

On March 4, 2017, I urged my readers to be wary of planting invasive plants. Before purchasing and planting, I encouraged gardeners to be familiar with the growing characteristics of the plants they buy. If the word 'invasive' appears anywhere in its description, I advised to take caution. Invasive means having the tendency to spread. A good number of invasive plants have the propensity to crowd out and destroy less vigorous plants.

Through the years, I have knowingly acquired plants deemed invasive. One such plant evokes within me a feeling of nostalgia whenever I see it in bloom. Currently, that flowering plant is in full bloom throughout our yard. Its scientific name is *Monarda didyma*; however, most gardeners know it as monarda, beebalm or bergamot. One particular variety of monarda now blooming is an offspring from Mother's monarda that she once had blooming in her flower borders. Years ago, Rita and I took divisions from Mother's monarda, and now its beauty continues in our backyard.

Mother was an accomplished gardener, growing many beautiful beds of flowers. When I was a child, she had a knack for recruiting me to work those flowerbeds — weeding, watering, and probably



whining. It was there in her garden that monarda made its impression on me. To this day, I do not know the exact variety of monarda that Mother grew, but, in July, her flowers standing at least three feet tall were ablaze with a deep scarlet-red color. Today, in our flower borders, their striking beauty not only captures my attention but the attention of every butterfly and bee in

the neighborhood.

Monarda is an indigenous plant to North America. Native Americans brewed and drank a tea made from the leaves and flowers of spotted bee balm (*Monarda pectinata*), a common prairie wildflower.

Monarda didyma is a member of the mint family. It grows best in full sun but tolerates light shade and thrives in any moist soil that is rich in organic matter. It is a showy ornamental plant. Monarda blooms from mid-summer to early autumn. Root divisions or cuttings can propagate it. Monarda

generally grows two to four feet tall, depending on the variety, and fits well planted near the back of the border. Monarda generally blooms only once in the season, but a second flowering can be stimulated by cutting back the flower right after it blooms. When growing monarda, make sure to allow for good air circulation around the plant. It is very susceptible to powdery mildew.

Because monarda has a tendency to spread, it is essential to keep it contained. To do so, the plant

should be root divided every three years. Dig up the root clump in the early spring, discard the inner, older portion, and replant the new divisions twelve to fifteen inches apart. I readily recall helping mother thin her monarda. While we physically removed the excess plants, I



vividly remember their crushed stems emitted a sweet minty aroma, a fragrance I still enjoy.

There are numerous cultivars since Mother's time, yet all continue to excite my sense of sight and smell. Although they are new cultivars, keep in mind, they all still have a tendency to be invasive.

Some newer varieties of monarda possessing a degree of mildew resistance are the following:

- *JACOB CLINE - Large, scarlet-red, two to three inch tubular flowers in dense terminal whorls.
- *MARSHALL'S DELIGHT – A unique hybrid from Canada. Large, showy hot-pink flowers. Claimed to be the boldest and brightest of all.
- *BLUE STOCKING – An exceptionally beautiful variety with enormous violet-purple flowers and dark foliage.
- *GRANDMA'S PEARLS – Snow white flowers on strong stems.

If Mother were alive today, I know she would likely be growing many of the new cultivars of invasive monarda, and, if so, I would gladly help her with the weeding and watering, but probably not the whining. I think I have somewhat outgrown that.