

WINTER FLAVOR OF PEPPERMINT

The flavor of peppermint can be found in many common foods and everyday products. We love peppermint tea to soothe a stomach ache, peppermint patty candies, and peppermint gum, just to name a few.

Peppermint is a perennial herb in the mint family (Lamiaceae) that has a very strong aroma and flavor. Peppermint is a cross between watermint and spearmint and is most commonly grown in North America, Europe, and Asia. The peppermint plants have many uses, including food, health, aromatic, and even medicinal purposes. The leaves can be used dried or used fresh, and the flowers can also be dried and used for flavoring. Creating essential oil from the plant is a very common use, which allows for flavoring or the oil being used for possible medicinal uses. Peppermint extract is used to add flavor or fragrance to foods, cosmetics, soaps, toothpastes, mouthwashes, and other products, and it may even have some medicinal benefits.

Spearmint and curly mint are the varieties most often grown to use as an herb in cooking and beverages. Peppermint is too strong to use fresh for most culinary purposes. You can find other varieties of mint that have interesting flavors and aromas. Apple mint has an apple scent; orange mint has a citrus flavor; chocolate mint has a bit of chocolate taste.

When added to recipes, fresh mint leaves are usually cut in ribbons. Sometimes the leaves are crushed or muddled to release more flavor. When using mint in food, it adds great mint flavor and is the perfect addition to salads, salad dressing, delicious when sprinkled on fruit, and can be mixed with basil or cilantro to make mint pesto. Fresh chopped mint makes a great addition to peas, green beans, cauliflower, carrots, or other vegetables to create minted vegetables for a unique twist. Mint traditionally complements lamb and poultry. Mint leaves can be added to a sauce or stew as it simmers. Peppermint and chocolate are a classic combo. Add mint to brownie batter or hot chocolate for a delicious homemade treat. Extract may be used to give mint flavor to baked goods and candies.

Mint makes a refreshing addition to drinks such as tea, lemonade, hot chocolate, or other beverages. Mint tea is a delicious and popular drink that can be served either hot or cold. Steeping fresh mint leaves in boiling water for approximately five minutes makes a simple tea that is also known to help digestion after a meal.

Mint can also easily be used for health, body care, and hygiene purposes. For example, to create a facial astringent, it is as simple as adding some finely minced fresh peppermint or other mint leaves to a cup of witch hazel. The mixture should be stored in a glass jar for at least a week and shaken frequently. After a week, the leaves can be strained out of the liquid, and the astringent may be used.

For an all-natural mouthwash, try infusing a quarter cup of chopped mint into a quart of boiling water. After the water has cooled, remove the herbs using a strainer and store the mouthwash in the fridge. Or, even chew on some fresh mint leaves! However, do not use fresh mint herbs if you are breastfeeding because they can reduce milk supply.

Steeping mint leaves in hot water and then straining creates a natural mint solution that can be added to bath water to make a mint bath that helps soak stress away. A strong peppermint tea mixture that has been cooled completely can be applied to sunburns to ease the pain of the burned areas.

Mint can also be used around the house to help repel bugs naturally. Branches of fresh peppermint, sage, and other strongly scented herbs can keep moths out of closets, ants out of the kitchen, and fleas and other bugs off of your pet's bed.

In contrast, mint growing naturally in your garden attracts bees and butterflies, which will have beneficial effects on your pollinated plants or crops. Mint is notorious for "taking over" garden areas, so it can be an excellent candidate to be planted in a container garden. It is easy to grow, the seeds are small, and it isn't easy to germinate. Therefore, use root cuttings and stem cuttings to start your new mint plants. Mint is considered a vigorous grower that is hardy in USDA Hardiness Zones 3-8, which includes Wyoming.

Peppermint is an aromatic herb that is not only delicious but has many practical uses for your health and home as well. Peppermint is a signature flavor that screams wintertime!

(Sources: www.almanac.com; www.britannica.com; planthardiness.ars.usda.gov)

<https://www.britannica.com/plant/peppermint>

<https://www.almanac.com/benefits-of-mint-plant>

<https://planthardiness.ars.usda.gov/PHZMWeb/#>