

Spotted bee balm



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Photo by Valorie Catania



Zebra swallowtail on Spotted bee balm

Photo by Peg Urban

Spotted bee balm (*Monarda punctata*), also known as Dotted horsemint, occurs south to Lee and Palm Beach counties in dry sandy soils that are often disturbed sites, such as roadsides, but also in open pine flatwoods. It is moderately tolerant of salt spray and can be found near the Gulf of Mexico and along the Indian River Lagoon.

It is a good cut flower for fresh or dry arrangements. Native American tribes used the plant to treat a wide variety of ailments. A weak tea can be made from the leaves.

Description

Monarda punctata is a perennial that dies back to the ground in winter in North Florida, but can retain some foliage farther south. It is multi-stemmed, almost bushy in form, with a 2- to 4-foot spread and height of about 3 feet. It can grow taller with irrigation and fertilizer. Its bright green, lance-shaped leaves make attractive foliage that is scented like oregano or thyme.

The whorls of flowers are creamy white to yellow with purple spots, and are underlain with even shadier bracts of lavender to cream. The whorls are repeated several times on a single stem. Because of its height and ability to spread easily by seed, it should be used toward the back of the landscape or in a place of its own.

Planting

As a perennial, Spotted bee balm will come back each year, and can be divided to produce more plants in the spring when there is new growth (plants

may be too woody for division in summer or fall). It readily reseeds itself in the garden. Plants should be 2 to 3 feet apart. Don't crowd plants; allow for good air circulation. Mulching may help to reduce the number of unwanted seedlings.

Seeds

Seeds are commercially available, or collect your own after flowering is complete and stems are drying. The seeds, or nutlets, are found in the calyx at the base of the flower. Look for almost-black seeds the size of poppy seeds as a sign of maturity. To collect, cut and shake stems into a container.

Butterflies and bees

Beebalm is known as perhaps the best Florida wildflower for attracting vast numbers of pollinators. From summer through fall, the showy blooms attract butterflies and a great variety of other insects not generally seen in any other season, including many native bee species. Hummingbirds also use it.

Plants

Four-inch to 1-gallon pots are available.

Care

Spotted bee balm is quite drought resistant, but during prolonged spring droughts, it may need a little extra water.

In early summer, plants can be cut back to reduce the height and still produce blooms. Trimming the bloom stalks near the end of flowering may also help

lengthen the bloom period. Spent stems are beneficial to insects and birds, but can be cut back to the emergent growth if desired for tidiness.

Spotted bee balm contains a chemical called thymol that helps to prevent fungal and bacterial diseases, so it is relatively trouble-free.

Site Conditions

Full sun will bring out the best flowering, but partial shade also works. Spotted bee balm does best in sandy, well-drained soils. Some moisture may be tolerated, but when more nutrients or water are available, the plant is likely to grow taller and even fall over, requiring extra trimming or staking. In wet conditions, it can be susceptible to fungal attacks.

Hardiness zones

Spotted bee balm is best suited for zones 8A–10A.



Gulf fritillaries on Spotted bee balm

This species grows throughout the Eastern U.S. and into Canada. For best landscape performance, be cautious and purchase plants that are Florida native ecotypes.



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