

Growing and Cooking with Mint

by Glenn Andrews

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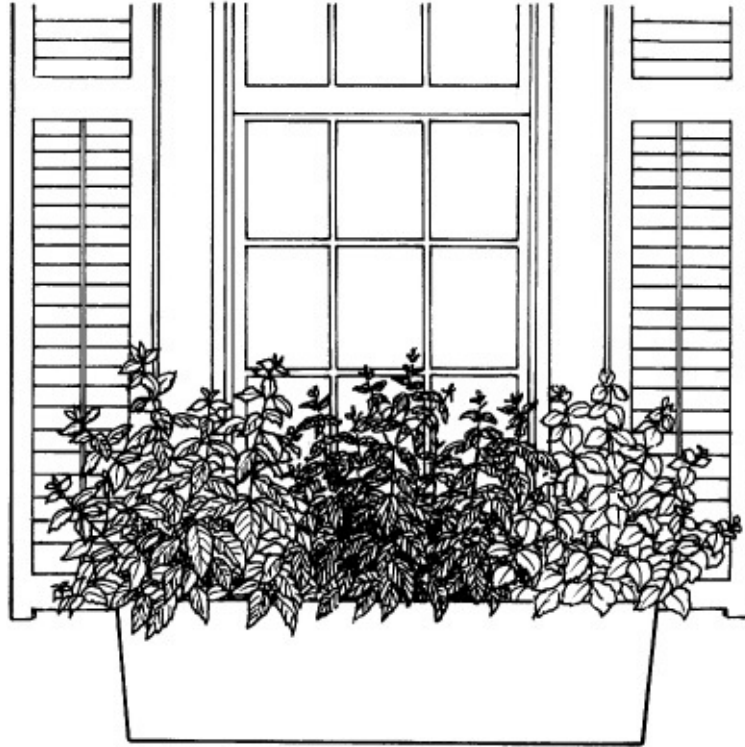
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You'll find dozens of uses for the wonderful mints — from using their flavors in cooking to enjoying them as live plants, both indoors and out.

Mint Lore

Mint is one of the great herbs, one it's hard to imagine getting along without. Throughout the centuries, mint has been used medicinally for indigestion — and as a “cure” for everything from dogbite to bad dispositions. Even today, we taste it (and probably feel its beneficial effect) in cough drops, antacids, mouthwashes, and a wide range of other products.

Before the advent of finished floors, it was customary to strew herbs on the dirt floors of houses. Just lying there, the herbs gave off fragrance, but when they were stepped on, a strong and lovely aroma came forth. Many different herbs were used for this purpose, but none more so, or to greater effect, than mint. It's rather a shame we've let this practice go. Imagine how pleasant it would be to come home from a hard day's work, open the door, walk in, and set off a cloud of the sweet scent of mint!

Today we do put mint in sweet-scented potpourris. You'll find a recipe on page 6.

But people in widely scattered parts of the world (Thailand, North Africa, England, and Greece, for instance) have long since discovered the best use of all for mint — as a special flavoring in cooking.

If you grew up in the United States, you may have encountered mint only in the form of the bright green, artificially colored mint jelly often served with lamb. Or perhaps your mother always stuck a sprig of mint into your iced tea. (My own mother always whacked the sprig across her wrist to release more of the mint's flavor first.) If so, then you've missed many starring roles for mint, and you're in for a tremendous treat. Try the recipes in this bulletin and discover the joys of mint.

But first, you need to know some of the varieties of mint available, and where and how to grow them. Also, it's important to know how to preserve some of your crop for year-round use, so you'll always have some on hand.

Then on to the recipes!

The Many Varieties of Mint

The Mint Family includes basil, summer savory, and marjoram, but the ones we're concerned with here are the actual *Mentha* varieties, including pennyroyal.

Mint is a hardy perennial, dying back in the winter in cold climates and emerging in the spring. It is best propagated by cuttings or plants, not seeds. (It will root readily in water, though not if your water is heavily treated with chemicals.) Some seed catalogs offer mint seed, but often with the warning that mints grown from seed are not uniform and that their flavor will range from spearmint to peppermint.

At the end of this bulletin, you'll find a listing of several sources for mint plants, including most of the unusual varieties, and one source for seeds.

The two most popular mints are spearmint and peppermint, but there are many other varieties. Perhaps you can find a friend who will be happy to give you plants or cuttings, or you may find just what you want at a local nursery. In either case, you might want to break off a leaf, scrunch it up in your fingers and smell it, then take a taste. You'll know right away whether you're going to like it. (I've been doing this for years and have never been reprimanded. But then, I've never been caught!) Here are some of the varieties that exist:

Spearmint (*Mentha spicata*). The old favorite of cooks around the world. If you can only have one mint, I strongly recommend that you choose either spearmint or applemint, which has a similar taste. This is not just a matter of personal taste; spearmint is milder than peppermint and seems to lend itself better to many sorts of dishes. Its leaves are larger, too, which comes in handy in cooking, and the plants thrive almost anywhere. The plant has bright green leaves, which are shaped like spearheads. It grows to 2 feet, sometimes higher.

An interesting variety is *Mentha spicata* 'Chewing gum,' which has a strong spearmint flavor and mahogany foliage, and the scent of chewing gum.



Spearmint



Peppermint

Peppermint (*Mentha x piperita*). This mint features purple stems with dark green leaves, and is great for tea and for medicinal uses. It does have one problem: it should be moved every 2 to 3 years. Some cooks find it a bit harsh for culinary use. This plant typically grows to 2 feet.

Applemint (*Mentha rotundifolia*). This is every Grandma's favorite mint. It has excellent flavor, but wilts quickly after picking. The light green leaves are somewhat woolly in appearance and the plant typically grows to 3 feet.

English applemint (*Mentha suaveolens*). This variety is easily grown (even more so than most mints), and doesn't need as much moisture as others. It is very good for all sorts of cooking and its light green foliage is good for making candied leaves. It grows to 2 feet in height.

Pineapplemint (*Mentha suaveolens* 'Variegata'). This variety has a pleasant aroma similar to a ripe pineapple, and is nice in iced tea. The plant's green leaves are edged with white, and it typically grows to 2 feet in height.

Orangemint (*Mentha x piperita* 'Citrata'). Also known as bergamot mint and Eau de Cologne mint, or Lavendar mint, this mint seems to vary in scent from plant to plant, hence the multiplicity of names. It is especially enjoyable in teas (hot or iced), punches, potpourris, and salads, and is the choice mint for Mint Juleps (see page 29). The plant has dark green leaves, and grows to 2 feet tall.



Orangemint

Chocolate mint (*Mentha x piperita* ‘Chocolate’). The aroma is as evocative of chocolate-covered mint patties as the name. Usually used in conjunction with sugar — in desserts and ices, the plant has dark green leaves and grows to 18 inches in height.

Variegated Scotch mint (*Mentha x gentilis* ‘Variegata’). This plant has a mild spearmint taste. Its appeal is in its coloring: striking gold and green variegated leaves. It grows to 1 foot tall.

Corsican mint (*Mentha requiennii*). This mint makes a superb and extremely aromatic ground cover, especially in moist shade, where many plants fail. It has tiny leaves, and the plant itself is extremely small — it grows to about 1 inch in height. This mint is not reliably hardy in cold climates.

Horsemint (*Mentha longifolia*). This is one of the wild mints. Its flavor and aroma are between spearmint and peppermint. The plant is covered with fine white hairs, and grows to 2 feet tall.

Native mint (*Mentha arvensis*). This plant is the original wild mint native to the northern reaches of North America. It is suitable for any mint use. This mint is easy to spot because its tiny lavender flowers don’t form on stalks, rather they grow in little circles around the stem just above the spot where each pair of leaves emerges. The plant grows to 2 feet.

Mint Potpourri

A potpourri of any sort will perfume the air and add its own sort of joy to your life. The ones you make from herbs and flowers you have grown yourself are especially effective as well as rewarding.

Add mint to any potpourri formula, or try this intensely mentha one (make sure that all the leaves are completely dry).

1 quart spearmint leaves

**1 quart leaves of another mint — orangemint, for instance,
or lavender mint — or some of each**

2 tablespoons powdered orrisroot (available at pharmacies)

1 tablespoon crushed dried lemon peel

1 tablespoon crushed dried orange peel

1 teaspoon ground Jamaican allspice

Mix everything together and store in a tightly closed container for 1 month before using.

English pennyroyal (*Mentha pulegium*). Another good ground cover, this mint spreads rapidly. It is famous as an insect repellent, because it smells somewhat like citronella. English pennyroyal is very low-growing and mat-like, but flower stalks grow to 18 inches in height. It cannot withstand frost, so for those who live in cold climates, this is one mint perhaps better grown from seed.

Mint Versus Fleas & Other Insects

Probably the best-known natural flea repellent is pennyroyal, a mint. But other mints work well, too. Clothes moths, for instance, are supposed to be averse to peppermint. Insects, including ants and mosquitoes, seem to hate the mint smell we love so well. Many people rub exposed parts of their skin with pennyroyal and say that it keeps all insects away; a legion of pet fanciers swear by it to keep fleas at bay.

With this in mind, you might want to create an insect-free picnic area by planting pennyroyal or a wild mint in some scenic spot. Can you imagine an ant-free picnic? It's certainly worth a try!



English Pennyroyal dog collar For a natural, homemade flea collar, take a piece of lightweight fabric about 5 inches wide and long enough to fit comfortably around your dog's neck. Fold it in half lengthwise, right sides together, and stitch on long edge. Turn right side out to form a tube. Stuff tube with dried pennyroyal. Stitch ends closed, catching in a small piece of elastic, as shown.

Growing Mint

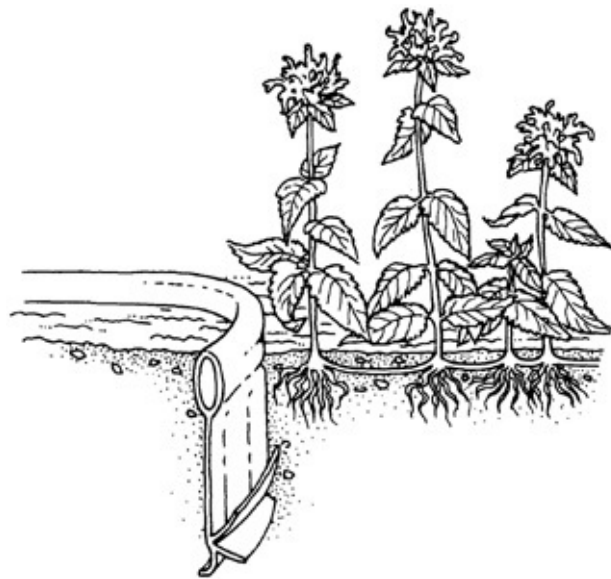
Whatever mint you choose, you now have to decide where to plant it. The old wisdom says to plant your mint directly under or next to an outside water faucet. This system really works beautifully, and tells you something about the nature of mint — it needs lots of water. But soggy, boggy soil won't do; mint needs good drainage.

Mint also thrives best with a little shade in the course of the day. Three hours of sun is perfect, but it's an amenable plant and will try to get along with somewhat more or less. In fact, commercial growers get good results planting mint in full sun.

Like most herbs, mint doesn't need a lot of fertilizer, although it does appreciate a little well-rotted compost twice a summer. Don't apply fresh manure as it could spread rust disease.

The main thing mint needs is a home of its own. It's a wanderer. Don't try to include it in a lovely little well-mannered herb garden, as it will take over. One preventative for this is to sink a 6-inch piece of metal edging to define where you want the mint to grow. (Some say to make the edging go down 18 inches.) Others will tell you to plant it in a bottomless bucket or flower pot. But it is simpler just to give mint its own spot of land, which you can then refer to as the "mint patch."

I've read that one way to make mint stay where you want it to be is to cut down through the roots with an edger, but in my experience, new sprouts will appear wherever you do this, as though you're offering the mint a challenge. One way or another, it's hard to imagine ever having a shortage of mint once your patch is established!



Keep mint from wandering by edging around your mint patch.

As the mint grows, snip off all buds before they have a chance to flower. And as you pick mint, make your cuts right above the spot where leaves come out of the stem. You'll usually find that two new sprigs will emerge from the spot where you removed one.

As Fall approaches, if you live where there will be frost, don't cut mint back more than half way.

Where I live, it is impossible to stake out space for a "mint patch," so necessity has driven me to what has turned out to be a wonderful alternative. Two years ago, I bought a small pot of applemint and planted it with some growing mix in a portable window box, approximately 7 × 17 × 5 inches in size, on my deck outdoors.



Trim mint just above the spot where leaves come out of the stem.

The mint flourished in its little environment and gave me a bumper crop, most of which I dried (see the next section for drying mint). I left the container out all winter, expecting to have the mint pop up again in the spring after its winter hiatus.

This part of the window box experiment was a big disappointment. True, I live in a cold part of the country (northwestern Massachusetts), but always before, my outdoor mint patches have sprung back to life after their long winter's nap. This time, though I watched and waited expectantly, nothing happened. The mint was dead. Evidently, the roots weren't protected enough by the narrow confines of the window box. (It may well be that I helped the demise of the mint by harvesting it too near the first frost and cutting it down too far.)

So the next summer I tried again with a fresh little plant. As before, the summer crop was sensational, but this time I took the window box in and put it on a window sill when summer ended, before the first frost.

By Christmas, I was discouraged again, as the mint seemed to die back. Luckily (or lazily), I didn't pull it out and throw it away. Instead, I kept watering it, mainly because it was sitting there on the window sill next to a window box full of some flourishing basil. Lo and behold, in January it suddenly came to life! By the middle of February, there was enough fresh mint to use in cooking. It only got an hour or so of sun a day, but that seemed to be enough. Also, I think it appreciated the fact that I keep my house quite cool.

The upshot is: with a portable container you can have fresh mint almost year 'round, solving another problem which has nagged me for years: in the Northeast, outdoor mint patches are never ready in time for the Kentucky Derby in early May. How, I ask you, can you give a Derby Day party without offering your guests a proper Mint Julep (see page 29) to have in hand while watching the race?

Medicinal Uses of Mint

The menthol cough drops that Americans consume in such quantity are, of course, made from mint. The same goes for many of the stomach-settlers. In other words, mint's medicinal uses are not just old wives' tales.

A recent scientific study has discovered that potassium helps reduce the threat of strokes and that 1 cup of peppermint tea contains 3500 milligrams of this essential mineral. Mint is

also high in vitamins C and A.

Here are some of the traditional ways to improve your health via mint. (I can't vouch for these, but my guess is they'd all work!)

- To ward off seasickness: Peppermint boiled in milk.
- As a breath-sweetener: Any sort of mint, chewed.
- For a mild stimulant: Tea of spearmint or peppermint.
- To calm your stomach: Peppermint tea (see page 28).
- To improve your memory: Crush, then sniff mint leaves.
- To cure insomnia: Fresh mint leaves laid on the forehead.
- To bring down a fever: Sponge with mint-infused alcohol.

Keeping Mint on Hand

Even with the portable window box trick, there's still a small period of each year when you have to do without fresh mint.

For cooking purposes, this shouldn't bother you too much, as long as you have preserved a good quantity of mint by drying or freezing it.

Before you can dry or freeze mint you need to harvest, which means large-scale mint-picking. This can be done two or three times throughout the summer, as long as you remember to remove the buds before they flower. It's best to harvest your mint crop in mid-morning on a sunny day. The early-morning dew will be gone, and the mint will be at the height of its vigor. As I mentioned before, don't cut the plants back more than halfway as fall approaches.

Next, most authorities will tell you to wash the mint, then carefully and quickly dry it — a tricky process. To me, this is totally unnecessary if you've grown your own mint and know it is uncontaminated by pesticides or weed killers. Do, however, brush it off to remove any dirt that may be clinging to the leaves.

Drying Mint

Drying is the age-old way of preserving all herbs, including mint. The old ways involve either setting the mint sprigs on trays to dry or gathering the stems into bundles, tying them together, and hanging them, heads down, to dry. This latter way is picturesque and pretty; herbs hanging from a rafter in an old kitchen add a great air of colonial thrift!

But neither of these ways of drying yields a superior product. Mint dried in these ways may mildew, it may lose much of its flavor, and its color may fade.

It's only recently been discovered that the perfect way to home-dry herbs is in the microwave oven. (I was glad to learn of something to do with mine aside from thawing frozen foods!) The system couldn't be simpler. Barring a microwave oven, a food dehydrator is also a great way to dry mint. There are many on the market now. They are easy to use and dry foods quickly without losing their flavor.

Microwave Mint

To dry mint in the microwave oven: Put a double layer of white paper towels on the floor of a microwave oven. On this spread out a handful or two of fresh mint, in one layer. Make sure you have removed any hard, woody stems; soft, new stems can be dried right along with the leaves. Do not cover.

Microwave on high for 4 minutes, and that's it!

You now have absolutely perfect dried mint! Store in an airtight bag or container in a dark place and it will give you many months of cooking pleasure.

Freezing Mint

Mint freezes fairly well, though it becomes limp and can't be used for a garnish the way fresh mint can. But it has all the flavor and color you could want and is great in many dishes, such as Mint Butter (page 18). Freezing mint is even easier than the almost-instant drying method described above.

To freeze mint, simply pack clean mint sprigs or leaves in airtight bags or freezer containers and put them in your freezer! (If you do feel you have to wash the mint first, be sure it's thoroughly dry before it goes into the freezer.)

Other Ways of Preserving Mint

The other ways of preserving mint give you mint products. First, there's Natural Mint Jelly, which you'll find on page 27. Then there's Mint Vinegar (page 24), a delightful way to give a fillip to many a winter dish. Not to be forgotten: Mint Potpourri (page 6), which will make your house smell heavenly. Finally, Crystallized Mint Leaves (page 30) last a long time (if kept airtight) and are truly dazzling when used to garnish a winter dessert.

Now you know a lot about mint and how to choose it, how to grow it, and how to preserve it. Now you're ready for some wonderful ways to use mint in every course of a meal.

Substituting Dried Mint for Fresh

As with any herb, fresh is better than dry. But dry mint is excellent and is called for in many Middle Eastern recipes. There's a simple rule of thumb: Use 1 part of dry mint for every 3 parts of fresh mint called for in a recipe.

In some situations (Minted Cheese Spread on page 14, for example) you need the look and texture of fresh greenery. So go ahead and substitute the dry mint for fresh — but add as much minced leaf lettuce, parsley, or spinach as the amount of mint called for.

Cooking with Mint

In these recipes, I have not specified which mint to use. Any mint is a great mint! Personally, I tend to be partial to spearmint, applemint, and orangemint. But use what you prefer.

MINTED CHEESE SPREAD

You've had commercial herb-and-garlic cheese, I'm sure, and perhaps black pepper cheese. They're popular and good, but this one's better.

8 ounces cream cheese

1 tablespoon milk

1 tablespoon white wine

½ teaspoon freshly ground black pepper

1 medium garlic clove, finely minced

1 tablespoon minced fresh mint (or 1 teaspoon dry mint and 1 tablespoon minced parsley, lettuce, or spinach)

½ tablespoon minced chives (optional)

Combine all the ingredients (a food processor works well for this, but it can also be done with a fork). Chill, covered, for several hours. Serve with toast squares or crackers. It will keep refrigerated and covered for up to a couple of weeks.

MAKES ABOUT 1 CUP

ZUCCHINI-MINT SOUP

This is a terrific, fresh-tasting soup. Needless to say, it can be made with any other summer squash — it just won't be as green.

2 tablespoons butter or margarine

2 large onions, minced

6 zucchini, about 4 inches long, thinly sliced

4 cups chicken broth

¼ cup minced mint

Salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste

Melt the butter in a medium-sized saucepan and sauté the onions over medium heat until they're nicely limp. Add the squash, stir well, then add the chicken broth. Cover and simmer until the squash is tender — say 15 minutes. Season to taste.

Now purée the soup by running it in a food processor or blender or through a food mill. Then stir in the mint. Serve now or chill first, if you prefer a cold soup. (But if you do serve it cold, check the seasoning before serving.)

SERVES 4

COLD CUCUMBER-MINT SOUP

The old phrase “cool as a cucumber” should perhaps be changed to “Cool as Cucumber-Mint Soup.” What a treat to have some of this in your refrigerator when the hottest days of summer

threaten to wilt you!

2 tablespoons butter or margarine

3 medium-sized cucumbers, peeled and thinly sliced

1 medium onion, thinly sliced

3 cups chicken broth, divided

1/3 cup minced mint

1 cup cream, milk, sour cream, or yogurt Salt and white pepper (freshly ground if possible) to taste

Melt the butter in a medium-sized saucepan, and cook the cucumber and onion slices until they are limp and somewhat translucent. Add 1 cup of the chicken broth and run in a food processor or blender or through a food mill.

Add the remaining 2 cups of broth, then chill. When cold, add the mint and 1 cup of whichever dairy product you choose. Season to taste.

SERVES

BAKED PORTUGUESE MINTED BREAD SOUP

Some soups are thin. Others are more solid. This one's really solid! And really delicious, too. Served with a salad, it makes a perfect lunch or light supper.

French onion soup crocks can be used instead of a casserole.

8 slices bread

4 cups beef broth

2 tablespoons butter or margarine

2 tablespoons minced fresh mint or 2 teaspoons dried mint

2 teaspoons fresh thyme, stripped from its stems or 1/2 teaspoon dried

2 teaspoons minced fresh tarragon or 1/2 teaspoon dried

1 bay leaf

Freshly ground black pepper

Toast the bread, remove the crusts, and make crumbs by tearing the slices into fairly small pieces and running them in a food processor or blender.

Combine the bread crumbs with all the other ingredients in a large saucepan. Bring to a boil, then turn the heat off, cover the pan, and let it sit for 5 minutes.

Now remove the bay leaf and pour the soup into a fairly large casserole dish. Bake at 350°F. for 30 minutes, or until the top is brown and crusty.

SERVES 4 TO

PROVENÇAL TOMATOES WITH MUSTARD AND MINT

Made with home-grown summer tomatoes and fresh mint, this is a dish to swoon for. But in mid-winter, this treatment will do more for the pitiful shipped-in store tomatoes than anything I know.

4 medium-large tomatoes

1 tablespoon Dijon-style mustard

Freshly ground black pepper

¾ cup soft bread crumbs

1½ tablespoons minced fresh mint (or use 1 heaping teaspoon dried mint plus 1½ tablespoons minced parsley, lettuce, or spinach)

4 teaspoons olive oil

Slice the tomatoes in half across their middles. Turn the halves upside down and squeeze out the seeds. Place the tomatoes, cut side up, in a greased baking dish and spread the cut surface of each with some of the mustard. Grind on some black pepper.

Now combine the bread crumbs with the mint and pat some onto each tomato half. Sprinkle on the olive oil.

Bake at 350°F for 20 minutes.

SERVES 4 TO

POTATOES WITH GARLIC AND MINT

This is one of the most tempting of all potato dishes, and well illustrates garlic's affinity for mint. I'm giving you two versions — one to be made in a microwave oven, one in a conventional oven — since the microwave way does seem to imbue every fiber of the potatoes with the other flavors. (And yet not everyone owns one of these space-age marvels.)

1½ pounds small potatoes (if you can find Yukon Gold or other yellow potatoes, they're especially pretty here)

2 teaspoons minced garlic

¼ cup olive oil

¼ cup minced mint

Salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste

Conventional oven: Poke holes in the potatoes with a fork, then bake at 400°F. for 1 hour. Now cut them up into convenient-size pieces and toss with the other ingredients.

Microwave oven: Cut the potatoes into small pieces. Put them into a microwave-safe dish with all the other ingredients except the mint. Cook, covered for 10 minutes on high (or for 15 minutes in a low-power oven). Stir in the mint.

SERVES 4 TO

MARINATED LAMB CHOPS WITH MINT BUTTER

When I want a real treat, I often turn to these chops.

4 lamb chops (thick loin chops if you're feeling flush, otherwise shoulder chops)

Salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste

3 tablespoons olive oil

1 tablespoon minced mint leaves

Sprinkle the lamb chops on both sides with salt and quite a bit of freshly ground black pepper, then sprinkle on the olive oil and the mint leaves. Marinate the chops for at least an hour at room temperature, turning them over several times. Marinating them for 2-6 or more hours will impart more flavor to the meat.

Meanwhile, make the mint butter (see below).

Broil the chops over fairly hot coals or on a rack in a hot broiler until brown on both sides. Serve with a little of the mint butter on top of each chop.

SERVES

MINT BUTTER

This herb butter is especially good on lamb chops, but it's also great added to any vegetable just before serving. It can be made in larger quantities and kept refrigerated or frozen until you need it.

3 tablespoons unsalted butter, at room temperature

2 tablespoons minced mint

2 teaspoons minced chives (optional)

1 teaspoon fresh lemon juice

Salt and freshly ground black pepper (optional)

Combine all the ingredients in the order given. Chill until needed.

MAKES ABOUT 4 TABLESPOONS

HONEY-GLAZED CARROTS WITH MINT

Try these with your Thanksgiving turkey — or to add a touch of bright color and a lot of fantastic taste to any meal.

1 pound carrots, peeled only if they're old

3 tablespoons butter or margarine

3 tablespoons honey

2 tablespoons minced mint

Slice the carrots fairly thinly on the diagonal, so you have long oval pieces. Put into a medium-sized saucepan with enough water to cover and boil gently, covered, for 10 to 15 minutes or until barely tender. Drain.

Add the butter or margarine and the honey to the saucepan, and cook and stir over medium heat, uncovered, until the carrots are glazed — just a few minutes. Add the mint and cook and stir for 2 minutes more.

SERVES

NEWLY MINTED PEAS

Peas and mint have an affinity for each other. This lovely dish is at its best (as are all pea

dishes) made in the spring with home-grown peas fresh from the garden. On the other hand, it can be one of the best ways to give a fresh taste to frozen peas.

1½ cups shelled small fresh peas or frozen peas, not thawed

⅓ cup chicken broth

4 tablespoons butter or margarine

2 teaspoons sugar

1 tablespoon minced fresh mint, or 1 teaspoon dried mint plus 1 tablespoon minced parsley, lettuce, or spinach

Combine all the ingredients in a saucepan. Stir over high heat for 1 minute, then turn the heat down, cover the pan and simmer until tender — 10 minutes or so for very small fresh peas, more for older ones, less if the peas are frozen.

SERVES

NEW POTATO SALAD WITH MINT

Any potato salad would benefit from the addition of a little mint, but salad made of new potatoes becomes quite spectacular when given this treatment.

This is one case where dried mint cannot be substituted for fresh.

1½ pounds new potatoes (particularly red ones), scrubbed but not peeled

½ teaspoon salt

½ cup mayonnaise

6 grinds of a pepper mill

¼ cup minced scallions

2 tablespoons minced red or green sweet peppers

¼ cup minced mint leaves

Boil the potatoes in water to cover for about 10 minutes, or until tender, but not falling apart. Drain, then cut them into halves if they're very small, quarters if they're a bit bigger.

Mix all the other ingredients in a medium-sized bowl, then stir in the potato pieces. Chill.

SERVES 4 TO

TABOULEH

Tabouleh (sometimes spelled Tabouli) is a Middle Eastern salad which has become very popular in this country.

Why? Well — it's unusual, and that's a plus to many people. It's also good for you, and it can be — should be — made ahead. But most important of all, it's an excellent dish!

Don't let only 1 cup of wheat make you think this is a small portion — the wheat expands considerably as it soaks.

1 cup cracked wheat (also known as bulghur or bulghur wheat)

3 cups water

3 tablespoons minced fresh mint

3 tablespoons minced parsley

3 tablespoons minced scallions

3 tablespoons olive oil

3 tablespoons freshly squeezed lemon juice

Salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste

Romaine or other crisp lettuce

Soak the wheat in the water for 1 hour, then squeeze out all the water you can and spread the wheat out onto paper towels or a cloth to dry for 20 minutes.

Now put the wheat in a dry bowl and mix in all the other ingredients. Serve on romaine or other lettuce leaves.

Garnish, if you wish, with bits of cucumber and tomato, but don't mix them in, since their juices will dilute the salad's flavor.

SERVES

MINT VINAIGRETTE

Here's a good way to perk up any salad by adding a taste of summer.

¾ cup olive oil, preferably "extra virgin"

¼ cup mild wine vinegar

1 pinch dry mustard

2 teaspoons water (that's a secret ingredient)

1 clove garlic, pressed

Mint — 1 teaspoon dry or 1 tablespoon fresh, minced

Salt and freshly ground pepper to taste

Combine all the ingredients in a screwtop jar and shake well just before serving. (Keep refrigerated, but remove from the cold about 20 minutes before you're ready to serve.)

MAKES ABOUT 1 C

BEER AND MINT BREAD

This is a marvelous quick bread, moist, tasty, and unusual. It's best served right after it's made, and doesn't keep too well. But that's all right; there's never any left anyway.

You can use any sort of beer, so go by your own tastes and what you want to serve the bread with. Perhaps a lager when you'll be using the bread with a hearty stew, a dark beer to go with cheese, etc.

3 cups self-rising flour

3 tablespoons sugar

¼ cup minced mint (or 1¼ tablespoons dry mint)

12 ounces beer

¼ pound melted butter or margarine

Combine the flour, sugar, and mint, then stir in the beer. Put batter into a greased 5-cup loaf pan, then pour on the melted butter or margarine. Bake at 350°F for 1 hour.

MAKES 1 SMALL LOAF

MINT-COTTAGE CHEESE BREAD

You may have tried “Dilly Bread,” an amazingly easy-to-make casserole yeast bread with cottage cheese and dill. This bread is the same idea, but using mint instead of dill and omitting the onion found in most dill breads. I’m very fond of dill, and of Dilly Bread, but Mint-Cottage Cheese Bread makes a nice change every now and then. In fact, it’s a marvelous bread, without making any comparisons. (And, just as an aside, both breads are also good sources of protein and calcium.)

1 package dry yeast

¼ cup warm water

1 cup cottage cheese (any type you like)

2 tablespoons melted butter or margarine

1 egg

2 tablespoons honey

1 tablespoon dried mint

1 cup whole wheat flour

1½ cups unbleached flour

1 teaspoon salt

¼ teaspoon baking soda

Stir the yeast into the warm water in a large mixing bowl and let sit for 5 minutes or until foamy. Meanwhile, heat the cottage cheese cautiously, stirring, until lukewarm, then add the butter, egg, honey, and dried mint. Beat into the yeast mixture in the large bowl.

Now combine both flours with the salt and baking soda and add, about ⅓ cup at a time, to the cottage cheese mixture, beating well (preferably with a mixer) after each addition.

Alternate food processor method: Place unbleached flour, salt, and baking soda in processor bowl. Pulse briefly, then add the cottage cheese mixture. Run machine until batter is nicely combined, then add the whole wheat flour ¼ cup at a time, processing for about 5 seconds after each addition.

Spoon the batter into a well-greased 1½ quart casserole or soufflé dish. Cover. Leave in a warm place until doubled — about 45 minutes.

Bake in a preheated 350°F oven for 40 to 50 minutes, or until the edge of the loaf shrinks away from the pan and a toothpick or cake tester inserted in the center comes out clean. Let sit for 10 minutes, then remove to a wire rack to cool.

MAKES 1 ROUND LOAF

PIQUANT MINT SAUCE

When you hear “mint sauce,” you usually think of roast lamb. This sauce, though, is also good with ham or chicken or kebabs of any sort. (Try basting skewered chunks of zucchini with it as they broil.)

If you use the Natural Mint Jelly on page 27 to make it, the sauce will not be green. In that case, and if you have some available, it’s a good idea to use a few fresh mint leaves for garnish. These will give your guests a clue as to what they’ll be eating. (On the other hand, though, it’s fun to surprise people!)

2 tablespoons butter or margarine

¾ teaspoon cider vinegar

½ cup Natural Mint Jelly (page 27)

¼ teaspoon prepared mustard

A dash of cayenne

Melt the butter and stir in all the other ingredients. Heat gently, stirring, until the jelly has melted. That’s all! You can make it ahead and reheat when needed.

SERVES

MINT VINEGAR

A pattern to follow for herbal vinegars. You can use any fresh herb — dill, chervil, tarragon, chives — as well as mint. For small-leaved herbs such as thyme, use an extra sprig or two.

4 large sprigs fresh mint

2 cups white wine or champagne vinegar

Put the mint sprigs into a pint bottle and pour in the vinegar (or divide everything between 2 smaller bottles). Seal. Store for 2 to 3 weeks before using.

TRADITIONAL ENGLISH MINT SAUCE

You’ll find a similar product on the shelves of fancy grocery stores — but yours will be much better. Because of its high proportion of vinegar and sugar, both natural preservatives, this can be refrigerated and kept ready for use for weeks. I find it utterly mouth-watering, and can’t imagine serving a leg of lamb without it. It’s also handy as an addition to salad dressings and with boiled new potatoes.

⅔ cups cider vinegar

⅓ cup sugar

½ cup chopped mint leaves

Simply run the ingredients together in a food processor or blender and the sauce will be ready to use. Heat if you want, but it really doesn’t seem necessary.

MAKES ABOUT 1 C

MINT MARINADE AND BASTE FOR KEBABS

This recipe is particularly good on lamb kebabs, but it will also add spice to other meats,

poultry, and vegetables.

½ cup wine vinegar

½ cup chopped mint leaves

¼ cup minced onion

1 small clove garlic, minced or pressed

2 tablespoons salad oil

Salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste

Combine all the ingredients, then use to marinate meat for about 2 hours. Put meat onto skewers, then baste with the same mixture every time you turn the meat as it cooks.

For vegetables, skip the marinating. Just baste as they cook. Try chunks of eggplant, tomatoes, or summer squash, such as zucchini.

MAKES ABOUT 1 CUP

MINT SORBET

“Sorbet” is the fashionable version of sherbet. And mint is one of the most interesting of all sorbets. It’s nice served by itself or on fresh cut-up fruit for dessert, and serves well, too, as a “palate refresher” between courses at a heavy dinner. Try it under chocolate or hot fudge sauce for an amazing sundae.

The recipe can be doubled or tripled if you wish to make more.

3 cups water, divided

2 cups sugar

3 tablespoons freshly squeezed lemon juice

1 large bunch fresh mint, coarsely chopped

1–2 tablespoons green creme de menthe (optional)

Mint sprigs for garnish (optional — see below)

Put 2 cups of the water in a saucepan. Stir in the sugar and boil, stirring, until the sugar has dissolved. Set aside to cool.

Meanwhile, bring the remaining cup of water to a boil in another pan. Add the lemon juice and the mint and remove from the heat. When cool, strain into the pan containing the sugar-water syrup. Add the creme de menthe, if you’re using it. It will emphasize the mint flavor and also give the sorbet a greenness it would otherwise lack. If you don’t use it, do garnish the servings of sorbet with sprigs of mint. Chill thoroughly, then freeze in an ice cream maker, according to the manufacturer’s directions.

MAKES ABOUT 1½ PINTS

NATURAL MINT JELLY

The “natural” in the name of this jelly refers to the fact that it’s made without artificial coloring. Mint jelly you buy in stores is bright green, and jam-packed full of food coloring. Natural Mint Jelly is tan in color — and fabulous in taste. You can, if you wish, add green food coloring to your own mint jelly, but try to have the courage not to! The whole mint leaves in each

jar add a touch of greenness and tell the world what sort of jelly it is.

2 cups fresh mint, stems and all (try to use the younger sprigs), plus 8 to 12 large mint leaves

1²/₃ cups water, divided

1/3 cup cider vinegar

3½ cups sugar

½ bottle liquid pectin

Make an infusion by simmering the mint (but not the 8 to 12 mint leaves) in 1 cup of the water for 10 minutes. Strain into a fresh saucepan and add the rest of the water, the vinegar, and the sugar. Stir over medium-high heat until the sugar has dissolved and the mixture comes to a boil, then immediately add the liquid pectin. Bring back to a boil and remove from the heat. Put two or three of the reserved mint leaves in each of four freshly sterilized jelly glasses and pour in the jelly. Seal according to the directions which came with the jelly glasses. (I recommend the ones with two-piece metal caps — which are about all you can buy these days, anyway.)

MAKES ABOUT FOUR 8-OUNCE GLASSES OF JELLY

MINT TEA

All the mints make pleasant teas, but peppermint is the one that's best for stomach upsets.

1 cup chopped fresh mint leaves (or 1/3 cup dried)

2 cups boiling water

Add the mint to the water. Cover and steep for 5 minutes. Strain or not. Add a little lemon juice and sugar if you wish.

MAKES ABOUT 2 CUPS

SPICED MINT ICED TEA

As opposed to Mint Tea above, this is made with tea leaves plus mint — and spices. If you're a fan of iced tea (and who isn't), you'll love it. My father used to insist on having it every summer weekend afternoon. I can see us now, relaxed and happy, sitting on a flagstone terrace, iced tea glasses in hand, looking out at the fields and the lake.

The best way to make iced tea is the sunlight method. Expensive gadgets are available for this, but any glass jar will do the job nicely. Even the sunlight isn't totally necessary — it's the long steeping that does the job. (The main advantage to sun tea is that your tea will always be sparkling clear.)

1 tablespoon whole cloves

1 small cinnamon stick

2 quarts plus 1 cup water

½ cup tea leaves (your choice of variety) or 8 tea bags

¼ cup minced mint — plus mint sprigs

Lemon slices and sugar to taste (both optional)

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