
Wildflower Spot – July 2020

John Clayton Chapter of the Virginia Native Plant Society

MOUNTAIN-MINTS

Pycnanthemum tenuifolium/muticum

By Helen Hamilton, *Past-president of the John Clayton Chapter, VNPS*

What's not to like about a native perennial that is attractive to bees and butterflies, does not spread aggressively, and is deer-resistant? Mountain-mints bloom from June through August, with small white flowers rich in nectar that is food for many kinds of insects – butterflies, skippers, bees, beetles, flies and especially wasps. Flowers are tightly clustered on the ends of stems and their structure allows wasps and other short-tongued insects to feed easily.

Two species are common in our area. With very narrow leaves, Slender Mountain-mint (*P. tenuifolium*) has a delicate, somewhat airy appearance. This native perennial plant grows 1-3 feet tall, branching frequently to create a bushy effect. The leaves are up to 3 inches long and ¼ inch across. Each leaf is hairless, with a prominent central vein and smooth margins. Small white to lavender 2-lipped flowers are in dense clusters in the leaf axils or at the ends of slender, hairless stems.

The dark green leaves of Clustered Mountain-mint (*P. muticum*) are not thin, up to 2 inches wide, and have a strong spearmint aroma when crushed. The flowers are similar the 2-lipped tubular flowers, each up to ½ inch wide, are in dense flat-topped clusters at the ends of the stems. Each cluster has a pair of showy silvery leaf-like bracts at the base. The entire plant looks like it has been dusted with powdery snow. Massed in groups, the effect is stunning – a clustered plant with tiny pinkish flowers buzzing with insects, surrounded by dark green leaves and snowy bracts.

Both Mountain-mints are easy to grow in the home garden, in full sun or part shade. Slender Mountain-mint prefers soils that are somewhat drier than the bogs and wet meadows where Clustered Mountain-mint occurs.

The flowers have no scent, but the leaves have a minty odor and taste. Deer usually don't browse on Mountain-mints because of the minty taste; the foliage may contain anti-bacterial substances that disrupt their digestive process. The tiny seeds are disseminated by wind – they are too small to be of much interest to birds.

The common name “Mountain-mint” does not refer to a preference for the mountainous regions. Both Mountain-mints are found in most counties of Virginia, and range over the eastern and central regions of the U.S. and Canada. The genus name derives from the Greek *pycnos* for “dense” and *antheon*, meaning “flower” and aptly describes the crowded flower clusters. The species name *tenuifolium* is derived from the Latin *tenuis*, meaning “thin,” a reference to the narrow leaves. ❖



Photo: Mountain Mint (*Pycnanthemum tenuifolium*) taken by Helen Hamilton in York River State Park

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