



## Mint: The Ubiquity of a Commercial Crop

Victoria Pickering

### Introduction

Some scents regularly appear in our daily lives and give us a sense of familiarity. Mint is one such example. Its strong scent, and taste, notable green leaves with serrated edges, and broad consumer use (such as toothpaste and chewing gum) are so common to us that they obscure the lesser-known fact that mint has a nuanced history of naming and identification.



⋮ Mentha aquatica, water mint



⋮ Mentha piperita,...

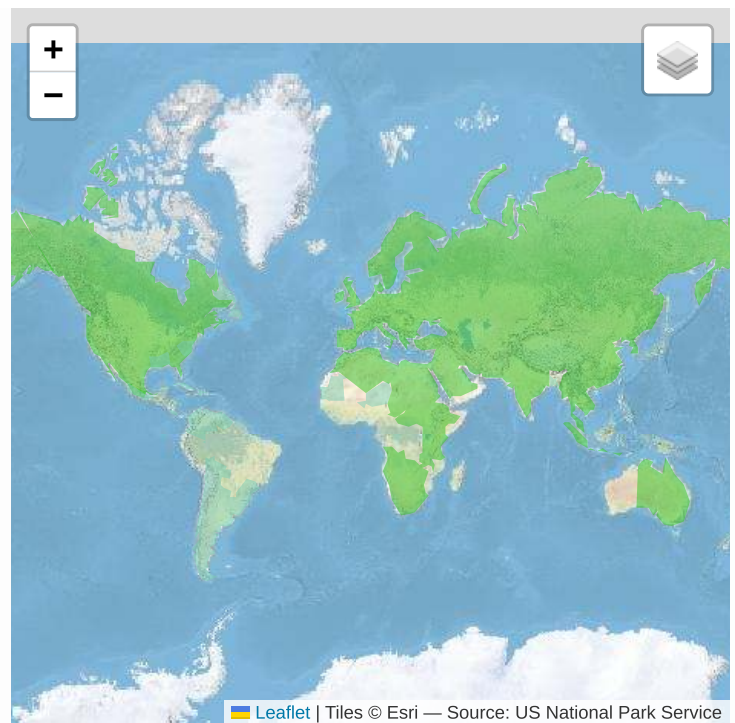


⋮ Mentha spicata, spearmint



⋮ Mentha pulegium, pennyroyal

Known as the genus *Mentha*, mint is part of the Lamiaceae family (formerly Labiatae). With its ability to naturally hybridize, it includes a wide variety of aromatic and perennial plants including at least 236 genera and over 7,000 species. Happily growing in wet and damp environments, species such as bergamot mint, spearmint, pennyroyal, and peppermint are found across parts of Africa, Asia, Europe, Australia, and North America. To consider how the generic mint plant has become so familiar in our everyday lives, we begin with an account of ancient Greek mythology.

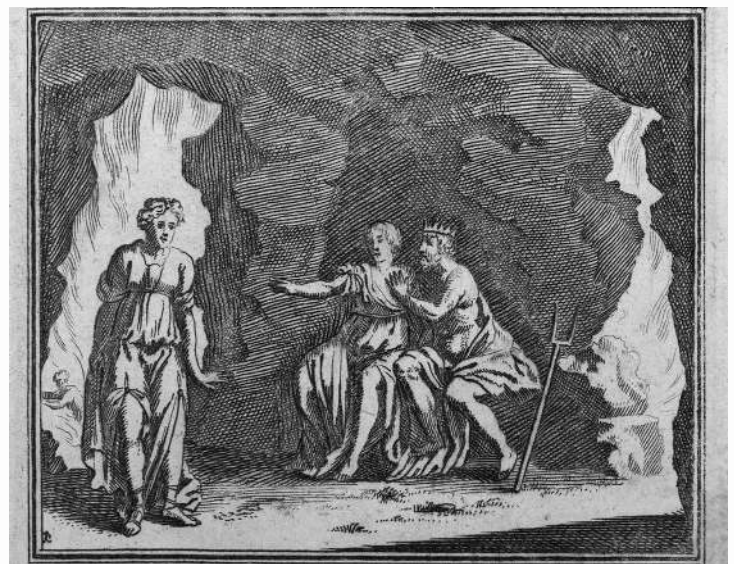


⋮ Distribution of *Mentha*



## Religion and Mythology

Mint and common hybrid species such as peppermint have long been held in high esteem. Biblical reference to mint in the [Book of Matthew](#) suggests that it was a plant considered of high value to be used as 'tithes by the Pharisees along with anise and cumin' (Matthew xxiii, 23). Reaching back to ancient Greece, where plants were entwined with mythology, Minthe was the Naiad—nymph—daughter of the underworld river Cocytus and loved by the god Hades. When Hades's wife, Persephone, discovered the affair, she was driven to transform Minthe into the plant of her name:

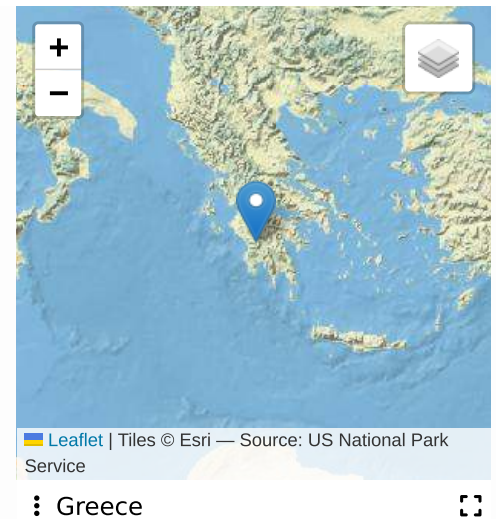


⋮ Minthe changed into a Mint Plant





*Near Pylos, towards the east, is a mountain named after Minthe, who, according to myth, became the concubine of Hades, was trampled under foot by Kore (Core) [Persephone], and was transformed into garden-mint, the plant which some call hedyosmos. Furthermore, near the mountain is a precinct sacred to Haides.*<sup>1</sup>



Others consider Minthe to have been turned into dust by Persephone, from which Hades caused the mint plant to grow forth, masking the smell of the dead and ensuring she was never forgotten. In fact, mint was used in funerary rites in Ancient Greece, not just for its sweet smell but to form part of the fermented drink Kykeon, which was believed to offer hope in the afterlife.<sup>2</sup>



⋮ Black-Figure "Pinax" (Plaque)



Mint's reputation for being used in a variety of ways, especially therapeutically, has been found in published material for centuries. The English botanist John Gerard (1654–1612) writes about what the Ancients believed in his *Generall historie of plantes* (published in 1633): the Greek physician Galen taught that it “stoppeth the casting up of bloody, being given with water and vinegar”; Pliny taught that when applied to the temples (in the form of a broth), mint could “take away the headache”; and Dioscorides speculated that it was possible for mint to [prevent women from becoming pregnant](#).



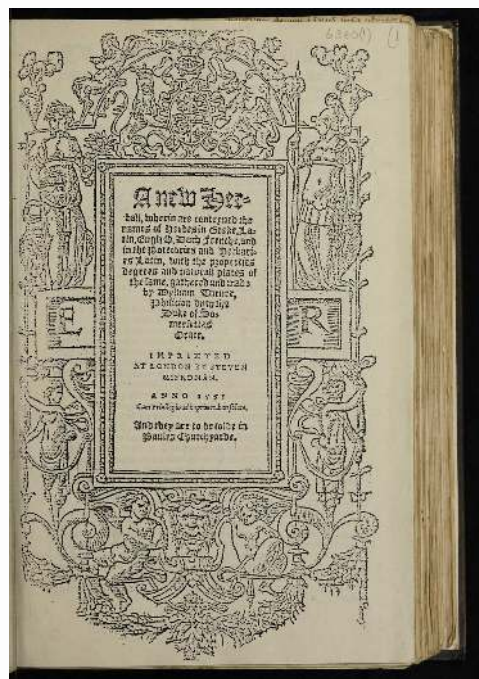
⋮ Drawing from a...



⋮ Clear glass shop rou... ⋮

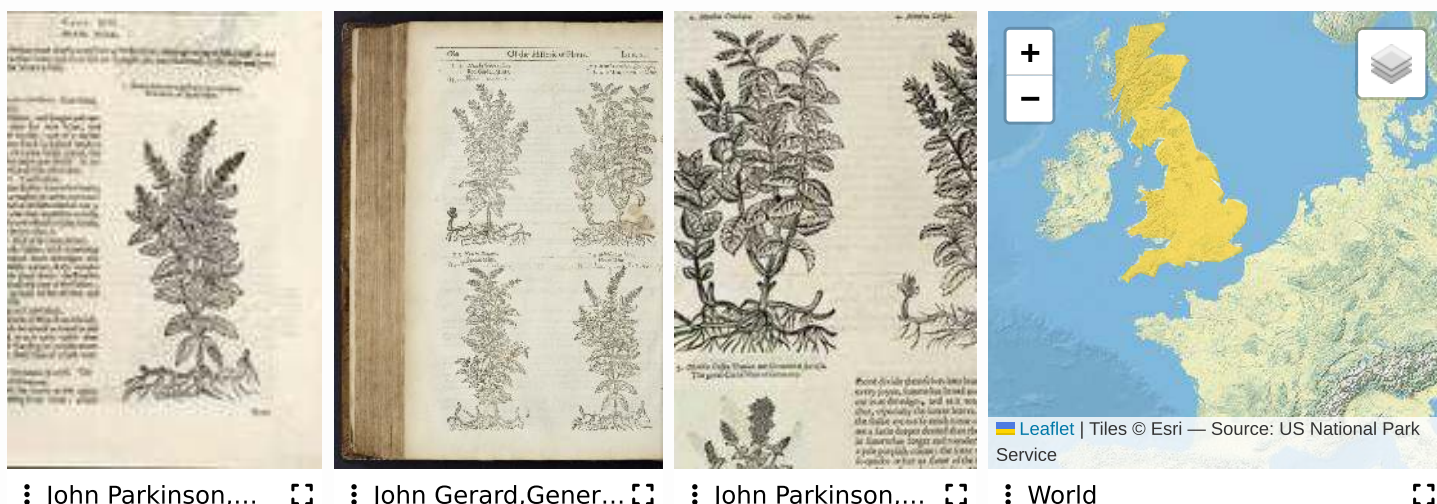
## ‘diverse kyndes of myntes growing’

The English gardener Jon Gardener (fl. 1400s) writes of [myntys](#) in *The Feate of Gardening*, one of the earliest accounts of instructions for sowing and planting that lists over 100 plants.<sup>3</sup> Naturalist William Turner (1509–1568)<sup>4</sup> has a section dedicated to mint in *A new herbal* published in 1551, in which he writes about the difficulty of identifying the “diverse kyndes of myntes growing,” and of mint’s “warming, bynding” nature and ability to “stop blood,” “killeth round wormes in the belly,” and “a singular pleasantness in sa[u]ces.” While *Mentha* was considered then to be the common garden mint, Turner separates these from *Menstratum*, a Latin term for wild mints that we find referred to across botanical literature.



⋮ William Turner, A new herbal,... ⋮

Today, the common scent and flavor we associate with mint is synonymous with culinary flavor and cleanliness value, but in earlier centuries mint was valued for a broad set of therapeutic properties. In fact, the English astrologer and apothecary Nicholas Culpeper (1616–1654) believed that the [mint plant could be used to treat](#) over 40 different ailments. This history of its diverse uses is seen in combination with a history of troublesome plant identification through centuries of botanical literature. Herbals in the seventeenth century identify this pattern particularly well. As John Parkinson wrote in 1640 in his *Theatrum Botanicum, or a Theatre of Plants* (London), “[there are many sorts of Mints,](#)” and listed 12 varieties including the Crosse Mint, which had “purplish colour flowers,” the “great Curld Mint of Germany,” and “Clusius his knobbed Wilde Mint,” which apparently had an “[unpleasant smell](#)” and the “Small round leafed wild Mint” that was considered to have a “rather strong and heady” scent that was “[not very pleasant.](#)” John Gerard noted in his *Generall historie of plantes* (1633) that mint was “a marvellous wholesome for the stomach” and that it had a “[smelle rejoyceth the heart of man.](#)”



In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, *Mentha* engaged the attention of numerous well-known British botanists including John Ray (1627–1705), Adam Buddle (1662–1715), [Samuel Dale](#) (1659–1739), and Jacob Bobart (1641–1719). They could be found collecting a variety of mint species across Britain and exchanged their findings via written correspondence. They were intrigued by the properties and characteristics of the specimens, as well as “conjectures about the synonyms of authors.”<sup>5</sup> Indeed, in *Transactions of the Linnaean Society*, the botanist and naturalist James Edward Smith (1759–1828) stated that “no British genus of plants, except perhaps *Conserva*, has been hitherto less understood than that of *Mentha*; either with respect to its species, and the principles upon which their distinctions ought to be founded, or the synonyms of those species in the most recent, as well as the more ancient writers.”<sup>6</sup>



English botany, or, Coloured...



Brian Lawrence has described the taxonomy of the genus *Mentha* as “being in a state of flux, with more than 3,000 names published since 1753.”<sup>7</sup> In fact, the last comprehensive classification of *Mentha* was, according to Lawrence, published over a century ago, in 1896. Due to the ease of which *Mentha* can be hybridized, around 95 percent of the 3,000 names published for the *Mentha* since 1753 (the publication year of Linnaean’s *Species Plantarum*) are synonyms or illegitimate, being known as “infraspecific taxa.”<sup>8</sup>



⋮ A mint plant with a... 📺



⋮ Coloured engraving...📺



⋮ Pennyroyal and... 📺

# Peppermint: A Commercial Crop

This problematic nature of identifying and naming mint does not appear to have prevented the plant from becoming a significant commercial crop. Mint, especially commercial mint, is not considered native to North America, but Elder William Brewster (1568–1644), a passenger on the 1620 Mayflower voyage, is known to have grown a variety of mint in his garden in Plymouth, Massachusetts, not long after arriving from England.<sup>9</sup> From this information, the naturalist and traveler John Josselyn (1608–1675) postulated that the New World was introduced to mint, or “Labiatae,” by the pilgrims. Josselyn traveled to New England in 1638 and again in 1663, documenting his travels and the natural world he encountered in two publications *New England's Rarities*, published in London in 1671, and *An Account of Two Voyages to New England*, also published in London in 1674.



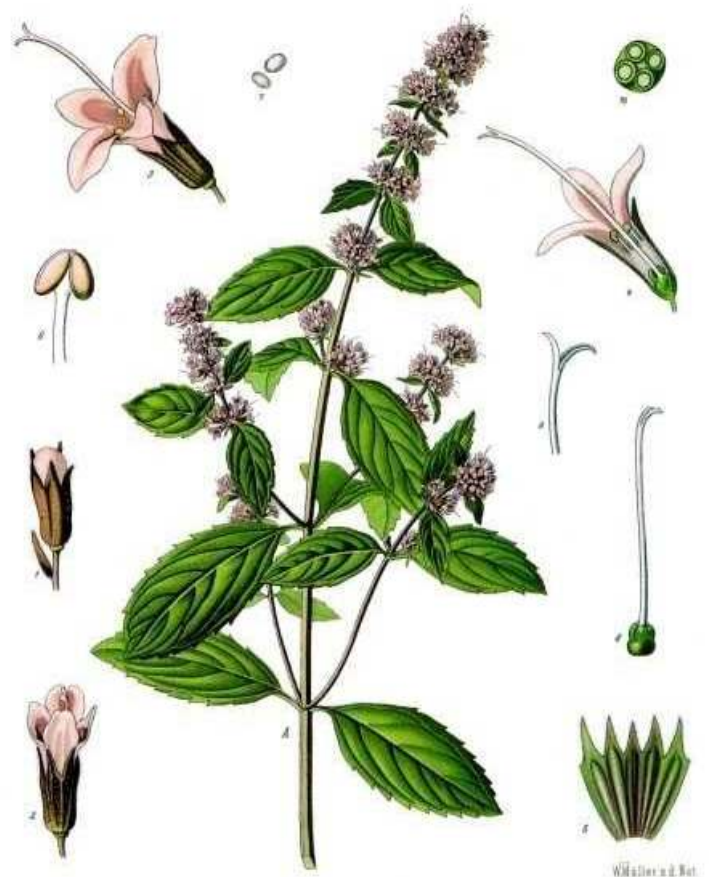
⋮ New England



⋮ Brewster Gardens Along Town Brook; Statue The Pilgrim...

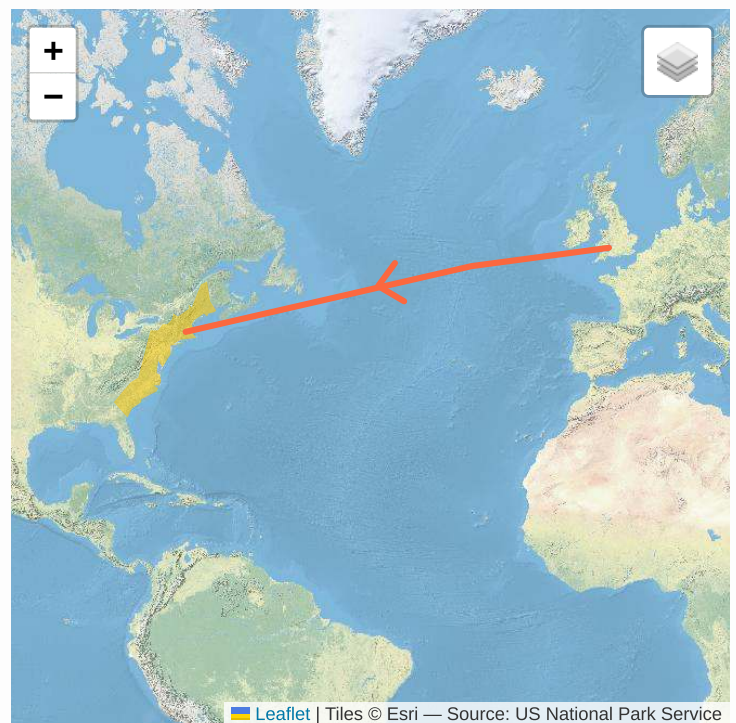


Despite not being native to North America, peppermint and peppermint oil in particular prove to be an important lens through which to consider the movement and commercial development of the plant's use in America. Peppermint (*Mentha piperita*) is a hybrid of spearmint and water mint (*Mentha aquatica*) and its oil is volatile, which means that it is composed of hydrocarbon compounds called terpenes. Menthol is the major terpene in peppermint oil.<sup>10</sup> Peppermint oil has been used in commercial products since the eighteenth century. One of the first published mentions of peppermint is in *Synopsis Methodica Stirpium Britannicarum* in 1696 by John Ray, a prominent British naturalist. Entwined in botanical exchange networks across Britain and Europe in the seventeenth century, Ray wrote that “Spear-Mint or Heart-Mint” had been “found by Mr. Dale in Essex [England] by Bocking River side below the Fulling-Mill in two or three places.”



Peppermint from Franz Eugen Köhler, Köhler's...

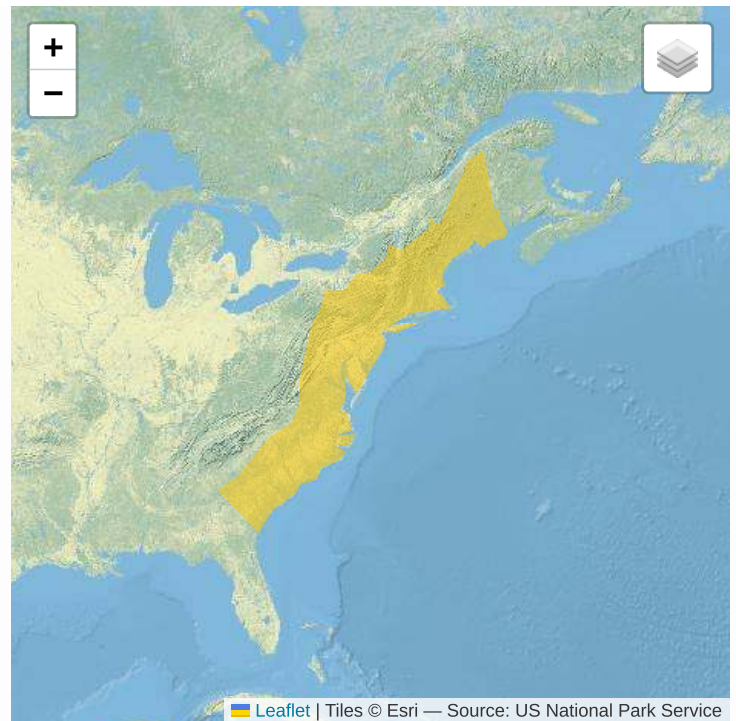
Essence of peppermint was regularly imported to America from London and according to research undertaken by Dan Allosso in 2017, advertisements for peppermint products in American newspapers appeared in the thousands between 1750 and 1800. In fact, his research at the American Antiquarian Society has identified almost 3,000 advertisements that appeared in over 70 newspapers printed in each of the original 13 colonies. Physicians and apothecaries “used and sold peppermint-based products in every major city in every colony.”<sup>11</sup>



World



American colonists were quick to recognize the commercial opportunity presented by locally producing peppermint oil rather than importing it from England, no doubt due in part to the ease of growing mint in a variety of environments. Unlike other varieties of mint, the peppermint plant would have been propagated in early America using root cuttings probably from a small number of original plants in England. Commercial peppermint production gradually shifted from England to America starting in the 1750s; records of peppermint fields in America show that the first were found near the town Ashfield, in Franklin County, Massachusetts. In these early days, essence peddlers ensured that peppermint was part of a widespread production and distribution network, including in northern New York and New Jersey.<sup>12</sup>



⋮ New England



⋮ Triunfo mints, 20th century

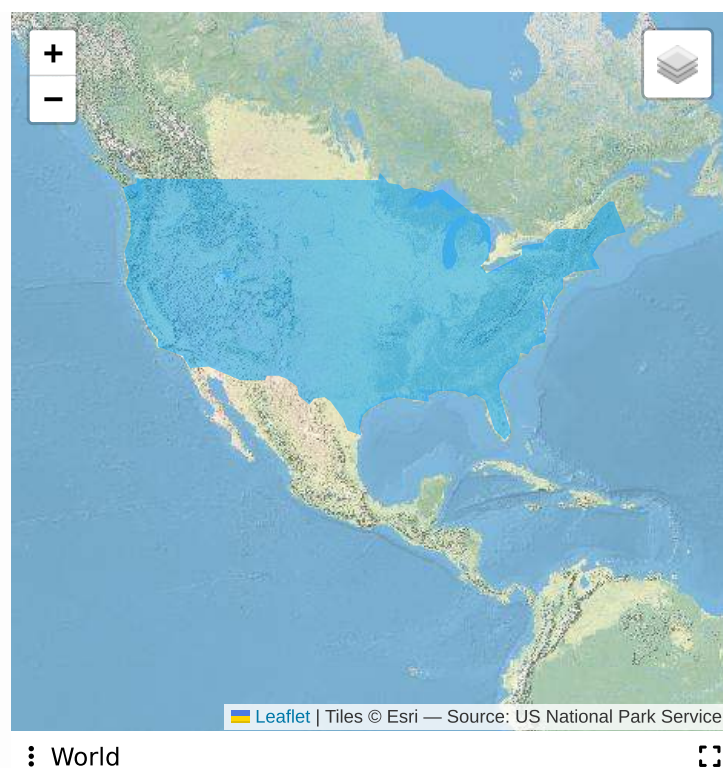


⋮ A Christmas card...

By the mid-1850s, America's mint industry was focused in Wayne County, New York. Up until this time peppermint oil was valued for its therapeutic properties. However, as American medicine developed based on new scientific knowledge, herbal remedies lost their popularity and peppermint oil needed a new market. American peppermint would become a popular flavor for confectionary on local and global scales.<sup>13</sup>

Over time, American mint oil production would spread westwards from the east coast in New York State to the Pacific coast in Washington. Peppermint was being produced in Ohio and Michigan by 1833. Commercial peppermint was introduced to Idaho in 1903, and in Oregon's Willamette River Valley in 1909. In 1917, drained land on Puget Island in a Columbia River estuary in Wahkiakum County, Washington, proved to be ideal land for mint farming on the Pacific coast. By the late 1920s, mint oil prices were high, no doubt the result of significant advertising campaigns fashioned by American manufacturers of mint-flavored confectionary, chewing gum, and toothpaste. Not only was mint valued in the domestic market, but it was exported as well. World War II slowed the export of mint, but the increased need for menthol from American-grown peppermint for supplying the armed forces saw peppermint and spearmint become an essential war crop.<sup>14</sup>

The mint industry in Washington and Oregon would go on to develop in line with sophisticated mechanical planting techniques and harvesting equipment. More recently, Washington farmers have faced increasing competition from China and India, who appear able to supply the shifting consumer taste for a stronger mint flavor that cannot be easily produced by the peppermint species.





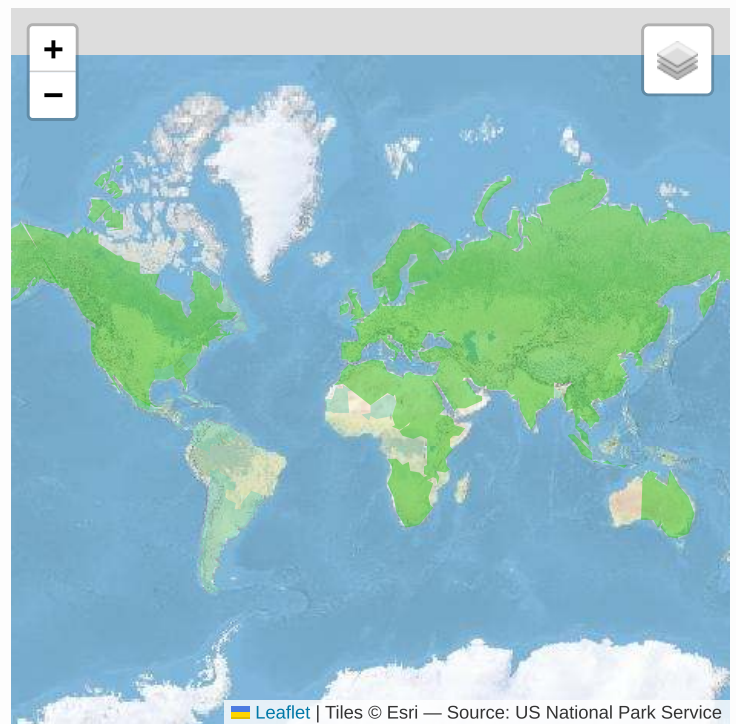
## Conclusions

The mint market in British American colonies and the early United States shows that peppermint has always been an item of commerce, and an inherently commercial crop. While the naming of mint species may have constantly been in flux, American peppermint was cultivated from species that we can trace today. In fact, the majority of commercial peppermint (over half of which is used for chewing gum) descends from *Mentha Piperita*. Two varieties, Black Mitcham and White Mitcham, were introduced into Michigan from Surrey, England, by 1883 because of their hardy nature.<sup>15</sup>

Today, mint varieties are cultivated in many different parts of the world. Its range extends across the world, wherever there are appropriate habitats for it to flourish. Mints thrive when near water, which means that lakes, rivers, and even spaces in shade enable this fast-growing plant to be grown all year round. For example, wild mint (*Mentha arvensis*) is cultivated on a huge scale in Brazil, China, Paraguay, Japan, Thailand, Angola, and India.<sup>16</sup> In this way, peppermint production in America, spreading across the breadth of the country over time, is a microcosm of the pattern of mint distribution across the world.



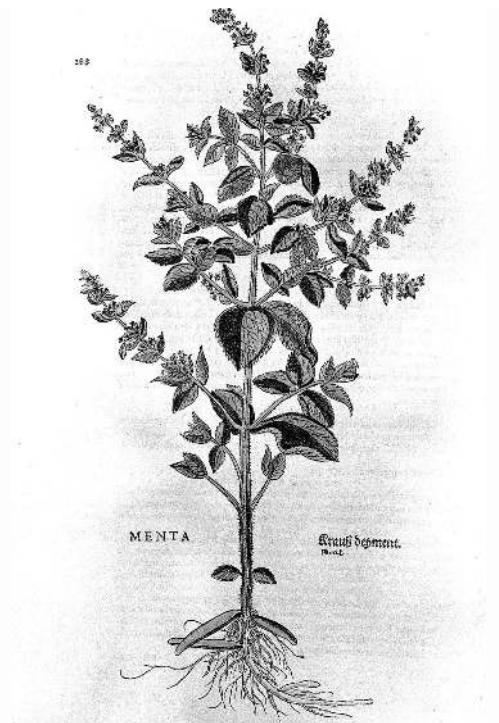
⋮ Peppermint



⋮ Range of mint across the world



Mint is ubiquitous perhaps because it has remained relevant across time and space. The plant reveals something of the early difficulties of botanical exchange and naming; speaks to the local and global movement of plants; exposes changes and developments in medical thought and practices over time (the changing popularity of herbal remedies for example); and continues to play a role in global consumer markets and advertising. Mint, in other words, will always be relevant for historical, cultural, and geographical studies. And as Hades called forth the plant to ensure that Minthe would never be forgotten, we too are constantly reminded of this plant as we go about our daily lives.



⋮ L. Fuchs, De historia stirpium... ⌂



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