

August 30, 2017



Marvelous Monardas
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There is a plant in my garden that I'm very happy with, and if you do not know it, I'd like to tell you about it. Monardas, also commonly called Bee Balm, have so many excellent attributes which I can think of:

- Has a long bloom time from late spring till mid-summer.
- Massively attractive to many beneficials, particularly bees and hummingbirds.
- Easy to grow.
- Works well as a cut flower on sturdy long stems.
- This plant is a perennial, which means it will return and rebloom over the years.
- Named varieties are readily available from both mail order catalogs and local nurseries.
- Monarda are considered deer-resistant!

When looking at a new flower border last year, my plant wish list included much of the above. In my neighborhood, I see a lot of Spanish lavender and sturdy shrubs in front yards. We have deer munching about and my aspirations for a cottage-style profusion of color, fragrance, and blossoms had to include plants that look good but don't necessarily taste good.

Monardas are native to North America and are found in the eastern United States and Washington and Oregon. They are not native to California and given our dry summers, do need regular water to look good. In the winter, they will die back.

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Last spring, we put a few four-inch pots of *Monarda didyma* “Gardenview Scarlet” in garden soil amended with several inches of commercial compost. Our irrigation is by in-line tubing and not a lot happened to those plants that first year. This year, in early spring, it was apparent that *Monarda*, a member of the *Lamiaceae* family which includes the mints, shares a common mint attribute... it spreads. Oh boy, from four-inch plants came runners that spread maybe two feet in all directions. Yippee!! who doesn't love bitty plants that give a big bang for the buck? I've read that *Monarda* will spread, but it is not considered invasive. In another year or two, I can start dividing and either replant in bare spots or give some divisions away.

The blooms are available in shades described as red, scarlet, violet, pink, purple, and white. I've seen mostly the scarlet side of reds but witnessing how easy they're to grow, I may look to other color varieties in the catalogs. The flower is difficult to describe other than “unusual,” “striking,” and “uniquely shaped.”

As these are in the mint family, it's easy to describe the fragrance as “minty.” I've yet to try the leaves in an herbal tea, but it nice to know it's possible. The blossoms are big balls of color and last and last until the plant suddenly looks leggy. I saw many stems and blooms on my plants and if inclined, I could have had weeks of cut flowers. Instead, bees had a blast around my *monardas* and their buzzing filled the air and my heart. Hummingbirds also checked in and stuck around. Powdery mildew can be a problem, but I didn't get hit. If I had, I'd try to improve the air circulation with some thinning.

Monardas are an herbaceous perennial. Their stems feel soft, not woody, and are easy to trim. With these very hot summer weeks, my plants started to look finished for the season, so I cut them back hard, to the ground. That was a week ago, and I see ample new growth emerging. Who knows? I may get another bloom? Typically, I should have just deadheaded and waited for a repeat bloom, but as I mentioned, the stems were looking leggy. I should plan to put something shorter in front before next spring. *Monardas* grow between 30” and 4-5’ depending on the variety. They're commonly included in plant lists suitable for cottage-style gardens. As these plants can tolerate light shade, they would also work in a woodland setting. Despite their spectacular appearance, they're singularly easy to manage. As for deer, well... they have not been interested. I saw their scat, I saw what they have tasted in my garden, but the big red blooms were left alone. I wanted to share this exciting plant if you do not already know it!

Free Master Gardener public education classes are picking up in September. “Seasonal Color with California Bulbs” with Catherine Moné is on Saturday, September 9 at the Government Center Hearing Room, Bldg C, 2850 Fairlane Ct, Placerville. Class will be 9:00 to noon. “Saturdays with Barry” continues on the same day, from 9:00 to 11:00 at the Sherwood Demonstration Garden, 6699 Campus Drive, Placerville. “California Native Oaks” with Heidi Napier is on Wednesday, September 13 at the Cameron Park Community Center, 2502 Country Club Drive, Cameron Park. Class will be 9:00 to noon.

UCCE Master Gardeners of El Dorado County are available to answer home gardening questions Tuesday through Friday, 9:00 a.m. to noon, by calling [\(530\) 621-5512](tel:5306215512). Walk-ins are welcome at our office, located at 311 Fair Lane in Placerville. For more information about our public education classes and activities, go to our UCCE Master Gardeners of El Dorado County

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