

SUCCEEDING WITH MONARDAS

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When Clare and I open our garden to NGS visitors at the end of July each year, there is one thing that I can guarantee, and that is that there will be more complimentary remarks and queries about one particular plant than about the over 200 other perennial plant and grass species in the garden! That plant is the monarda. The nice words are richly deserved – it is a fabulous plant suitable for most herbaceous borders, but particularly for a mid to late summer flowering planting scheme.

Everything about these aromatic plants is appealing. Of course, the flowers, ranging from almost white through to various pinks, reds and purples, are wonderful, attracting hordes of insects looking for the abundant nectar. Not for nothing are monardas sometimes called bee balm. The plants themselves are of medium height, robust and self-supporting with good foliage throughout the season and furthermore, no slug damage! As a bonus during autumn and winter, the seed heads create an interesting silhouette, perhaps against a background of grasses, or more especially when covered with a hoar frost or a pom-pom of snow. After all this praise, I might say what's not to like? Well, I must be honest and admit that growing the plant does sometimes have a few problems, which I will go into later.

Monardas are native to the eastern side of North America, where they grow typically alongside river banks. This gives a clue to the conditions in which they will thrive. They like a moisture-retentive soil, one which contains plenty of organic matter, that will allow their shallow fleshy roots a reasonably free run and the opportunity to meander at will. They are happy in sun or in part shade. They most certainly will not like a very heavy soil that may become waterlogged in winter, or at the other extreme, a soil which bakes hard under a hot sun in summer. In my garden, I grow them in part shade, in a workable clay soil enriched with garden compost.



Monarda 'Beauty of Cobham'



Monarda 'Raspberry Wine'

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When grown in conditions they do not like, monardas will often become more susceptible to diseases. If the soil is too wet in winter then the plant will simply rot away. The most notorious of the problem issues often mentioned by gardeners however is mildew. This will affect the plant mostly when the conditions are too dry... but there again, it could also be too wet! My advice generally on this is to avoid the older varieties such as *M. 'Cambridge Scarlet'*, and choose instead the more modern hybrids. These have been bred with a much greater degree of mildew resistance.

Another of the problem issues mentioned by people I have spoken to is that the plant simply does not appear in

spring. My feeling on this is that it is more to do with understanding what the description 'perennial' actually means. Perennial as far as horticulture is concerned certainly does not mean that a plant will perform reliably year after year without some degree of 'management'. Monardas fall in the category of perhaps needing a little more management than most perennials. They will spread naturally, but will at the same time tend to die out in the centre. Therefore every two or three years it makes sense to pot up some healthy vigorous pieces from the outside of the patch, dig over the complete area, adding in some organic matter, and replant once the potted plants have established. Just to emphasise, good soil preparation is vital. Without this necessary maintenance there is a risk that the plant may just fade away.



Monarda 'Gewitterwolke'

What about companion plants? This is a tricky area, as I am sure that every gardener will have a different view on this depending on what happens to be his or her preferred planting style. But I will nail my colours to the mast! Those of you who have seen our garden will not be surprised that my view is that monardas look at their best in a more natural setting, reflecting their North American origins. This means combining them with the taller growing grasses such as miscanthus, calamagrostis, molinia, etc. together with the later flowering perennial plants such as echinaceas, asters, persicarias, rudbeckias, eupatorium, helenium, etc. Wonderful - but I am prepared to be persuaded that other combinations will also work!



Monarda 'Libra'

Finally, a word about varieties. There are so many hybrids available, many of which can seem remarkably similar. I have the following growing in my garden and are all doing well, with minimal mildew problems:

M. 'Beauty of Cobham'; pale pink with dark purple calyxes.

M. 'Gardenview Scarlet'; more reliable than 'Cambridge Scarlet' but can be difficult to place as its flowers shine out conspicuously.

M. 'Gewitterwolke' (syn. 'Thundercloud'); lovely dusky purple-red.

M. 'On Parade'; purple-red.

M. Libra (syn. 'Balance'), bright pink.

M. 'Prärienacht'; lighter purple, seems to tolerate drier conditions.

M. 'Raspberry Wine'; a rich red as the name implies.

M. 'Vintage Wine'; similar to 'Raspberry Wine'.

I have also read that *Monarda* 'Marshall's Delight' (clear pink, rounded, ball-shaped flowers) is another superior variety.

So in summary, monardas are probably my favourite perennial plants and I do encourage you to give them a try, as they are beautiful and rewarding to grow, despite their minor foibles. But if you don't believe me then listen to Piet Oudolf, who says - and I quote - "*Monardas are without doubt one of the most important plant genera for the natural garden*". There you have it!

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