
Wildflower Spot – September 2007
John Clayton Chapter of the Virginia Native Plant Society

WILD BERGAMOT

Monarda fistulosa

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

Wild bergamot is easily recognized with clusters of dense heads of pink to lavender twolipped flowers, looking like ragged pompons. Growing in groups 2-3 feet tall, butterflies and hummingbirds feed constantly on the tubular flowers. The square stems and paired leaves, together with its flower characteristics, place this plant in the mint family. A close relative Beebalm (*Monarda didyma*) produces stunning true red flowers, but in Virginia it is native only to counties in the mountain region.

Easy to grow in the home garden, Wild bergamot thrives in a wide range of soils, from acid to lime, from rich to poor, from sand to clay. Found in upland woods, thickets and prairies across much of Canada and [from British Columbia] and south to Georgia and Arizona. It occurs in scattered counties across Virginia, mostly in mountainous areas. Bearing profuse flowers at the ends of tall stems, this is a striking plant for the perennial border, stunning in masses with black-eyed Susans and blazing star. As a meadow plant, full sun is preferable. Wild bergamot begins flowering in June and continues through September.



The aromatic leaves have been used to make mint tea, and oil from the leaves was formerly used to treat respiratory ailments. Linnaeus named the genus *Monarda* in honor of a 16th century Spanish physician and botanist, Nicolas Bautista Monardes. The species name "*fistulosa*" may refer to the tubular flowers. ["fistulose" is usually used in reference to hollow stems.] ❖



Photo: Wild Bergamot (*Monarda fistulosa*) by Helen Hamilton
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