

Hints for Growing Mint



Most people want to know how to not grow mint. Its reputation for aggressiveness is well-deserved. New gardeners may not realize that if you give mint what it wants--rich moist soil in full sun or partial shade--it will take over your garden.

Mint reproduces from long, creeping stems that spread out just under the soil surface whenever they get a chance. Mint can even find its way via deep, tortuous routes under fences and other barriers. It is recommended to plant mint in containers, preferably with bottoms, sunk into the soil.

You can also improvise with stove pipes or boxes at least 18 inches deep to keep it in bounds for a time. In springtime, when mint is just beginning to grow, is a good time to pull out any straying stems. Eventually, mint will make a break for it.

The easiest way to propagate mint, and to be sure what you're getting, is to take root cuttings from established plantings. Find a piece of mint you like poking from the ground a short distance from the parent plant. Tug gently and pull from the ground a piece of underground stem. Pot it up for a friend or transplant it to a new location. Harvest mint leaves as flowering begins. They can be used right away in teas or recipes, or dried for later use.

Mint varieties commonly available include:

- Peppermint: sweet, strong mint flavor. It flavors many candies. Shiny, dark green leaves, some with a purple tinge. - Spearmint: flavor stronger and less sweet than peppermint. The curly variety is very ornamental; it is used to make traditional mint sauce for lamb. - Pennyroyal: a ground cover and a very tough plant that spreads almost decorously in dreadful soil. Do not ingest pennyroyal, especially if you're pregnant. It's used as a bug repellent. - Corsican Mint: mat-forming ground cover that can be walked upon, releasing its creme de menthe fragrance; often used to flavor liqueurs, along with peppermint. Tiny, moss-like leaves are bright green, and they appreciate some shade.

This article adapted from Cooperative State Research, Education and Extension Service, USDA. Please contact the Farm Advisor's office at cdcalaveras@ucdavis.edu or 754-6477 with your agricultural questions. Talk to a certified Master Gardener every Wednesday, 10:00-12:00, 754-2880. To speak with a Master Gardener in Tuolumne County, please call 209 533-5696.