

The buzz about bee balm

Monarda dydima is botanically named for the Spanish physician and botanist, Nicolas Bautista Monardes. Bee balm got its common name from its plant resins once used to relieve bee stings. The foliage, used by the Oswego Indians to make tea, is responsible for another of its common names – Oswego tea. Many gardeners call it bee balm because its nectar is a dietary delight of bees.

Bee balm grows barely more than a foot and upwards of 4 feet depending on the variety. Members of the mint family, they have square stems and leaves that smell like mint when bruised or crushed. Clusters of tubular flowers – in shades of pink, lavender, purple, and red – sit atop branched stems of coarse dark green leaves from mid to late summer.

Bee balm prefers to be planted in moist soil generously amended with organic matter in a spot with full sun to part shade. Planted in meadows, herb gardens, perennial borders and rain gardens, many varieties spread slowly by rhizomes to create charming colonies.

Older varieties were often plagued with powdery mildew, but today there are newer cultivars that, when given good air circulation, are extremely resistant to powdery mildew.

In addition to bees and other pollinators, bee balm invites hummingbirds and butterflies to the garden. The foliage, however, is not typically on the menu of rabbits or deer.

There are many varieties available at local garden centers. Here are a few mildew-resistant favorites.

Jacob Cline can easily reach 4 feet tall and 3 feet wide and shows off large, brilliant red flowers. Sandwich Jacob Cline bee balm between *Rudbeckia* ‘Viette’s Little Suzy’ and *Helianthus* ‘Lemon Queen’.

Purple Rooster grows 2 to 3 feet tall and 2 feet wide, sporting royal purple flowers most of the summer. Partner Purple Rooster bee balm with *Coreopsis* ‘Zagreb’ for a dynamic duo in the border.

Marshall’s Delight tops out at 3 feet tall and half as wide and boasts an abundance of hot pink blooms. Marshall’s Delight bee balm would be pretty planted in a group with *Achillea* ‘Moonshine’ and Russian sage.

Bubblegum Blast is a bit smaller – 2 feet tall and wide. The dark green foliage is a perfect backdrop for the frilly, pulsating pink flowers. This one stays where it is planted instead of spreading by rhizomes. Plant Bubblegum Blast bee balm in a container with blue ageratum, and orange calibrachoa. Dusty miller will keep the peace in this colorful riotous combo.

The bees, butterflies and hummingbirds think the Sugar Buzz™ series of bee balm are as sweet as candy. They grow from 12 to 24 inches tall and wide. Cherry Pops boasts cherry red flowers;

Grape Gumball shows off magenta-purple blooms; and Rockin' Raspberry rocks deep raspberry-pink blossoms. These varieties would be beautiful in sunny summer containers or toward the front of the perennial border.

Add the brilliant color and nectar-filled flowers of bee balm to your landscape this summer.

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