

Peppermint Primer

A hardy perennial—watch out or it'll take over the garden!—peppermint is a cross between spearmint and watermint. Its botanical name is *Mentha x piperita*, after a Greek nymph who was transformed into a plant, but you've most likely heard it called simply "mint."

One brush against peppermint and you'll instantly recognize its fresh, menthol-clean fragrance. One taste and you'll identify the hot-then-cool sensation. To make a positive identification, look for square, purplish stems with dark green, toothed leaves and reddish veins. In mid-to-late summer, violet flowers appear in whorls (little clusters) around the stem. These flowers, along with the leaves, are harvested just as the flowers begin to open. The plant grows wild all over the world, but cultivated peppermint tends to have the best volatile oil content.

Historically, peppermint was found on the banquet tables of ancient Greece, in the temples of the Middle East, among the healing herbs of the American Indians, and in the teacups of the American colonists.



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Peppermint

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Q&A

Is there a difference in mints?

Yes; “mint” doesn’t necessarily mean “peppermint.” In fact, there are over two dozen species of mints, each with its own subtle or obvious distinction.

(Square stems are characteristic of the entire mint family.) Spearmint, perhaps the next most familiar mint, is a bit milder than peppermint when it comes to taste.

Other mints you may come across include the citrusy/lavender

bergamot mint, the variegated ginger mint, and the mildly flavored pineapple mint.



Most of my recipes call for fresh mint. Can I substitute dried peppermint?

Well, it doesn’t make an attractive garnish for a mint julep, but because dried peppermint retains the plant’s essential oils nicely, it stands in just fine for the fresh herb in most recipes. If your recipe calls for fresh peppermint, substitute one third the amount of dried.

Is it true that peppermint deters pests?

As a matter of fact, it is. Mice, in particular, don’t appreciate the scent of peppermint. To deter them, simply sprinkle some peppermint leaf where you think they might scurry. Or dab a little peppermint essential oil on cotton balls and then place the balls strategically around the house. Crush some dried leaves and place them in potpourris or sachets around your home to deter flies.

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Minty Fresh

Peppermint Teas

A powerhouse in the world of herbal teas, peppermint partners well with a wide variety of other herbs (raspberry, rosehips, lemongrass, ginger—you name it) for tea blends. Delicious hot or iced, it has an uncanny ability to both refresh and calm. Peppermint tea freshens the breath and is traditionally served after meals. It’s been relied upon for centuries to address a wide variety of ailments. (The herb first appeared in the *London Pharmacopoeia* in 1721.)

Peppermint tea is delicious when combined with other beverages like fruit juices and sparkling water. (Peppermint ice cubes are a fun way to add subtle flavor to drinks, too.) And be sure to try it in hot cocoa. Simply steep the leaves in the hot water or milk before adding to the cocoa.



Pampering with Peppermint

Your toiletry cabinet likely contains something (shampoo, soap, toothpaste) with the cool scent and cleansing properties of peppermint.

Peppermint oil is drying, but the leaf is an emollient. Try it in facial toners, masks, and steams; hair rinses; tooth

powders and mouthwashes; baths and lotions.

(Some people are sensitive to peppermint, so test a batch of your product first on a small area on the inside of your arm.)

Morning Bath

Most of us think of baths as bedtime rituals, but a morning bath is a great way to start the day. (You can prepare the herbal “tea” the night before.) For an evening



bath, substitute elder flowers and chamomile for the lavender and rosemary.

Combine 1 tablespoon each: lavender, rosemary, and peppermint in a medium-size bowl. Pour 1 quart of boiling water over the herbs and steep for 20 minutes. Strain. Add to bathwater.

Cooking with Peppermint

You might be surprised at how versatile peppermint is in the kitchen. Try it in:

- Fruit salads, green salads, and salad dressings
- Egg dishes, like frittatas, omelets, and quiche
- Sauces for grains, pasta and veggies
- Soups, such as bean, beef, and fish soups and stews
- Vegetables, especially peas and carrots, green beans, spinach, potatoes, and squash
- Yogurt dishes, like raitas
- Jellies and jams
- Side salads, like tabouleh, cucumber, and carrot salads
- Sandwich salads, such as chicken salad and egg salad
- Desserts, like custard, ice cream, chocolate candies and pudding, fruit pies and pound cake

Easy Eggplant

It’s fun when peppermint shows up unexpectedly, as in this easy eggplant dish. Peppermint is the perfect foil for other—hot and spicy—seasonings.

2 tablespoons olive oil	¼ teaspoon salt
4 cups cubed eggplant	½ teaspoon black pepper ground
2 cups sliced red bell pepper	½ teaspoon garlic powder
1 teaspoon dried peppermint	pinch cayenne

Heat oil in a large skillet. Add eggplant and sauté for five minutes. Add bell pepper and continue to sauté until both the eggplant and pepper are softened and nicely browned. Add peppermint and spices. Cook, stirring gently, for another 5 minutes. ~ 4 servings

