

# 75 EXCEPTIONAL HERBS FOR YOUR GARDEN



BY JACK STAUB

ILLUSTRATIONS BY ELLEN BUCHERT

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FOR YOUR GARDEN



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# 75 Exceptional Herbs

Jack Staub



**GIBBS SMITH**

TO ENRICH AND INSPIRE HUMANKIND

75 EXCEPTIONAL HERBS

Digital Edition v1.0

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*For all our darlings whose  
gifts were lost too soon—  
would any of these  
could have saved you for us*

# Introduction

*“Happy the age, to which we moderns give  
The name of ‘golden,’ when men chose to live  
On woodland fruits; and for their medicines took  
Herbs from the field, and simples from the brook.”*

—Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, Lib. XV

This has been a fascinating journey for me. Although I have probably cultured at least half of the herbs I offer to you in this volume, and have surely sought the comforting warmth of chamomile or lemon balm tea on a blustery day, chewed a sprig of parsley for refreshment, and noted the dynamic nutritive value of dandelions and such, my herbal acquaintance has mainly been in a culinary vein and, therefore, my medicinal knowledge sadly lacking. As a result, the multiple historic remedial applications to which most of these herbs have been subject have been a revelation to me, even those subsequently disproved by modern medicine, but particularly those whose ancient herbal employments have managed to retain their luster in the bright light of contemporary scrutiny.

It is entirely appealing to me to imagine a world in which there were no drugstores or pill manufacturers, so that it was to nature’s pharmacy one was compelled to apply and, like the early herbalists, open one’s eyes to experimentation, observation, and, ultimately, knowledge: pounding roots into poultices, distilling tinctures and decoctions from leaves and blossoms, brewing infusions, hanging fragrant boughs from doorways, strewing floors. Certainly there were many maladies that, in the end, would not be eased or cured by such treatments but, for all those, there were countless that could be—and still can be. A second joy in the composition of this volume was the identification of plants, growing probably not a hundred yards from my doorstep, which I have haphazardly noted and ignored as weedy presences during my years amongst our native Pennsylvania flora. They were and are available for numerous herbal and culinary tasks and, finally, I have the knowledge to avail myself of them.

Although I have generally eschewed any historically lauded herbs that lack modern application entirely, as mentioned, I have included a good number whose historic employments have been temporarily modified, simply because the history and legend surrounding them is so fascinating and they are still attractive in the garden. One thing I was surprised to learn but which, ultimately, made sense was the importance of moderation in employment: to wit, a substance that in small doses might eradicate parasites or cancer or the effects of animal venom might potentially exterminate you in larger ones—such is the case with herbal constituents as benign as our common parsley or garden fennel. Therefore, ingestion of the concentrated essential oils of any of the herbs I mention here should be monitored most carefully. Another point of interest was the incredible

antioxidant potential of some of these herbs, particularly those members of the mint clan containing carvacrol, thymol, and rosmarinic acid, or those plants rich in omega-3 fatty acids, these giving stunning new import to the idea of a comforting cup of herbal tea.

Occasionally in this book, I will stop to laud a plant but advise you to seek the herb (for instance, saffron) or the rendered oil at your local market or health-food store, as, while the plant itself may be comely in the garden, the processing of its herbal product is best left to someone else. On other occasions, I will counsel you to eschew planting the herb in question, as it is probably available in near weedy ubiquity in your local wild, and to seek it out there for its beneficial herbal applications. But for most, I will urge you to both plant and employ it and, if you have the space for it, heartily endorse the construction of your own herb garden (light sandy soil, full sun) to decorate and scent your precincts, spice up your cuisine, and cure what ails you. In any event, I hope you will enjoy this journey as much as I have, and I wish you both exceeding good health and excellent dining along the way.

Jack Staub  
Hortulus Farm  
Wrightstown, Pennsylvania

## 1. Angelica

*Archangelica officinalis (Angelica archangelica)* (Image 1)



Image 1: ANGELICA

*“Contagious aire ingendering pestilence  
Infects not those that in their mouths have ta’en  
Angelica, that happy counterbane...”*

—Guillaume de Salluste Du Bartas, *La Sepmaine*, 1578

Who couldn’t love an herb with the exalted sobriquet of “angel of the archangel?” A close, if supersized, relation to carrots, parsley, fennel, and celery in the greater *Umbelliferae* family, angelica, even before the dawn of Christianity, was regarded as a kind of cure-all “counterbane” against evil spells and enchantments. Although some botanists believe that angelica may be originally native to Syria, it has grown in frosty Iceland and Lapland since time immemorial, and an ancient Latvian ritual still involves an annual early summer procession in which Latvians

bear armfuls of angelica, voicing chants so venerable that nobody knows their meaning. Angelica was thought to bloom on May 8, the feast day of St. Michael (the “Archangel” who delivered the glad tidings of the holy birth to the Virgin), and became closely associated with the Annunciation. A spray of angelica worn on St. Michael’s Day is still thought to bestow near-universal healing and protection upon anyone who carries it.

Ultimately, angelica was held in such high religious esteem that it earned the additional appellation “Root of the Holy Ghost.” John Parkinson, in his *Paradisi in Sole Paradisus Terrestris* of 1629, among many other uses, recommends a decoction of angelica for “swounings, when the spirits are overcome and faint, or tremblings and passions of the heart,” and the dried, powdered root added to wine to “abate the rage of lust in young persons,” which must have been happy news and of significant use to medieval parents. Nicholas Culpeper, in his *Complete Herbal* of 1653, maintained angelica root would “wonderfully help ... the bitings of mad dogs and other venomous creatures,” and Christopher Sauer, America’s first herbalist, in his *Herbal Cures* of 1764, echoed far earlier sentiments when he noted, “When the winds of death are blowing, Angelica makes an excellent prophylactic against dangerous contagion...”

All this said, there is, unfortunately, little contemporary evidence to support these high-flown herbal claims, although angelica root still rates a mention in the Swiss, Austrian, and German pharmacopoeias, the Germans recommending it for indigestion and flatulence. German studies have also found that angelica root, either chewed or added as a powder to liquid or honey, relaxes the windpipe, and many modern herbals tout its effectiveness as a “stimulating expectorant,” both, therefore, commending it for application in the treatments of colds and coughs and the like. However, angelica is employed almost exclusively culinarily, the stems candied for their sweet licorice flavor and the young leaves employed in teas and salads. It is also still common in Iceland to eat the roots raw with butter: your call entirely.

Far better to understand the majesty and sensory allure of this heroic honey-fragranced plant, with its many fennel-like joints, toothy pinnate leaves, large globe-shaped white-to-green umbels in June or July, and often growing to 8 feet tall or more, making it an absolutely fantastic ornamental idea for the back of a mixed border. Confusingly, angelica is commonly listed as both a biennial and a perennial, although it is really neither. A plant can take more than 2 years to mature and will often die after flowering and seeding, and its cycle is totally disrupted by cutting the flower stalks. That said, angelica is an immensely hearty sort that will enthusiastically self-seed in many situations and will stand up to brutalizing temperatures and sketchy soil situations with equal aplomb. Therefore, scatter a few seeds at the back of your border and stand back for the show. In the kitchen, try the peeled, chopped stems sautéed with an equal amount of chopped onion as a lovely aromatic accompaniment to a nice bit of roast pork.

## 2. Anise

### *Pimpinella anisum*

“For the dropsie, fill an old cock with Polipody and Aniseeds and see the him well, and drink the broth.”

—William Langham, *The Garden of Health*, 1633

Anise, also known as aniseed, pimpinel, and sweet cumin, is a member, like angelica, of the parsley family and, like many umbellifers, is thought to be anciently native to Egypt, Greece, and parts of the southern Mediterranean. According to excavated texts, anise has been cultivated in Egypt since at least 2000B.C., the flavorful “seeds” having been employed as a diuretic and a digestive aid and to relieve toothache. Anise is mentioned in the seventeenth-century-B.C. works of Hammurabi, the sixth king of Babylon and author of the *Code of Hammurabi*, one of the first legal treatises in recorded history, and it is also known that Charlemagne adored this fragrant herb and planted it extensively in his gardens at Aquisgrana (now the spa town of Aachen in far western Germany) between 800 and 814A.D. Anise was known to British herbalists by the fourteenth century A.D., and, according to Mrs. Grieve, was being cultivated in Great Britain by the mid-sixteenth century, when it was also introduced into South America by the Spanish *conquistadores*. The *Pimpinella* in anise’s botanical name derives from the Latin *dipinella*, or “twice pinnate,” in reference to its leaf form, and because of its pungent, licorice sweetness, anise saw broad medicinal application across all cultures it touched, but particularly for respiratory and digestive ailments.

Hippocrates, father of modern medicine, recommended anise for respiratory issues in the fourth century B.C., and the Greek botanist Dioscorides wrote in the first century A.D. that anise “warms, dries, and dissolves” everything from an aching stomach and a sluggish digestion to excessive “winde” and a stinking breath. John Gerard recommended it in his *Herbal* of 1636 for “the yeoxing or hicket [hiccup]” as well as “strengthening the coitus,” and in 1763 Christopher Sauer maintained that it “removes chill from the chest” and “staves off coughing fits.” The “breath-sweetening” employment was also lauded by the British apothecary William Turner, who reported in 1551 that “anyse maketh the breth sweter and swageth payne.” Interestingly, unlike many early herbal claims, most of those attached to anise are surprisingly smack on the money. We know now that anise seeds contain healthy doses of vitamin B, calcium, iron, magnesium, and potassium, as well as athenols, which aid in digestion, calm intestinal spasms, and reduce gas. A tisane made of anise has also proven effective in calming both coughs and chronic asthma, and, of course, anise is the main flavoring ingredient in those potent nectars anisette, pastis, and absinthe, the last of which will pretty much calm anything into submission. (Image 2)

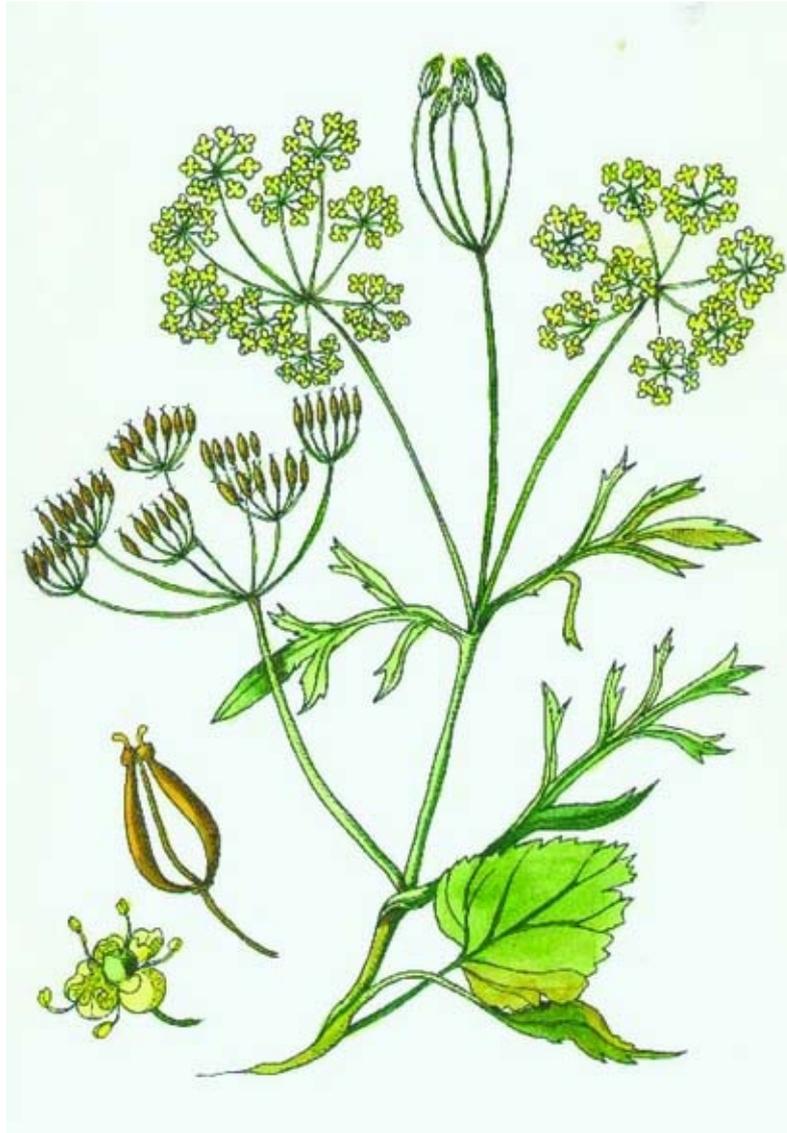


Image 2: ANISE

Anise is also a very pretty plant, with bright green coriander-like foliage and lovely diminutive white-and-yellow flowers held in feathery umbels, the whole of it growing to about 18 inches. Anise seeds are actually the fruit of the anise plant, which, when dried, are transformed into those familiar gray/brown, longitudinally ribbed seeds habitually positioned as a *digestif* by the cash register in your favorite Indian restaurant. Anise is an annual herb and needs a longish, hot, dry season to seed successfully, so, in cooler climes, it is advisable to start seeds in pots indoors in March and set them out when the soil is well warmed up. Otherwise, sow seed *in situ* in dry light soil and a sunny spot early in April, thinning the plants to about a foot apart. When threshed out, anise seeds are easily dried in trays and jarred for future use. In ancient Rome, wedding celebrations customarily ended with an anise-scented *Mustacae* cake to aid digestion (and, one assumes, “strengthen the coitus”), so why not create your own festivity by mixing a handful of anise seeds into your favorite pound cake recipe?

### 3. Basil

#### *Ocimum basilicum*

“With Basil then I will begin  
Whose scent is wondrous pleasing...”

—Michael Drayton, *Polyolbion*, 1612–1622

It is fascinating to me that a plant as benignly loveable as our common sweet basil (*Ocimum basilicum*) developed in such a swirl of historical controversy and opposing symbolism. Thought to have originated in India, at least in the form of holy basil (*Ocimum sanctum*), basil is also incredibly ancient to both Africa and Asia, although the compact bush basil (*Ocimum minimum*) is native to South America alone. Basil is thought to have entered Greece with the returning armies of Alexander the Great in about 350B.C., from whence it spread throughout the Mediterranean basin, ultimately reaching England and northern Europe in the early sixteenth century and the North American continent through the earliest Spanish explorers in the late sixteenth century. “Basil” seems to have two possible derivations: the first from the terrifying half-lizard, half-dragon *basilisk* of Greek mythology, famous for its fatally penetrating gaze (which seems to be where the negative connotations surrounding basil find their root), and the second from the Greek *basilikon*, meaning “royal” or “kingly,” in reference to basil’s regal scent and royal-purple flower wand. One ancient tale held that only a king was sufficiently highborn to harvest it, and then only with a sickle of gold.

In India, holy basil (*tulasi*) is regarded as sacred, being associated with the goddess Tulasi, who, after being tricked by Vishnu into betraying her husband and then killing herself, was worshipped ever after for her faithfulness, *tulasi* ultimately becoming a Hindu symbol of love, purity, and protection. Tradition still requires that the head of a Hindu believer be bathed in *tulasi* water before burial and a leaf placed on his breast to ensure safe conduct into the afterworld. In ancient Greece and Rome, however, it was bizarrely decided that basil would only grow well if you ranted and raved and shrieked wild curses while sowing the seed—one imagines this must have made spring planting in the southern Mediterranean a bona fide riot—and in France you can still hear the phrase *semer le basilic*, which translates to “sowing the basil,” meaning “to rant and rave.” Basil also developed a reputation for spontaneously generating scorpions: place a basil leaf under a flowerpot and presto—lift the pot to find one! This notion was further fortified when the seventeenth century French botanist Joseph Pitton de Tournefort reported, “A certain Gentleman of Siena was wont to take the powder of the dry herb [basil] and snuff it up his nose; but in a short time he turned mad and died; and his head being opened by surgeons, there was found a nest of scorpions in his brain.” Suffice it to say that, in many quarters, basil earned a reputation as a bearer of malice and lunacy, Chrysippus, the ancient Greek champion of stoic theory, reporting as early as the third century B.C.: “*Ocimum* exists only to drive men insane.”

Then consider basil's most famous literary role, which occurs in Giovanni Boccaccio's fourteenth-century tale of the tragic Isabella and Lorenzo, most famously retold by John Keats in his "Isabella; or, The Pot of Basil." In the story, Lorenzo is murdered by Isabella's brothers and the clearly unbalanced Isabella decides, as a keepsake, to remove his head, pop it into a flowerpot, "...and cover'd it with mould, and o'er it set Sweet Basil, which her tears kept ever wet." On the lighter amatory side, in old Romania, if a girl presented her beau with a sprig of basil, they were officially engaged, and Italian suitors traditionally signaled their love by courting with a sprig of basil engagingly tucked into their locks—in many parts of Italy, basil still goes by the charming alter ego *bacianicola*, or "Kiss-Me-Nicholas." In the end, what is one to think? Nicholas Culpeper had a very clear idea when, in 1653, he deemed basil "...the Herb which all Authors are together by the Ears about, and rail at one another like Lawyers."

What seems beyond general contemporary debate, however, is that basil in any of its lovely scented forms is an easy-to-grow annual and a seasonal staple in the kitchen. There are many fine types from which to choose, and I always plant at least two varieties to spice up the summer table, with enough leftover come fall to process into pesto cubes and freeze for winter consumption. Some of the varieties that may be of interest to you are the classic big-leaved 'Genovese' type; the spicy 'Thai' variety with a hint of cinnamon; the tiny-leaved 'Globe,' perfect for pot culture; the sprightly 'Lemon' or 'Lime' types, scented with a hint of *Citrus*; and the purple and ruffled varieties like 'Red Rubin,' 'Opal,' or 'Purple Ruffles,' which add a becoming flash of color to the garden, although I have habitually found them more finicky of culture than the others. In any case, sow some seeds indoors in a pot or two on a sunny windowsill in early spring, set out when the weather warms up (or transplant into the garden) in a nice, sunny position and keep clipped, hoard a bit of fresh mozzarella, and wait patiently for the first garden tomato and the culinarily *n'est plus ultra* of a classic caprese salad. (Image 3)

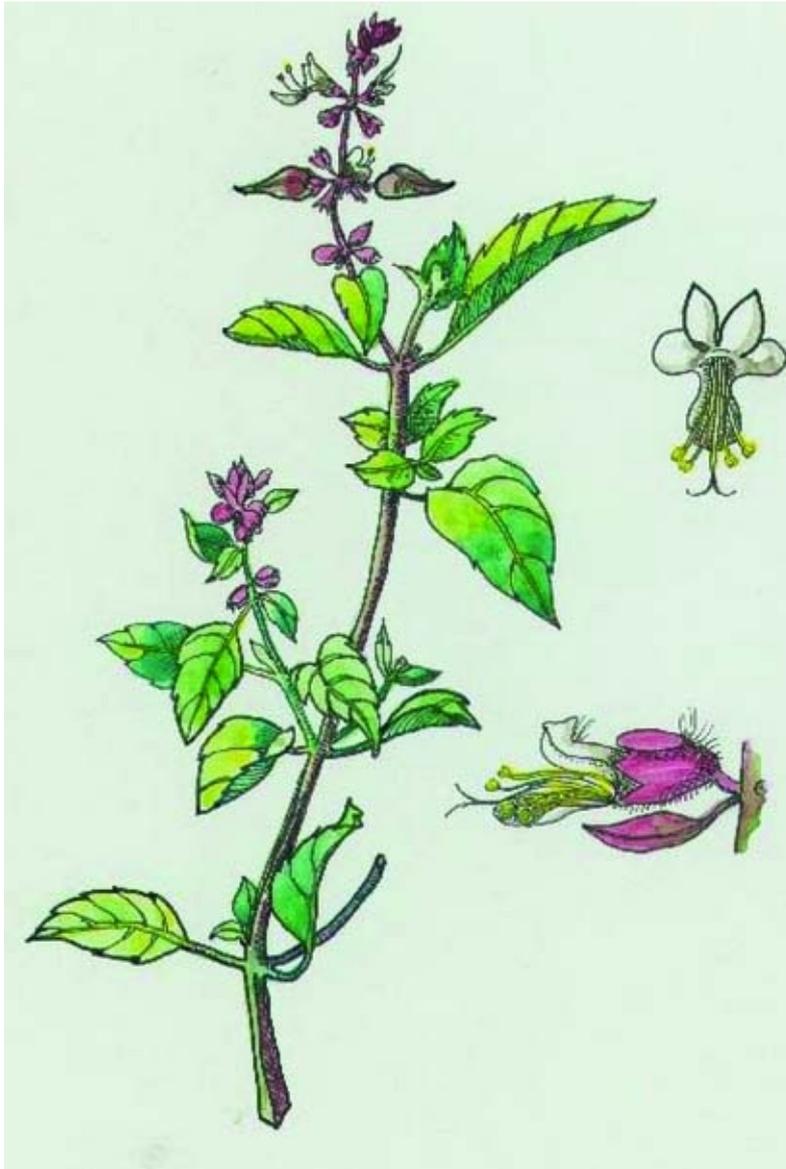


Image 3: BASIL

## 4. Bay Laurel

### *Laurus nobilis*

“...neither witch nor devil, thunder nor lightning, will hurt a man in the place where a bay-tree is.”

—Nicholas Culpeper, *Culpeper’s Complete Herbal*, 1653

The true culinary bay laurel ( *Laurus nobilis*), also known as sweet bay, is antiquely native to the Mediterranean, India, and Africa alone, although its cousin in the greater magnolia family, the California bay ( *Umbellularia californica*), also known as Oregon myrtle and pepperwood, is a close ringer but of a stronger savor. The ancient Greeks considered the *Laurus nobilis* both sacred and protective, and associated it with Apollo, who fashioned himself a crown of laurel to celebrate the slaying of Python, the tempestuous she-dragon of the underworld, upon whose former lair he built his Delphic temple and then roofed it with bay leaves to protect it from lightning. Similar celebratory wreaths were soon bestowed upon the winning athletes of the Pythian games at Delphi, ultimately graced the locks of the first Olympians, and were awarded to the greatest early poets—thus “poet laureate”—with our educationally esteemed *baccalaureate*, translating to “laurel berry.”

Additionally, the Pythia, the anciently revered Apollonian Oracle of Delphi, is known to have chewed bay leaves to intensify her oracular hallucinations, famously delivered in an ecstatic trance, and partially induced by what contemporary historians now believe were ethylene vapors rising from fissures in the ground around her. Greek mythology also gives to this savory herb its Greek name *Daphne*, in reference to the beautiful nymph daughter of the river god Peneios and earth goddess Ge, whom they transformed into a bay laurel in order that she might escape the prurient advances of Apollo. From that moment on, the bay laurel was associated with purity, purification, and protection, with Nicholas Culpeper jumping onto the “protective” bandwagon in his *Herbal* of 1653 and attributing all kinds of pharmacological feats to the bay laurel, including the berries being “very effectual against all poisons of venomous creatures” and the oil distilled from them helping with “palsies, convulsions, cramps, aches, trembling, and numbness of any part.” (Image 4)



Image 4: BAY LAUREL

In a notable herbal leap of faith, the thirteenth-century Arab physician Ibn Baitar believed sporting a bay leaf behind one's ear could prevent inebriation; however, contemporarily, because of the bay laurel's strong camphorous fragrance, it is most generally herborally employed as an aromatherapy oil in the treatment of such complaints as colds, flu, and muscle aches. It is, however, its famous culinary merits that remain truly commendable. Additionally, *Laurus nobilis* is a handsome tree with signature thick, shiny, elliptical leaves, small pale-yellow flowers, and oval green berries, which will ultimately turn black in fall. That said, here I am forced to admit that the bay laurel is hardy only to USDA zones 8 through 10 and is a somewhat delicate creature, craving protection from frost (a good, thick mulching of its notably shallow root system) and wind (a sunny sheltered location), and requiring rich, well-drained soil. Leaves are also easily scorched by cold winds and weather but without cause for real alarm: new shoots will resprout handily in spring.

However, as many ancient households habitually displayed a “protective” potted

bay beside the front door to ward off evil spirits, it is this employment I will recommend to the greatest number of you here. The bay laurel is a splendid candidate for pot culture and, loving a good spring pruning, may be kept to a manageable 6 to 8 feet tall as well as topiaried to suit your aesthetic whim. Just pot up in light well-drained soil, keep in a cool, dry, brightly lit spot indoors in winter, and move outdoors to a partially shaded locale in summer. Culinarily, what could be more entrancing than to harvest bay leaves off your very own tree (n.b.: leaves don't develop their full gusto until several weeks after picking and drying), tie them up with some fresh thyme and parsley, and add them to your favorite recipe in the flavorful guise of a classic *bouquet garni*. As Julia Child so aptly put it at the end of every television program: “*Bon appétit!*”

## 5. Bergamot (Scarlet)

### *Monarda didyma*

*Tea legend holds that, after the son of a Chinese mandarin was saved from drowning by an English soldier, Charles Grey, Prime Minister and Earl of the British Empire, was sent the gift of bergamot-scented tea, giving birth to the variety known forever after as “Earl Grey.”*

Certainly this is the story of a scent in search of a horticultural identity, as the term *bergamot* can actually refer to as many as three entirely different plant forms, linked only by the commonality of their strong lemony fragrance. What we might term “true” bergamot, although we will only touch on it here, is the bergamot orange ( *Citrus bergamia*). Clearly a member of the greater *Citrus* clan and a Far Eastern native introduced to the Ivory Coast along the spice roads in the twelfth or thirteenth century, it was ultimately delivered into the Mediterranean by the sixteenth century, where it is still cultivated for its essential oil, a key ingredient in perfumes. “Bergamot” derives from the city of Bergamo in the Lombardy region of Italy, where the oil was first offered for sale, and it was the Italian Christopher Columbus who first carried *Citrus bergamia* to the New World from the Canary Islands in the fifteenth century. However, as its fruit is not possessed of the culinary distinction awarded many of its relatives in the *Citrus* family, the bergamot orange was not received with much interest and is still largely grown only in southern Italy and on the Ivory Coast for the fragrance industry. It is a typically handsome tree with star-shaped white flowers, glossy leaves, and fruit resembling a pear-shaped cross between an orange and a grapefruit. Bergamot essential oil, the scent of which is basically citruslike, is also described by knowing noses as being “fruity” and “warm, spicy, and floral,” and is thought to be herbally effective in the treatment of depression, stress, and tension, as well as skin infections.

Another also-ran in the bergamot race is the American native orange mint ( *Mentha citrata*), noteworthy for its distinctive citrus-like fragrance and dark green purple-tinged leaves often blushed with red on the undersides, the entire plant having a distinct reddish purple aspect in spring. Two other potential contenders in this fresh-fragranced group are our wild bergamot or purple bee balm ( *Mentha fistulosa*), boasting lavender-hued flowers, and lemon bergamot, or lemon mint ( *Mentha citriodora*), with strongly lemon-scented leaves and edible purple-pink flowers growing in whorls up the flower stalk. However, it is to our own native bergamot ( *Monarda didyma*), also known as scarlet bee balm, gold Melissa, Indian nettle, and Oswego tea, to which we will turn our horticultural attention here. Scarlet bee balm is a beautiful perennial plant originally native to the Oswego, New York, area, notable for its blazing scarlet blossoms, and growing wild as far south as Georgia and as far west as Michigan. The plant’s botanical name *Monarda* comes to us from the Spanish botanist Nicholas Monardes, author of *Joyfull Newes out of the Newe Founde Worlde*, published in Seville in 1569 and