

Wildflower in Focus—Bee-Balm

Oswego-Tea

Monarda didyma L.

Mint Family (Lamiaceae)



he scarlet flowers of bee-balm or Oswego-tea (*Monarda didyma*) appear along the wooded banks of Bear Branch on the lower slopes of Frederick County's Sugarloaf Mountain in midsummer. These vividly hued, strikingly tall members of the mint family have been a favorite sight for artist

Tina Brown and me for many years, and we had no idea how uncommon this wildflower was in Maryland when we chose to feature it in "Wildflower in Focus." MNPS board member Carole Bergmann, Montgomery County forest ecologist and botanist, observes: "I've never seen *Monarda didyma* in the wild in Montgomery County Parks. I saw it once on the Frederick Watershed property, but I rarely see it in Maryland. West Virginia is where I've seen it the most in recent years—then always in moist, often partially shaded areas along streams and ponds. It is beautiful when you see it!" MNPS vice

president Marney Bruce adds: "I agree with Carole. The only place I've seen it in the wild, in just the circumstances Carole describes, is up in central Pennsylvania. But what a sight! We spotted this large red patch in the distance in the woods and as we got closer it was this lovely stand of *Monarda didyma* in dappled sunlight near a stream. Unforgettable! Had to be a wild population since there was no cabin or even remains of one for miles." Like Carole, MNPS treasurer Matt Cohen has seen wild plants in West Virginia, "notably in the Dolly Sods Wilderness Area in moist seeps in filtered sun." But as an avid and accomplished gardener focused on native plants appealing to wildlife, Matt says: "I grow some in my raingarden where it's been thriving for years." The flowers attract hummingbirds, adding to their value and appeal. I planted bee-balm in my garden several years ago and it seemed that within five minutes of blooming, a ruby throated hummingbird was dipping into the flowers!

Flowers: Brilliant red, tubular, with 2 widely divergent lips. Long stamens protrude beneath the upper lip. Individual flowers are each slightly more than an inch long, surrounded by purplish or reddish bracts and borne in a showy round cluster.

Leaves: Opposite, simple, toothed, ovate-lanceolate or deltoid-ovate, 2–6" long; pungently fragrant, as many mint family leaves are. Carole Bergmann says: "As a person who loves to use the "sense of smell" when identifying plants, I can say that *all* of the *Monardas* have a wonderful scent!"

Height: 2–5'. Like most members of the mint family, bee-balm has a square plant stalk.

Habitat and Range: Moist woods and thickets, stream banks; Maine to Michigan, south along the mountains to Georgia (some authorities suggest the New England plant populations are garden escapes).

Herbal Lore: According to Steven Foster and James Duke: "American Indians used leaf tea for colic, gas, colds, fevers, stomachaches, nosebleeds, insomnia, heart trouble, measles, and to induce sweating. Poultice used for headaches. Historically, physicians used leaf to expel worms and gas." Marney Bruce observes that the common name "bee-balm" evolved from the plant's use as a remedy for bee stings.

Similar Species: Most apt to be confused with cardinal flower (*Lobelia cardinalis*). Cardinal flower has alternate leaves and its flower clusters are long and upright (not round). Another *Monarda* species, wild bergamot (*M. fistulosa*), is more common in Maryland. Its flowers are lavender or pink. Fleming, Lobstein and Tufty list four *Monarda* species in *Finding Wildflowers in the Washington-Baltimore Area* and Carole Bergmann describes where she sees them in her travels: "I see [horsemint] *M. punctata* most commonly on the eastern

shore, but I have seen it in Prince Georges County a few times. I've seen [basil balm] *M. clinopodia* several times growing in partial shade along the C&O Canal in Washington County, but I haven't ever seen a lot of it in one place. I have seen [wild bergamot] *fistulosa* most frequently. I see it both in sunny open somewhat dry fields and along the edge of woods. I think it tolerates poor clay soil and somewhat rocky soil. It's very attractive to hummingbirds, butterflies and bees."

According to MNPS board member, teacher and author Cris Fleming: "*M. punctata* fills the open fields at Jug Bay Wetlands Sanctuary in Anne Arundel County in late summer. It is also listed on a MNPS field trip to Piney Orchard, also in Anne Arundel County, on Sept. 21, 2008." Cris adds: "I have seen a nice colony of *M. clinopodia* along the C&O Canal just north of Violette's Lock in midsummer."

Blooming Time for Bee-Balm: June–September. Other *Monardas* also summer-early fall blooming.

~ Melanie Choukas-Bradley



Monarda didyma L.

Photo by Carol Bergmann, Inset by Carolyn Fulton

MNPS board members Carole Bergmann, Marney Bruce, Matt Cohen, Cris Fleming, Rod Simmons and artist Tina Thieme Brown contributed to this article, which was adapted from *An Illustrated Guide to Eastern Woodland Wildflowers and Trees: 350 Plants Observed at Sugarloaf Mountain, Maryland* (Choukas-Bradley and Brown, University of Virginia Press).

Marilandica

Summer 2012

A Publication of the Maryland Native Plant Society

Volume 3, Issue 2



Monarda didyma Lamiaceae

Tina Thieme Brown