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## Wildflower Spot – July 2011

### John Clayton Chapter of the Virginia Native Plant Society

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## HORSEMINT

*Monarda punctata*

By Helen Hamilton, *President of the John Clayton Chapter, VNPS*

This unusual native plant has head-like whorls of yellowish, purple-spotted, tubular flowers occurring in clusters along the stem to form an elongated spike, or from the leaf axils. Each whorl is surrounded with showy whitish, purple-tinged, leaf-like bracts at its base. The aromatic flowers attract butterflies. Leaves are lance-shaped with shallow teeth.

Provided with full sun in well-drained, sandy soil of average fertility, this plant blooms

profusely for several weeks in mid-summer. Because they grow about three feet tall, horsemint makes an excellent addition to the rear of a perennial border, either formal or wild.

Horsemint grows in coastal and central counties of Virginia in dry fields and along roadsides. The plant can be found from Vermont to southeast Minnesota and south to Florida and Texas.

Linnaeus named the genus *Monarda* in honor of a 16th century Spanish physician and botanist, Nicolas Bautista Monardes (1493-1588). Monardes never went to the Americas but was able to study medicinal plants in Spain because Spain controlled navigation and commerce from the New World.



The fresh leaves have been used medicinally as a tea. Historically, doctors used this mint for various illnesses. The oil is high in thymol and has been used as an antiseptic. Thymol was once commercially derived from thyme (*Thymus* species), but during World War I when commercial fields were destroyed in Europe, horsemint was grown in the U.S. as a substitute source of thymol. ❖

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**Photo:** Horsemint (*Monarda punctata*) taken by Phillip Merritt  
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