of mercy is not strained
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven.
Act 4, Scene 1, Merchant of Venice*

As you read today's column, we trust the heat will have mercifully broken and gentle raindrops fallen across Pocahontas County. As the weather in Iowa fluctuates from cool and rainy to hot and dry, we encourage everyone to keep a close eye on recent tree plantings. We've had several calls of brown and dying windbreaks – keep those trees and shrubs watered!



Today we'll focus our attention on wild bergamot, a native wildflower that copes well with weather extremes. Also known as horsemint or bee balm, wild bergamot is easily recognized as a member of the mint family with its square stems, opposite leaves, and small but fragrant flowers. As you might guess, both leaves and stems have a minty aroma that may last into the winter.

Native Americans collected wild bergamot for its medicinal properties. The Winnebago and Blackhawk used it to treat pimples and other skin eruptions, the Meskwaki used the plant to cure colds, while Navajos and early pioneers used horsemint tea to treat fevers, sore throat, colds, and headaches. The plant's antiseptic properties come from thymol, the same active ingredient in commercial mouthwashes.

Wild bergamot is still used as a personal and home fragrance. Its aroma is a cross between lavender and orange and includes chemical compounds that give distinctive scents of thyme, oregano, pine, nutmeg, cardamom and an essential oil shared with hemp, rosemary, cloves and hops. Don't confuse wild bergamot with bergamot essential oil, which comes from the rind or oil of an unrelated citrus plant, bergamot orange.

Like many members of the mint family, wild bergamot is also used to flavor beverages and food and as a meat preservative. Wild bergamot goes nicely with pork dishes. Other members of the mint family still widely used today include marjoram, rosemary, peppermint, spearmint, horehound, thyme, sage, lavender, catnip, hyssop, and penny royal.

From a conservationist standpoint, wild bergamot is an important plant in butterfly, hummingbird, native, and rain gardens. Its blossoms are clusters of slender pink to lavender tubes, each with a lip or lobe that serves as a landing pad for its main pollinator, a small black bee, *Dufourea monardae*. Despite its somewhat ragged appearance, wild bergamot is an important nectar source for butterflies, moths, hummingbirds, wasps, flies, and long-tongued bees such as bumblebees, miner bees, and large leaf-cutting bees as well as a pollen source for beetles, flies, and bees throughout the summer.

Today garden centers offer many cultivars of wild bergamot. This spring we planted a Sugar Buzz variety named Grape Gumball that has good resistance to powdery mildew. If you have trouble with deer and rabbits, you might try wild bergamot in your flower beds as grazers seem to avoid it, probably due to its strong favors. Another tasty tidbit of summer—wild bergamot will add flavor to your garden and pork roast.