

DR. CHRISTOPHER'S
Herbal Legacy Newsletter

Mints

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From *The Green Pharmacy Guide to Healing Foods* by James A. Duke, PhD

By Dr. James A. Duke in *The Green Pharmacy Guide to Healing Foods*



To most people, “mint” means spearmint, peppermint, and fresh flavors that are associated with mouthwash or gum. Actually, there are hundreds of plants in the mint family – I have over 70 of them in my garden alone. Many of them are herbs that you’d recognize from your spice cabinet, such as basil, rosemary, thyme, oregano, lavender, sage, and lemon balm.

All these spices are known for the great flavor they impart to foods, but they can do much more for your health. Perhaps the most exciting breakthrough for the mint family is in the field of Alzheimer’s research.

Nutrient Nuts and Bolts: Members of the mint family, with their pleasant taste and aroma, are traditional stomach soothers, often in tea form. Many of them also contain central nervous system stimulants, which work rather like caffeine, so they are nice alternatives to traditional coffee or tea. These are the “uppers,” which include peppermint and spearmint. Some mints, such as lemon balm and lavender, are actually “downers,” with sedative effects. They’re also loaded with healthy-heart antioxidant compounds.

Perhaps the most exciting thing about the mint family is that most of its members contain at least a half dozen compounds that prevent the breakdown of acetylcholine. Acetylcholine is the neurotransmitter that carries messages from one synapse to another in your brain. When you’re deficient in this substance, the messages have a harder time getting through. Keeping those connections strong may help us stay mentally sharp as we grow older, and adding more of the mint family to your diet just may be one of the keys to doing that.

How to Get More: The mind is certainly not something to trifle with, which is why I make mint tea part of my everyday routine. By including a variety of mints (I often use rosemary, peppermint, and thyme), you can create an infusion with more than a dozen acetylcholine-preserving compounds.

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Making the Most of Them: People often ask me about my recipe for mint tea, and I have to admit that I don't really have one. I generally take a pinch of this and a pinch of that, pour boiling water over it, and let it steep for 10 to 20 minutes before drinking it. Over time, you'll find that you like some flavors more than others, in which case you can add more of the mints you enjoy and less of the ones you don't. I have been known to make mint teas (and liqueurs) with a mixture of all the dozens of good-tasting mints in my garden.

Other Eating Tips: Another option for getting the benefits of fresh mint is to chop the leaves and add them to salads. And, of course, many members of the mint family are ideal seasonings for a variety of healthful dishes. You can put them into a muslin bag and steep them in your bath, since most of the acetylcholine-sparing compounds are transdermal, meaning they will go through the skin.

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