

## Growing Beebalm

Beebalm (*Monarda spp.*) is one of our great native perennials and herbs. Native Americans used beebalm as a tea, brewing it for colds, minor bronchial and digestive complaints, and also as a poultice to soothe insect stings. During the Boston Tea Party, rebellious colonists utilized beebalm as a tea substitute, calling it "Oswego tea". Some gardeners may tuck beebalm leaves under their hats to ward off mosquitoes and flies.

*Monarda* is a member of the mint family, and leaves are aromatic and minty. The flowers are edible and can be added to salads. Beebalm prefers a moist, richly organic, well-drained soil in full sun to light shade. Plants need good air circulation. Beebalm tolerates summer heat but not prolonged droughts.

Bees, butterflies and hummingbirds are attracted to its colorful, nectar laden flowers. The colorful tubular flowers open from mid-June to late July, but plants will re-bloom when deadheaded. Flower colors range from the popular bright red to white, pink, lavender and purple. Beebalm is a great multiplier, and often the flower bed becomes very crowded in two to three years, requiring division of plant clumps.

Beebalm has few pests - except powdery mildew, a serious foliage disease problem. As summer humidity and heat kicks in, soil moisture declines and air circulation becomes stifling, a white coating of mildew begins to coat over foliage of susceptible cultivars. Weekly spraying with garden fungicides from late June to frost is not a viable option. Organically, you can reduce mildew severity by stripping away the lower 1/3 leaves and thinning out seedling populations to increase air circulation around plants. Diseased stalks should be discarded and not put in the compost pile.

A better approach to defend against mildew is to plant disease resistant varieties. 'Jacob Cline' displays very large red flowers and 'Marshall's Delight' is a pink blooming beebalm. Both grow 3-4 feet in height. Before his retirement, Richard E. Bir, featured SAPS speaker for April, conducted a multi-year evaluation of *monarda*. In addition to 'Jacob Cline' and 'Marshall's Delight', Dick also recommended *Monarda fistulosa* 'Clare Grace'. Late in the season, 'Clare Grace' befell to mildew, but the plant's rapid growth rate and above-average drought tolerance made it worthy of mention.