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Mints are flavorful, refreshing and easy to grow

By John Begeman and Laura Murphy

Of all the garden herbs, none have more compelling fragrances and flavors than the mints. Most popular are the spearmints and peppermints. They're great for flavoring teas and other beverages, making jellies, using in potpourri, and as a breath freshener. Apple, orange and pineapple mints are wonderful additions to fruit and leafy salads. The chocolate mint is terrific addition to many deserts.



Mints thrive with little attention. They prefer lots of sun, but in our desert environment need some afternoon shading from the summer sun. Eastern exposures are ideal with morning sun and afternoon shade. When growing them in containers, use any quality potting soil. When planted in the ground, mints prefer and organic soil. This can be accomplished by tilling in a generous amount of organic matter to the area to be planted. Home or commercial bagged compost is the most readily available form of organic amendment available.

Mints are not drought tolerant and must be watered regularly. In the heat of the summer, depending on the sun exposure, this could mean thoroughly watering every day. Mints should be fertilized once in the spring and again at the start of the monsoon season with a dilute water-soluble fertilizer such as Peters or Miracle Gro.

Mints are notoriously hard to control in the garden. They spread vigorously by above and below ground runners. In no time flat, they can take over an entire garden patch. The best way to keep mints confined is to plant them in pots and grow them above ground, or sink the mint pots directly into your herb garden. I like to use clay pots because the porous sides breathe. When sunk into the ground, any excess moisture (resulting from over-watering), will escape through the sides into the surrounding soil. Be sure to select a pot that is at least 12 inches high to allow deep rooting, and with a large hole in the bottom for adequate drainage.

The pot should be filled with soil from the bottom up, with mint planted in the center. Sink the pot with the top two inches extending above the surrounding soil. As the mint grows, keep shoots growing over the sides of the pot trimmed back. If these shoots grow long enough, they will root outside the pot and escape into the garden. As well as trimming the sides, clip the top shoots as you harvest. This will keep the plant thick and compact.

If you want to plant several types of mints together, try using clay chimney flue liners sunk into the ground at various depths. The square shape of the flue liner will allow you to place these "mint columns" flush against one another in an attractive grouping. By staggering the height of the mint columns, you can keep plants separate and prevent them from growing into one another.

Over-time plants may become overgrown, woody, and thin. At that point they can be divided and replanted. Easier yet, is to start new plants and discard the old one.

If you wish to propagate mint, simply let the shoots take root over the sides of the pot. Cut the stem attaching the plantlet to the Mother plant, dig it out, and pot it in another container. Mint can also be propagated by placing the ends of cuttings directly in water.

Occasionally, mint plants can be attacked by spider mites, aphids or whiteflies. In most cases, a soapy spray will control these pests. The spray can be made by mixing one tablespoon of liquid dishwashing detergent in one gallon of water. Do not use lemon-scented soaps. Spray the leaves both top and bottom. Repeat the spray in one week. If insects reappear, you can retreat with the soap spray. Limit soap sprays to no more than 4 total applications per month. Too much soap can cause plant injury.

Mint sprigs should be cut in the early morning. This is when the moisture content in leaves and stems are highest. The aromatic oils of mints are most concentrated at the onset of flower formation. This is the optimum time to harvest mints for storing frozen or dried. To dry, just place mint sprigs in a brown paper bag and hang it in a dark location. You can then crumble the dried leaves and store in an airtight container.

John Begeman is from the University of Arizona; Laura Murphy is a Lake Havasu City Master Gardener. For more information, contact the Lake Havasu City Master Gardeners by calling their Hot Line at 505-4105 or visit us at Home Garden Day from 11 am to 1 pm the first Tuesday of every month at the Library.

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