



*The July Plant of the Month*

*Monarda citriodora*

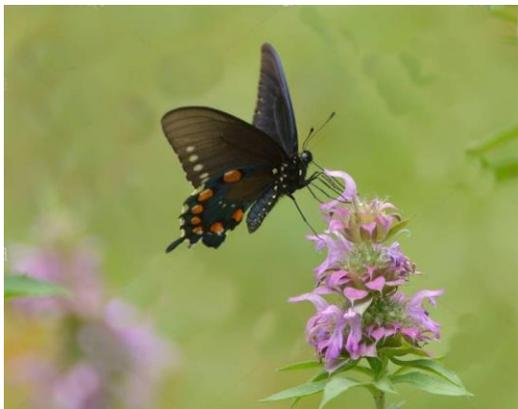
*Genus: Monarda*

*by Cindy Steele*

Have you ever imagined discovering a plant? What if you stumbled across a Texas mountain laurel in bloom, only to be hit in the nose with a grape-soda fragrance bomb? That'd be crazy, right? Nicolas Bautista Monardes — a 16th century physician and botanist — didn't actually discover plants in the genus *Monarda*. Their singular scents and towering stacks of petals and bracts were known and used by indigenous North Americans before him. But he did study them extensively from across the pond in Spain, where he took a particular interest in their medicinal properties (monardas are said to treat an array of human ailments). And they were eventually named in his honor.

Part of the mint family, Lamiaceae, plants in this aromatic genus are popular with pollinators as well as people, counting native bees, butterflies, and hummingbirds among





their biggest fans. And, they have the added bonus of being deer and rabbit resistant. Besides all of that, they're darn pretty. Get to know these brawny bloomers and keep an eye out during spring and summer: they are most likely coming to a field or garden near you.

Since *monarda citriodora*, or lemon beebalm, is a member of the mint family, some other common names are purple horsemint, lemon mint, plains horsemint, and horsemint. Some think the more common name of "horsemint" comes from horses being partial to eating the plant (like breath mints for the equine). Horsemint is an aromatic annual with unusual flower heads. Like ruffles on a dress, this monarda is perhaps most commonly seen in the central and southern U.S. and parts of northern Mexico. Its elongated spikes of flowers and bracts captivate onlookers along roadsides and in pastures or prairies with bold color from near-fuchsia to lavender (with occasional appearances in almost white). Several stems grow from the base and are lined with pairs of lance-shaped leaves. Lemon beebalm grows to about 30 inches and produces tight, spike-shaped clusters of lavender flowers. As an herb, it also has some culinary uses. The leaves add a lemon flavor to cooked foods, salads, and teas. They can also be used in aromatic potpourri mixes.



Lemon bee balm is often confused with lemon balm, another member of the mint family. Lemon balm is *Melissa officinalis* and is hardier, growing in slightly colder zones of the U.S. It grows in a large clump up to three feet wide and two feet tall. The flowers are spiky, pale yellow clusters. Lemon balm has a fresh citrusy smell and scent that many cooks add to salads, soups, and more. Lemon balm also has a unique medicinal history—its use as a curative can be traced back to ancient Greece and Rome, where its leaves were used in a variety of tonics and teas, and its essential oils were extracted to aid with digestive issues.



Lemon Beebalm



Lemon Balm

Growing lemon beebalm is easy. This herb tolerates poor and rocky soils and actually prefers soil that is sandy or with limestone. It will need full sun to thrive, although it can tolerate a little shade. Once established, watering requirements are low. Lemon bee balm can get by in dry soils. Although it is an annual, it will readily propagate by seed. If you leave flowers in place, this plant will spread. In fact, it can overrun areas of your garden, just like mint, where conditions are optimal. If you are starting from seed, simply rake the seeds into the soil in early spring or in fall in warmer climates. Supplemental watering is suggested if spring rains are poor. Provide additional water in May, if

necessary, until the plants reach 10 – 12 inches tall. Allow plants to mature completely (spherical heads become dry and brown) before mowing or cutting down. Since this is an annual, it is essential this species is allowed to reseed itself for the following year.

If you have lemon beebalm growing in your pollinator garden, it's a good idea to bring along a bit of it on your next camping trip or hike. The spicy scent discourages biting insects. A pinch of leaves in the campfire helps keep mosquitoes away, and a bouquet of drying lemon beebalm flowers hanging in your tent keeps those biting bugs away. Rubbing fresh or dried lemon beebalm on the feet and ankles offers some protection against chiggers and ticks...and that's always a winner in anybody's book!



If you add up all the benefits of adding lemon beebalm to your pollinator garden, it's at the top of the list! There are many places that sell lemon beebalm seeds, and you can find them at many online seed stores. So, treat those pollinators to one of their favorite delicacies while making your garden infinitely more beautiful!

