

נענע – Peppermint – Mentha Piperita

Refreshing, Sweet, Uplifting Mint

I was feeling a bit lethargic after my weekly six-am swim, when I sat myself down at the computer to write about peppermint. Learning how the essential oil of peppermint has a wonderful ability to refresh our minds and spirit, I put a few drops into my diffuser and placed it on my desk. As my mind became uplifted by the vapor, I was in a better spirit to share some peppermint insights. Known as 'נענע/nana,' steaming fresh mint sprigs are served as tea throughout the Middle East with or without a generous helping of sugar. Perhaps mint's Hebrew name, from the word נע/na – 'moving,' indicates mint's ability to quickly spread and multiply by dividing its roots, as in, "You shall be a wanderer (נָע/na) and an exile in the land" (*Bereishit* 4:12). Out of hundreds of kinds throughout the world, Wikipedia lists four mints that grow wild in Israel: נענת הכדורים (*Mentha pulegium*); נענת המים (*M. aquatica*); נענע ריחנית (*M. suaveolens*); נענע משובלת (*M. longifolia*). In English, they are pennyroyal, water mint, apple mint, and horse mint respectively. I have never come across apple mint, but for many years we have a persistent kind of mint in our garden which came back this spring – even after being completely uprooted from the rose bed. It has a spicier taste than regular peppermint and its leaves are a shade darker and more purple. I suspect it is either spearmint or water mint. Peppermint is actually a hybrid of these two kinds of mints. Spearmint and peppermint have similar medicinal qualities, but spearmint is supposed to be milder, so perhaps my spicy mint is water mint. Interestingly, the numerical value of נענע/nana – 'mint' is 240 which equals that of עמלק/Amalek the arch enemy of Israel. Also, the words מר/mar – 'bitter' and רם/ram – 'elevated' share the numerical value of 240. We could say that just as the sweet taste and scent of mint counteracts any bitterness, so too, does the spiritual attribute of mint work as an antidote to the spiritual bitterness of Amalek.



Peppermint Spirit

The numerical value of Amalek is also ספק/safek – 'doubt.' This negative energy is the cause of self-doubt, indecision and uncertainty. Energetically, peppermint essential oil with the identical numerology clears away this kind of doubt and mental chatter, while clearing our perspective and clearing the way. It counteracts bad odors and tunes up how we see ourselves and how we see the world. It assists us in moving out that which no longer serves us and enhances our receptivity for all that is new and fresh on the mental, emotional and spiritual levels. Just as peppermint is widely known to strengthen our physical digestive system, energetically it also helps us to better 'digest' new ideas. Due to its cooling nature, a few drops of peppermint on a wet bandana placed around the neck or head can help alleviate feeling overheated while hiking in the heat. Mint's cooling property can also help to relieve anger. Since ancient times, mint was thrown on dirt floors and hung in houses to create a clean, welcoming smell. Also today, we can use mint in similar ways to give a welcoming feeling to our guests. Peppermint is an essential oil that we would not be without. It is definitely one of the most vital essential oils because of its versatile uses.

Mint in Historical Israel and Rabbinic Literature

The mint growing in biblical time was probably spearmint, since it is an older mint than peppermint. Mint is believed to have derived from Egypt and then to have spread to Israel. Horsemint grows wild in Israel, but unfortunately does not have the pleasant aromatic smell of spearmint or peppermint. It does still have the beneficial medicinal qualities. I'm not sure how horsemint merited the nickname 'biblical mint.' Mint is not found in the Tanach (Bible) but it is discussed in the Talmud, which even gives recipes that include mint. A mixture of cumin, soap, mint, wormwood, cedar-blossom, and hyssop is recommended to be used as an ointment. It can also be infused in wine, water, or beer. This was recommended for the heart, for flatulence, and uterine pains:

תלמוד בבלי מסכת עבודה זרה דף כט/א אמר רבי יהושע בן לוי, מעלין אונקלי בשבת. מאי אונקלי? אמר רבי אבא, איסטומכא דליבא. מאי אסטומכא? מייתי כמונא כרויא, וניניא, ואגדנא, וציתרי, ואבדתא. לליבא - בחמרא, וסימניך, (תהלים קד) "וַיֵּין יִשְׂמַח לִבְבִּי אֲנֹשׁ". לרוחא - במיא, וסימניך, (בראשית א) ורוח אלהים מרחפת על פני המים". לכודא - בשיקרא, וסימניך, (שם כד) "וְכֹדַעַת עַל שִׁכְמָה..."

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi said: It is allowed to lift the 'onkly' on Sabbath. What is 'onkly?' Rabbi Abba said: It is the sternum of the heart. And how is this disease cured? By an ointment prepared of cumin, soap, mint, wormwood, cedar-blossom and hyssop. For the benefit of the heart, dissolve these in wine. The sign [by which you remember it] is, "Wine gladdens the heart" (*Tehillim* 104:15). Against flatulence, dissolve in water. The sign is, "the wind of G-d hovers over the water" (*Bereishit* 1:3). Against pains in the uterus (*kuda*), dissolve in beer; the sign is, "She had her pitcher (*kadah*) on her shoulder..." (ibid. 24:15); (*Babylonian Talmud, Avodah Zarah* 29a).

I am unable to decipher this obscure Talmudic section and the proof-texts used to recommend these particular herbs for the abovementioned ailments. What piqued my interest is that this passage teaches us that mint was well-known in Talmudic times. The Talmudic word translated to mint is *ניניא/ninaya*, which Rashi explains as *מינט/mentha* –which clearly refers to a plant in the mint family. Additionally, Rambam lists mountain-mint and water-mint among the few foods and medicines that have cleansing properties (Maimonides, *Medical Writings*, vol 5. p 103, 158). He also recommends mountain-mint and plain mint together with thyme as a treatment for lethargy (ibid. p 162).

Health Benefits of Peppermint

The peppermint herb and essential oil, with its pleasant taste and fragrance, have multiple uses and health benefits. The most outstanding is its value as a digestive aid, due to its carminative property. It is also an excellent respiratory aid because of mint's menthol oils, known for their diaphoretic and antispasmodic properties. Its calmative and sedative properties enable mint to calm the nerves and soothe headaches.

Aids Digestion

Mint alleviates gastro-intestinal disorders; (e.g., upset stomach, cramps, irritable bowel syndrome-IBS). It strengthens the liver, calms indigestion and stomach ache. Peppermint's menthol causes a mild anesthesia of the gastric mucosal membrane, which is beneficial for the digestive system. Mint can treat diarrhea, gastric fever and toxic infections. It stimulates biliary secretion and helps the digestion of fats. Peppermint essential oil is used not only topically, but also for various internal ailments- especially indigestion.

Respiratory Issues

Peppermint has a superior effect on the respiratory system. It is recommended for asthma, bronchitis and the flu because of its antispasmodic and sedative properties. Mint also treats sinusitis, because menthol is a vasodilator of the nasal mucous membranes. Mint essential oil can be used for inhalation as well as for chest massages. When massage clients lie with their face down and their head in a face cradle, there is a tendency for sinus congestion. Placing a tissue with a few drops of peppermint essential oil under the face cradle assists the client to breathe easier.

Calming the Nerves and Soothing Pains

Peppermint has calming effects and its essential oil is one of the best pain relieving herbal remedies. It is equally effective as any over the counter pain relieving medication (but without the side effects). Just apply a drop or two to each temple and the back of the neck for relief. Research has shown its effectiveness in treating migraine headaches. Mint's cooling effects also alleviate rheumatic pain, toothaches and ear inflammation.

Oral Hygiene

Mint essential oil freshens the breath, aids in disinfection and maintaining the hygiene of the oral cavity. It adds to oral health by inhibiting harmful bacterial growth inside the mouth and by cleaning the tongue and teeth.

Culinary Uses

Mint leaves have always had many culinary uses such as seasoning meat, sauces, and salads. Mint is also used as a spice in Middle Eastern cuisine. For example, a Lebanese recipe – *lebneh* (mint yoghurt) – is prepared by adding 2 or 3 chopped mint leaves, 2 pieces of garlic and lemon juice in a cup of yoghurt. Mint leaves can also be used in summer drinks. Boiled vegetables will look better if they are decorated with mint leaves. I like to mix mint tea with apple juice for a refreshing cooling summer drink.

Hands On

Besides its wide commercial use in ice-creams, chocolates, alcoholic and non-alcoholic beverages, cosmetics, medicines, inhalers, and breath fresheners, mint is also used as a condiment and a decorative item in culinary preparation around the world. Mint may even be used as a food preservative because of its high antioxidant capabilities. In the past, it was placed in milk because it was thought to help preserve it. Drinks and foods containing mint cool you off in the summer and it is often included in summer cocktails for a refreshing burst of flavor. It is also a good relaxant. Add fresh mint to plain or sparkling water, or even freeze whole leaves in ice cubes to add beautiful color to your beverage.

Mint Tea

Use 5-10 big leaves or more depending on how strong you want the tea. Tear the leaves and place in a mug. Then bruise the leaves for a few seconds with the back of a wooden spoon. Pour boiling water over the leaves and let steep 5-10 minutes. You can strain out the leaves with a fine strainer or leave them in if they are bug free.

Mint Bath

Rheumatism can be treated with mint baths. Boil 200g of leaves in 3 liters of water and mix with the bath water at 37 degrees Celsius.

Mint essential oil mixed with hot water is used topically to treat the flu, laryngitis and hoarseness.

Minty Green Salad with Feta Cheese

Use fresh herbs for this delicious salad.

½ cup mint

¼ cup cilantro

¼ cup parsley

¼ cup chopped walnuts

A bunch of spinach

1 medium leak

2 sprigs of thyme

8 ounce Bulgarian goat cheese or feta like Pastures of Eden Israeli sheep feta

1. Chop the herbs very fine.
2. Slice the leak.
3. Add the nuts and crumbled cheese.
4. Mix with cut and washed spinach.
5. Add olive oil and lemon juice to taste or serve with your favorite homemade vinaigrette dressing.