



Don't underestimate mint - - it's unstoppable

by Carol Barany

In the early days of my gardening life, I spent countless hours chasing after mint. I eventually won the race, but not in a sprint. More like a marathon, it took years.

Mint is one of the easiest herbs to grow, and I planted as many varieties as I could find in my first garden.

Peppermint, spearmint, chocolate mint, apple mint, and pineapple mint; I tried them all. A small nursery transplant expanded into a lush three foot wide mound in one summer. I attributed it to my exceptional skills. I was GOOD. Who said gardening was hard?

By the summer of my second gardening year, I recognized that mint did not need me to grow. Mint is unstoppable.

If you're thinking about planting mint for the first time, keep in mind that its rhizomatous roots stealthily run under and around any obstacle, sending up shoots far away from the mother plant. When you try to pull it, any small pieces of rhizome that break off quickly grow into new plants.

Mint was born to run through your entire herb garden, or wherever you planted that innocent looking 3" seedling that begged you to take it home from the nursery. For this reason it's better to plant mint in a pot.

Some gardeners suggest growing mint in bottomless containers sunk into the garden bed. Beware. It's highly likely that the confined rhizomes will make a jail break before you even turn around. I recommend growing mint in a big pot on your porch. Rubbing your hand across fresh mint leaves and breathing deeply of the perfumed air will never fail to bring a smile to your face. Besides, having a container close by means you'll use mint more in foods and beverages.

Come winter, just leave the pot where it is. Most mints are hardy down to Zone 3. Even without protection, mint will begin growing again in the spring.

While mint has the reputation of being one of the worst garden thugs, it's one of our most versatile herbs.

I'm not a fan of flavored coffees. When someone suggested I add some mint leaves to the coffee basket when I brewed a cup, I was skeptical.

I tried it. I liked it, especially when the coffee is iced.

It's too hot these days to do much cooking, but what are we going to do with all that mint we have growing? These recipes for two summer salads and a relish to accompany grilled meats or fish are proven winners, with most of the ingredients coming straight from your garden. A little slicing and dicing, and you're ready to eat.

If that's too much work, make a Mojito and order takeout. Cheers!

THAI-STYLE NAPA COLESLAW WITH MINT AND CILANTRO

Ingredients

- 3 tablespoons lime juice
- 4 teaspoons white sugar
- 1 tablespoon fish sauce, or to taste
- 1 medium jalapeno or Serrano chili, seeded and minced
- 5 tablespoons full-fat coconut milk
- 1 pound Napa cabbage (green cabbage will also work) thinly sliced (about 8 cups)
- 6 radishes, trimmed, halved, and thinly sliced
- 4 ounces sugar snap peas sliced diagonally
- ½ cup coarsely chopped cilantro
- ½ cup coarsely chopped mint
- ½ cup roasted and salted cashews or peanuts

In a measuring cup mix together the lime juice, sugar, fish sauce, and chili. Let the flavors blend for 10 minutes. Whisk in the coconut milk and add additional fish sauce if desired. In a large bowl, combine the cabbage, radishes, peas, cilantro, and mint. Add the dressing and toss until evenly coated. Stir in the chopped nuts.

MINT-ONION RELISH

Ingredients

- 1 Walla Walla Sweet onion, peeled and chunked
- 8 large cloves fresh garlic, peeled
- 40 mint leaves
- ¾ teaspoon salt
- ½ cup white vinegar
- 2-4 tablespoons sugar (to taste)

Combine all ingredients in the work bowl of a food processor and process until minced. Start with the smaller amount of sugar and add more if desired. Makes about 2 cups. Keeps several weeks, refrigerated.

ORZO TABBOULEH

Ingredients

- 1 cup dry orzo pasta
- 3 tablespoons olive oil
- 3 tablespoons freshly squeezed lemon juice
- 1/2 teaspoon kosher salt, plus more to taste
- Freshly ground black pepper
- 2 medium tomatoes, seeded and diced
- 2 cups loosely packed chopped fresh parsley leaves
- 1/2 cup loosely packed chopped fresh mint leaves
- 1 small cucumber, seeded and diced
- 2 medium scallions, thinly sliced

Bring a large pot of salted water to a boil. Add the pasta and cook until al dente, about 9 minutes or according to package instructions. Drain and run briefly under cool water to cool the pasta down. Drain well again. Place the olive oil, lemon juice, salt, and a few grinds of black pepper in a large bowl and whisk to combine. Add the cooked pasta, tomatoes, parsley, mint, cucumber, and scallions and toss to combine. Taste and season with more salt and pepper as needed.