

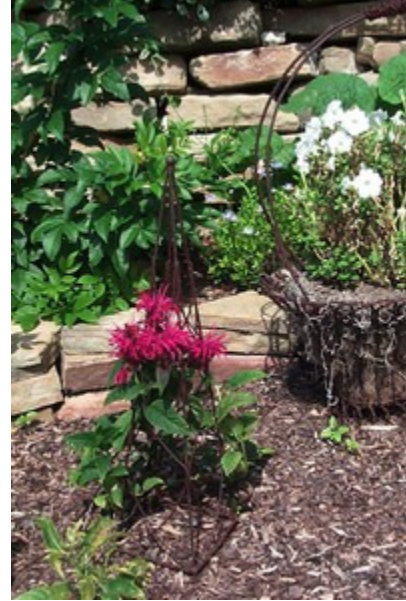
# OSWEGO TEA, BEE BALM, OR MONARDA

Common Names: Oswego tea, monarda, bee balm, bergamot

Botanical name: *Monarda*

Family: *Lamiaceae*

Few plants have Native American names. One of the exceptions is Oswego Tea named by the Indians who lived near the Oswego River, which means “pouring-out place.” The Indians taught early settlers the benefits of the monarda including making tea from the leaves. After the Boston Tea Party settlers drank Oswego Tea as a substitute for imported tea. Europeans often named American plants and animals with European names but after the Declaration of Independence was signed Americans were eager to break all dominating ties with England and animals and plants were named for American explorers and botanists though the names were still Latinized. It is interesting to note that few Native American names were ever used.



The monarda’s scent is like that of oil of bergamot, one of the ingredients in Earl Grey tea. Earl Grey was on a diplomatic mission to China and had a special tea mixed for him with a secret recipe that he gave to Jackson of Piccadilly in 1830. The oil of bergamot comes from a kind of citrus called after Bergamo in Italy.

The name bee balm comes from the fact that bees are attracted to this plant. The long flower is harder for bees to get nectar from but perfect for hummingbirds. Because hummingbirds are not found in Europe, the new settlers were fascinated with this bird and planted as many plants as they could find to attract them. Peter Kalm, Swiss naturalist sent to America in 1748, said during his exploration that, “an inhabitant of the country is sure to have a number of these beautiful and agreeable little birds before his window all summer long, if he takes care to plant a bed with all sorts of fine flowers under them.”

“Monarda” is after the Spanish physician and plant collector of the 1560s who was interested in medicinal plants from the New World. He said, “The corporal health is more excellent, and necessarie then the temporall goodes,” and he studied new plants hoping to find new cures for his patients. The *Monarda fistulosa* commonly called “wild bergamot” get its name from the Latin *fistulosus* (hollow), because of the long pipe-shaped flowers. No matter which name you choose, as a gardener, one can’t go wrong with this plant for hummingbirds and people’s enjoyment. Kalm also said, “It is indeed a diverting spectacle to see these little active creatures flying about the flowers like bees.”

*100 Flowers and How They got Their Names*

by Diana Wells