MAGNIFICENT MINTS
Beautiful, Woody Members of the Mint Family in the Arboretum Collection

Text by Phil Wood | Photos by Niall Dunne

The mint or sage family, Lamiaceae, is a familiar one for gardeners. We plant lots of low-growing herbaceous perennials from this group in our ornamental borders and culinary beds, including colorful sages (Salvia), basil (Ocimum basilicum), marjoram (Origanum majorana), Agastache, bugle (Ajuga), catnip (Nepeta cataria), and bee balm (Monarda), not to mention all the varieties of mint (Mentha) itself.

And many gardeners are aware that some of their favorite woody herbs, such as lavender (Lavandula) and rosemary (Salvia rosmarinus), are mint family members—generally characterized by their square stems (on new shoots), paired and simple leaves, and two-lipped, five-petaled, tubular flowers.

We might be surprised to learn, however, that the mint family—which comprises more than 230 genera at last count—also contains some larger woody members, including taller shrubs and small trees. A selection of these can be found in the collection at the Washington Park Arboretum and are well worth a visit when they bloom in summer.
**Vitex agnus-castus**  
**Chaste Tree**

*Vitex agnus-castus* is native to the Mediterranean region, as well as to parts of southwest and central Asia. A multi-stemmed deciduous shrub, it grows up to 10 feet tall and produces large, palm-shaped, compound, gray-green leaves, each made up of five to seven lance-shaped leaflets.

In September and October, panicles of scented, violet flowers appear at the ends of the stems—looking like the flower spikes of buddleia—and are very attractive to bees and butterflies. As with many mint family plants, the foliage is pleasantly aromatic. For best flowering results, chaste tree should be grown in full sun and moist, well-drained soil.

A number of cultivars are available, with varying flower colors and forms. At the Arboretum, you’ll find a mature specimen of the straight species just south of the lower Woodland Garden pond, along the east side of Azalea Way. On the northwest edge of the pond grows *Vitex agnus-castus* ’Silver Spire’ (dating to 1992), offering white flowers, while across the promenade are two brand new specimens of the compact ’SMVACBD’ (Blue Diddley®), which tops out at about four feet high.

**Clerodendrum bungei**  
**Rose Glory Bower**

Native to China, as well as in Vietnam and Taiwan, this three- to six-foot deciduous suckering shrub bears lovely, large, red-veined, heart-shaped leaves with coarsely toothed edges. In late summer, fragrant, rose-crimson flowers are held atop the foliage in rounded clusters up to eight inches wide, looking somewhat like a mophead hydrangea.

The literature says this plant’s foliage has an unpleasant odor when crushed, but to me the smell is pretty nondescript—like crushed leaf. The species name is a nod to the Russian plant explorer Alexander Von Bunge, who discovered the plant in Beijing in 1831.

In the Arboretum, you’ll find a clump of rose glory bower on the hillside just to the north of the lower Woodland Garden pond along
Azalea Way, growing underneath a flowering cherry. The species is supposed to be hardy to our area, but according to UW Botanic Gardens Curator Ray Larson, it behaves like a perennial in the Arboretum, dying back to the ground in the winter and sending up shoots again in spring. It’s a woody shrub that never gets to put on wood!

Because of the seasonal dieback, it never gets taller than a few feet high either, though Rays says, “The root suckers can and do spread, and we remove those, roots and all, to help keep the plant in bounds.” In warmer climates, it’s common for gardeners to prune the plant back in early spring to control for size and spread.

**Clerodendrum trichotomum**

**Harlequin Glory Bower**

Native to China, Korea and Japan, the harlequin glory bower is a small, deciduous tree or large shrub growing up to 20 feet tall. It bears oval-shaped leaves that emit a peanut fragrance, hence the plant’s other common name, peanut butter tree. The species is prized for its sweet-smelling, tubular, white flowers, which burst out of balloon-like pink sepals (modified leaves that protect the flower buds) in late summer. Hummingbirds, butterflies and bees love the flowers and help them develop into stunning, small, bright-bluish-green berries surrounded by star-shaped, red calyces (a calyx is a whorl of sepals) by fall. The bright colors of the fruits and flowers are reminiscent of the costumes worn by the harlequin, a stock character of 16th-century Italian comedic theater.

The Arboretum has two specimens of harlequin glory bower, one on the open, sunny, north edge of the Graham Visitors Center parking lot. The other is in a shadier spot just south of the Millburn Memorial Bench on the lower Lookout Loop Trail.

**Callicarpa bodinieri var. giraldii ‘Profusion’**

**Bodinier’s Beautyberry**

Beautyberries (*Callicarpa*) are grown for their big clusters of showy, late-season, bead-like berries, and indeed the genus name comes from the Greek for “beautiful fruit.” The summer flowers are not as stunning, but still handsome enough and very popular with pollinators.

The Arboretum features a variety of different beautyberry species and cultivars.

With its dense clusters of metallic-purple fall fruits, *Callicarpa bodinieri* var. *giraldii* ‘Profusion’ is considered by some to be the star of the genus. Native to China, the straight species grows up to 10 feet tall and bears elliptical green leaves with toothed margins. Flat-topped clusters of lilac flowers with big yellow anthers are borne in the leaf axils in summer. The glossy fruits ripen by September.

‘Profusion’ is an arching cultivar producing a bumper berry crop, with 30 to 40 fruits per cluster. New leaves emerge bronze-purple in spring, turn dark green in summer, and then golden-purple in fall before dropping. You’ll find four specimens planted together in the large southeast bed of the Witt Winter Garden. Planting beautyberry in groups helps with cross pollination and berry production.

**Prostanthera cuneata**

**Alpine mint bush**

*Prostanthera* is a genus of about 100 species of shrubs and trees, all of them native to Australia. The species usually planted in Seattle gardens is *Prostanthera cuneata*, alpine mint bush, endemic to mountainous areas in the southeast of the continent.

First described by British botanist George Bentham in 1848, it grows as a compact, spreading, evergreen shrub up to three feet in height. The glossy, dark-green leaves are small and oval-shaped and—true to the common name—emit a minty aroma when crushed. And the cup-shaped flowers are beautiful: white, flushed with lilac, and marked with purple blotches on the inside. They appear in abundance near the ends of the branches in late spring to early summer.

The plant grows best in full sun and well-drained soil, with little summer water. In the Arboretum, alpine mint bush can be found edging the borders of the Australian Entry Garden at Pacific Connections.

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