Catnip/Catmint

While pondering what to write about this month, I was being persistently whined at by one of my cats who thought I should be paying considerably more attention to her than I was. But inspiration struck, so I forgave her for being such a pest, as usual. There it was: my subject, “cats”—well, really catnip. This entailed several searches. First I had to find my herb books and my favorite remained hidden. It’s what I get for cleaning up and putting things away. Finally it surfaced and I began to think about catmint and decided to write about the differences between it and catnip, which engendered three books and an hour or so on the web searching to figure it all out. Well, it turns out there isn’t much difference. Both catnip and catmint are the same genus—Nepeta. After that, there are a large number of different species (N. cataria is the common catnip you will usually see available) and varieties and hybrids of these species. So, the simple article I was planning turned a little more complex but I did discover some lovely plants that might work in our gardens, so it wasn’t a lost cause.

Most of you are familiar with the fact that catnip is known for its effects on cats. Not all cats are affected by the plant, but for those that are, it’s amusing for their human companions to give the cat a “dose” now and then. I used to give my cat a handful of catnip when she was really at her annoyingly worst behavior. She loved to roll in it and eat it and it acted as a sedative. I got her out of the way for awhile and she presented the most ludicrous picture by sleeping on her back with her feet splayed. Cat lovers will know how hilarious they can look in that position. The cats I have today enjoy it but it seems to energize them. After rolling and eating it, they generally begin a merry chase around the house. Anyway, you get the picture about the effect of catnip. Scientists still don’t know why cats react this way. Try growing it outside if there are cats roaming...
your neighborhood and soon the plant is a mere shadow of itself or it's simply been loved to death. In fact, in 1754 a British horticulturists wrote a description of cats destroying his catnip patch. Wild cats, like lions, bobcats, mountain lions, etc., are also known to enjoy its effects.

Not all catmints have the same effect; the amount of the chemical that effects cats varies from species to species. I have had numerous catnip (N. cartaria) plants outside that just couldn't survive the onslaught of the neighborhood cats but I have a catmint out front that is doing just fine. So, if you are interested in growing these plants, you might have to experiment.

_Nepeta cataria_ is native to Europe, the Himalayas, China and Korea but has naturalized in North America, Japan and South Africa. Wild catmint in France was used as a culinary herb in salads and used in teas. The plant is also used as a medicinal. It is known as a sedative and for fevers and colds and for nervousness. In children, it has been used to ease colic, restlessness, pain and flatulence. While I don't advocate smoking, it is said that smoking catnip can relieve hiccups, although I had never heard of this remedy for hiccups before. I guess, if you are desperate and the cats don't mind you could try this. (My usual disclaimer: Do not use herbal remedies assuming they are safe. Natural does not mean safe! Check with your doctor before using any herbal products.) Leaves were chewed to relieve headaches. It was even a treatment for leprosy. There has been lots research on catnip and its active ingredients. If you are interested, do an internet search on catnip; a variety of the studies will show up.

Catnip/catmint are members of the mint family and exhibit those common characteristics. Roll the stem in your fingers and it will feel square or cut a stem and you will see it's square, (a common diagnostic technique when trying to identify an unknown plant); leaves are opposite and fragrant and it has spikes of flowers in small clusters. The size of the plant can vary. Leaves are heart-shaped and have scalloped edges and are more plentiful at the top of the branches. Normally, the leaves, when crushed, are scented—some varieties more so than others. Flowers vary from white to purple and the plants bloom in the summer.

This perennial is relatively simple to grow. It can be started from seeds which are easily found, especially for Nepeta cataria. You can also find plants in most nurseries and both catnip and catmint are available. Many of the varieties can tolerate dryer conditions. If you are looking for some of the more unusual varieties, check for cultural information. Some prefer wetter soil or don't tolerate the cold as well but most should grow here. Once established, they need little attention. The larger varieties should probably be pruned back occasionally to encourage branching but the short varieties don't need much care at all. Catmint can make a nice border plant or even a ground cover. Sharlot Hall Museum has a very nice stand of catmint, if you would like to see it. Most catnip varieties should do well in Yavapai county.

One of the more interesting aspects about cultivating catnip could be an old wive's tale but you never know. The claim is that, if you transplant catnip, it becomes ready prey for the local cats but if you grow it from seed directly in the garden the cats leave it alone. The idea behind this is that a disturbed plant has been bruised, releasing the aroma that attracts cats, whereas a plant grown from seed in place will not be bruised. Now that seems silly to me, as cats always bothered my plants regardless, but if anyone tries to experiment with this idea, let
me know how it works out. 
Varieties vary in size from 12 to 40 inches tall. Some of the varieties, with some comments that I found for a few of them are:

* *Nepeta cataria*—the common variety

* *Nepeta citriodora*—lemon scented, white, will attract cats

* *Nepeta X faassennii*—tough plant, blue flowers, low growing-mound, blooms late spring, will rebloom in late summer if trimmed back. Vigorous, drought tolerant

* *Nepeta x “Joanna Reed”*—cross between *N. sibirica* and *faassennii*, has iridescent blue-violet blooms with pink throats. 3 feet high x 2 wide

* *Nepeta lanceolata*—pinkish white flowers, aromatic

* *Nepeta longibracteata*—lemon scented, blue-violet flowers, from the Himalayas, needs moist, shady environment, gravelly or humous soils

* *Nepeta graciliflora* “Dawn to Dusk”—pink flowers, forms mound 2 1/2 feet tall and wide. Blooms June to September.

* *Nepeta mussinii*—Persian catmint, medium blue flowers, this isn’t as attractive to cats. Makes a good rock garden plant.

* *Nepeta nepetella*—flowers blue-violet to white, good for rock garden.

* *Nepeta racemosa*—Pale lilac to deep violet flowers, dry to medium moisture, 1.5 feet tall, doesn’t mind drought, spreading clump.

* *Nepeta subcissilis*—blue flowers, (also seems to have a variety with pink flowers-“Sweet Dreams”) 1 1/2 feet tall, from Japan, prefers moist soil and needs a shady environment. Will rebloom if deadheaded.

* *Nepeta tuberosa*—lovely spikes of bright purple flowers, felted wooly gray leaves, drought tolerant, needs very good drainage.

Catnip Tea for cats, (although why anyone would spend the time doing this when just crushing the leaves and giving them to the cats is enough to excite them.

Steep catnip in boiling water for 10 minutes, stirring several times. Strain, add milk or cream and serve to your favorite feline.

Sources for catnip are limited for the unusual varieties. I would do a search for the species you are interested in and see what comes up. If you run a general search for catnip also you might find some sources. Some of the best I found are:

High Country Gardens
www.highcountrygardens.com
1-800-925-9387 to order catalog

Avent Gardens
www.avantgardensne.com
710 High Hill Rd
Dartmouth, MA 02747
plants@avantgardensne.com

Digging Dog Nursery (can order a printed catalog, $4.00)
www.diggingdog.com
PO Box 471
Albion, CA 95410
707-937-1130

Watters Nursery
Prescott

has two varieties currently
People never seem happy about the weather; they grumble if it’s too hot or too cold, too dry or too wet. I happen to think that complaining about the rain in the desert is like shooting yourself in the foot—it doesn’t make much sense. One should consider rain in the desert a blessing. Yes, there can be floods, but, as long as you don’t build in the flood plain, it shouldn’t be a problem. Yes, it can get kind of gloomy but, just remember, summer heat is always around the corner. Yes, it can be muddy, but how many times did you complain about your hard ground last year? So, all in all, we shouldn’t really complain about the rain.

One of the really great benefits of rain is the spring wildflower bloom and, because this has been a wet year, expectations are that this is going to be a great blooming season! (I’m not going to even touch the issue of a great pollen season, also.)

Things are starting to bloom already down south, but there is plenty of opportunity still available to get outside and see the desert bloom.

Early spring wildflowers include the ajo-lily. You don’t see them very often but one the most amazing experiences of my life was to see miles of them in bloom. It wasn’t like the great poppy bloom where the hills turn orange but every few feet there was a lily in bloom. I think I was in high school when I saw this but I’ve never forgotten it. Lupine, fairy duster, desert marigolds, evening primrose and, another of my favorite plants, brittlebush, are also early bloomers. One of my greatest gardening regrets is that it’s just too cold for brittlebush in Camp Verde. I love it’s silvery gray leaves with the bright yellow flowers on long stems above the leaves. It’s already beginning to bloom and will continue for several months. Verbena, blanket flowers and creosote will also start blooming soon. You say, “what’s the big deal about creosote?” Well, the bright new leaves, yellow flowers and, later, little puffball seed pods may not be as spectacular but they add to a great spring display.

Next come many people’s favorites. Starting in late February and going on through April the poppies bloom. Great spreading fields of them turn hills golden. It is truly one of the most impressive displays of wildflowers in the world. Picacho Peak State Park is famous for its spring blooms of poppies. Other flowers you will see are ocotillo, desert sunflower, larkspur, strawberry hedgehog, blackfoot daisy, owl clover, blazing star and the mariposa lily. The mariposa lily is another of those little seen, striking flowers. It grows from a bulb and sends up just a few vibrant orange, yellow or vermilion flowers. They are truly a striking plant. There was an empty field behind the apartment I lived in when I first moved to Camp Verde. One day, when I was out walking, I found the hill filled with the yellow lilies. Another “can’t forget” sight. It broke my heart when they bulldozed most of that area a few years later. Penstemons will also start blooming mid spring. These are another of my favorite plants that grow well in Camp Verde. I have several of them in my yard and plan on adding more.

Late spring into summer there comes another wave. This is when we start to see the cacti and trees in the lower elevations begin blooming. The State flower, the sahuaro, begins to bloom. Datura, with it’s large snowy white blossoms, starts showing up on the roadsides. Yuccas put out there waxy white flowers, also. Mesquite, ironwood and paloverde color the hillsides. Ironwood has pinkish lavender blooms that cover the tree. Isn’t always much of a tree to look at in the summer but during blooming season it sparkles out in the desert. Mesquites aren’t talked about much in terms of their flowers but they can be quite showy, with their catkins of soft yellow green blooms. My favorite, though, is the paloverde—so much so that I planted a blue paloverde in my
front yard. It’s the most cold tolerant. But, boy, when you drive from Camp Verde to Phoenix the hillsides just glow from the blooms of the paloverde. I grew up around paloverde trees in Tucson and have always waited for their spring bloom.

Late summer, in spite of the heat, plants are putting out flowers. Barrel cactus and the century plant come into their own. Coyote gourds bloom, along with wild cotton, sunflowers, pincushion cactus and the jumping cholla. Desert zinnia, with its small mound of yellow flowers, goes to town, along with devil’s claw and the regal night-blooming-cereus. Desert willow also blooms, starting in the summer. They are a rather uninteresting plant until their orchid-like blooms start appearing. You can see them in the Camp Verde and Cottonwood area, where there are fairly common.

So don’t complain about the rain; without it you would miss a marvelous cycle of wild flowers. If you are interested in seeking out wildflowers, the Desert Botanical Gardens has a wildflower hotline at 480-941-1225. They have a recorded message that will tell you where the best blooms are going on and what is blooming at the garden. (Check their website starting in March to double check the phone number!) The Desert Botanical Garden (www.dbg.org) is a good place to go for wildflower season. They have a large variety of plants in a small area. Also, check the Arizona State Parks website, www.pr.state.az.us or call 602-542-4988. Several of the parks have good wildflower blooms and information is posted on the site. If you go to the site and do a search for wildflowers, most of the information should come up.

For the real wildflower aficionado

**Chilled Yucca Flower Soup**

4 cups clean yucca petals  (approx. 24 blossoms = 1 cup)  
2 cups chicken broth  
1 clove garlic  
1 cup plain yogurt  
1 cup sour cream  
dill weed


*From “Desert Wildflowers” by Arizona Highways*

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**Seed Starting**

By now you should have your seeds and you are just itching for spring. This time of year it is hard to resist that siren call of the garden. If it isn’t too wet, (wow! what a concept, but I’m writing this the day after that big rain that flooded out Oak Creek,) you could go out and start getting the ground prepared. There are roses and trees to be pruned and, for some, you might even have some house plants that could use a little extra care. But for the ambitious and those with room, start thinking about starting your early spring plants inside. Lettuce, broccoli, cauliflower etc., can be started inside for a quick start outside. You will need containers and a warm place to get them started. That and a little time should help you with your gardening fever.

Everyone has their favorite container. You can create your own from newspaper, use eggshells, paper cups or saved six packs from last year. It doesn’t matter, it just needs a drainage hole of some sort in the bottom. You can use a variety of soil mix also, although over the years I have developed a fondness for buying “seed-starting mix.” It generally has smaller particles and is lighter than a regular potting mix. If I use regular potting mix, I always add more perlite to the mix to improve drainage. Vermiculite will work also. Whatever you use, it needs to hold moisture but not get soggy. Little seedlings will succumb quickly to “dampening off” if the soil is too wet.

Plant seeds approximately six to eight weeks before you want to put them out in the garden, different varieties need different times. If you plant too early, it isn’t a crisis; you can slow down their growth—more on that later.

Pack the soil firmly into the container. Make sure it is wet before you add the seeds. Depending on how much time I have, I will either set the containers under the misters in my greenhouse overnight or I will mix the potting mix with water before I even put it in the container. Nothing is worse than watching your seeds

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I forgot to include this in the last newsletter. Thanks to all the Master Gardeners who put in hours last year!

**Master Gardeners Celebrate Successful Year at Annual Picnic**
by Pam Bowman

On a warm Saturday in early November, Yavapai County Master Gardeners and their families and friends enjoyed great food and engaging conversation in a beautiful setting. About 60 picnickers spent a lazy afternoon beneath large cottonwoods in full fall color growing on the banks Oak Creek. Following lunch, Yavapai County Agent Jeff Schalau thanked all active master gardeners for their volunteer contributions. Congratulations to those receiving recognition for cumulative hours:

100 hours: Evelyn Becker, Bob Burke, Marti Dodd, Charlotte Ewalt, Kathy Grant-Lilley, Ruth Jacobi, Laura James, Judy Mannen, Marilyn Perkins, Melissa Sandeen, Kitty Schleuter, Lindsay Schramm, Jule Weisenbeck, Richard Wise

250 hours: Jane Davie, John Hassell, John Paustian, Eunice Ricklefs, Bev Turnbull

500 hours: Mary Barnes, Rosh Preuss, Bill Starkman

1250 hours: Phil Young

1500 hours: Sal Sorrentino

1750 hours: Beverly Emerson

2000 hours: Nora Graf

Emeritus (10 years of active service): Nora Graf, Linda Scheerer, Art Fillippino, Orville Gilmore

We thank those responsible for another successful picnic: organizer Laura James, “site” director Jeanette Teets, and additional helpers Jane Davie, Rosh Preuss, Mary Barnes and Sal Sorrentino.

**Volunteer Opportunities.**

1) March 15, rose pruning demo/ work session at Sharlott Hall Museum, Prescott, 8am. Richard Wise (Master Gardener) manages their rose garden, and has offered pruning instructions to MGs who can stay for the day and help with the annual pruning. 6-10 volunteers needed. Contact Marti Dodd, 717-1810, mdodd@interwrx.com

2) Jeff Schalau is thinking about doing a landscape pruning demo in Prescott. We are looking for 1 volunteer to work with Jeff to set it up, and 6-10 volunteers to demo the pruning. It may be open to the public (not determined yet), and will be held in April or May. Please email Jeff if you are interested: jschalau@ag.arizona.edu.

3) The Prescott and Cottonwood Extension Offices need MGs to answer phones. For Prescott contact Bev Turnbull, 445-9590, baturnb@cableone.net, Cottonwood office contact Rosh Preuss, 282-9699, roshpreuss@yahoo.com

4) About 10 simple lesson plans need to be written for grades 3 to 5. It will require some research and computer skills to type them. You will be given a sample to follow. Estimated time to research, type plan, review it with a few MGs and trial in a classroom is 10 to 20 hours. Contact: Charlotte Ewalt, 443-5313, caewalt@cableone.net

Many thanks to those who helped at the Pecan and Wine festival last weekend.

Mary Barnes
washes away when you first water and the soil mix is so dry that it just floats away, seeds and all. Once the soil is moist, place the seeds. A general rule of thumb on planting depth is that the amount of soil on top of the seed shouldn’t be any deeper than the diameter of the seed. So if the seed is 1/8 inch, the amount of soil on top of it is 1/8 inch. Once the seeds are planted—water.

Seeds need warmth to germinate. While there is an entire science to germination, generally most plants like it to be at least 70-75°F for germination. Put your plants somewhere where the temperature is warm enough. A lot of people use the top of their refrigerator. Light isn’t as crucial at this point. It really helps if the soil is covered with something to preserve the moisture. Plastic wrap works or some sort of plastic cover. Moisture is crucial to germination. Once the seedlings poke their heads above ground they must have light. Here’s where you can slow down the process if you planted too early. Once the seedlings have their first leaves, they can tolerate colder temperatures. They will grow slowly but survive, so if you’ve rushed the season too much, put the plants in a cool, well-lighted location.

Once the seedlings first leaves appear, give them a weak fertilizer solution; one-quarter strength is enough. Continue to make sure the soil stays moist. While wilting seedlings isn’t the end of the world and they may recover, it will inhibit their growth.

Before you transplant, harden off the seedlings. They really won’t like it if you take them from some cushy environment and throw them to the wolves outside. Take the plants out and set them in a shady spot for several days before transplanting, gradually increasing the time outside. Transplant once the seedlings are four to five inches tall. It is best to plant seedlings late in the day or on a cloudy day, depending on the time of year. I usually plant after 4pm. The intense sun can fry tender seedlings very fast.

If you have more than one plant in a container, you can gently tease the roots apart to transplant them. Some plants don’t tolerate this well, like melons and some squashes, but others you can practically rip apart and they will be fine. Lettuce and tomatoes fall in this category. Gentle is better, though.

Once you have the seedlings in the ground, water. Even with hardening off, these little things can be very fragile and a moist environment not only protects the roots but it can create a microclimate of humidity which gives them a boost. In windy environments, protect them until they can withstand it by themselves. If you’ve done everything correctly, these plants should take off and be the start of a wonderful garden.
MG Association Meeting
Cottonwood  6:30pm
Cottonwood County Board of Supervisors Building,
10 S. 6th St.