

Old and New Garden Favorites

There are certain plants that gardeners learned in their youth and then dismissed as mundane when they began to garden for themselves. *Monarda* or Beebalm was one of those plants for me. I recall how the red flowers glowed in my parent's garden, and enjoyed its ability to attract a variety of bees and pollinators, as its common name belies. However, when I first started to use it in designs, its aggressive nature and lackluster autumn appearance caused me to dismiss this genus. As is often the case, age and education changed my impression!

Monarda is in the Lamiaceae or Mint Family, as is made evident by the square stems that typify this family. The genus name was penned by Carl Linnaeus (1707-1778) and honors Nicolás Monardes (1493-1588) who was the physician for King Philip II of Spain. Although Monardes never actually travelled to North America, he wrote an extensive 3 volume treatise on medicinal plants based upon materials brought back from explorations of the New World. The plant of my

youth, *Monarda didyma* is native from Georgia to Maine and west to the Mississippi. The species epithet was crafted by Linnaeus from the Latin meaning 'in pairs' or 'twins', referring to the stamens that are gathered in pairs under the upper lip of the flower. Typical to the genus, the flowers appear in dense terminal clusters of 20-50 (pictured on right) atop 24-30" stems that, for this genus, are deep red. The flowers are generally 1-1½" long and are two lipped; the upper lip is narrow and arches upwards, while the lower lip consists of 3 parts, with the central lobe the largest.



This species is often called Oswego Tea, reflecting the history of how the Oswego Native American Indians of NY taught the European settlers the medicinal benefits of a tea steeped from the plant's leaves. This species is also commonly called Bergamot, since the fragrance of the foliage is similar to that of a Bergamot Orange. The red flowers are also a magnet for Ruby Throated Hummingbirds and Fritillary Butterflies! The plants prefer average to moist, humus enriched soils and spread readily by underground rhizomes. The biggest problem is the development of powdery mildew on the foliage during late summer; it is exacerbated in areas with poor ventilation and can result in defoliation.

Although *Monarda didyma* is probably the best known species, there are numerous other species that rank as excellent garden-worthy contenders. The species that Linnaeus first described and is the 'type' species for the genus is *Monarda fistulosa*. The species epithet is from the Latin for a narrow duct or passage and describes the tubular shape of the corolla. Native to Eastern North



America, this species is often found in old fields of Northern NJ and it brandishes light to medium pink flowers (pictured at left) in mid-August through September. Unlike its aforementioned cousin, it is less susceptible to powdery mildew and it grows happily to 3' tall in drier soils! It was also utilized as a medicinal by the Native American Indians, both as a tea to treat colds and as an anti-

septic for minor skin wounds and infections. It was even used as a seasoning in the preparation and cooking of wild game. It too spreads via rhizomes, albeit much slower than its cousin, and throws numerous seedlings, allowing it to colonize large gardens or meadows. However, I would hardly call it weedy! The flowers attract large numbers of pollinators, including the Eastern Swallowtail Butterfly, as seen on the right in Warren County NJ.



Another species that I only recently discovered is *Monarda bradburniana*, Bradbury's Beebalm. John Bradbury (1768-1823) was a Scottish naturalist who explored regions of Missouri and areas surrounding the Mississippi River, which is home to this species.



Named in 1826 by Lewis Caleb Beck (1798-1853), an American physician, botanist, chemist and mineralogist who also studied flora of the mid-west, who honored



Bradbury by officially describing and naming this plant in the American Journal of Science. This species unveils dense heads of purplish-pink to nearly white flowers (pictured above left) from late May into June. The flowers are enhanced by a subtending whorl of leafy purple bracts that appear before the actual flowers begin to open (as seen in the image, above right). Clump forming in nature, the mildew free foliage also displays attractive purple and red fall

colors, as displayed on the left, that linger well into November! Like *Monarda fistulosa*, the plants do well in drier, well-drained soils in full sun or light shade, although they can tolerate short periods of inundation

Providing flowers and nutrition for pollinators from May to September, *Monarda* is easily woven into a sunny or part-shade garden composition. They look great blended with low and mid-sized ornamental grasses as seen on the right at Rutgers Gardens, as well as with various shrubs in a mixed border. As is so often the case, plants of our youth that we so often dismiss as dull or routine are actually phenomenal plants, again proving that age and education only helps to improve the gardener and the garden!

