

ANISE HYSSOP 2019 HERB OF THE YEAR and some of its colorful cousins

Kathleen Szabo, MGV 1993

Blue Fortune



The International Herb Association has named anise hyssop, *Agastache foeniculum*, 2019's Herb of the Year. Its leaves and flowers have a wonderful aroma that has been described as a combination of anise and mint or French tarragon and basil. I think it smells like root beer. It is a short-lived perennial that is native to North American plains and upland dry forests. It is in the *lamiaceae* family that includes mints. This is easily seen by its square stems. It is hardy in zones 3 to 8. Despite its name, anise hyssop is not related to either the anise or hyssop plant. The upright clump-forming plants grow from 2 to 4 feet tall and 1 to 3 feet wide and spread by rhizomes. The foliage remains green throughout the season and has a purplish cast on its new growth, especially at cooler temperatures. The upright flower spikes begin to form in midsummer and continue to bloom until frost. Flower color ranges from white to pale blue and lavender through deep blue-purple. The flowers attract lots of bees, butterflies and other insects that feed on the nectar or pollen, and sometimes hummingbirds. Goldfinches and other birds may eat the seeds later in the year. It is a favorite of beekeepers because it provides lots of pollen and nectar that makes a good-quality honey. The leaves of anise hyssop have been used for centuries as a substitute for French tarragon and for flavoring syrups, cordials and teas. They make interesting vinegars. Try some in vodka.

Golden Jubilee



Flowers can be sprinkled onto salads and fruits or candied for desserts. Both the leaves and flowers make nice additions to potpourri. Native Americans used the plant to treat various maladies. Flower spikes can be picked for fresh or dried bouquets. Deadhead to promote additional growth. Anise hyssop works well in the middle or back of the perennial border, in native, wild and herb gardens, as well as in meadows. It can be grown in small clumps or in masses. In native and wild gardens, it combines well with other natives such as Black-eyed Susans, goldenrods, purple coneflowers, bee balm, false sunflower and native grasses. In perennial or mixed borders, grow it with Globe Thistle, Japanese Anemone, Russian Sage and plants with purple or silver leaves such as *Heuchera* and *Artemisia*. The chartreuse foliage of 'Golden Jubilee' contrasts well with other green or purple-leaved plants.

Grow anise hyssop and its hybrids in full sun to part shade. It tolerates a wide range of soils as long as there is good drainage. Problems may arise from root rot in wet soils or rust, mildew and leaf spot in humid climates. Make sure plants are not crowded to assure good air circulation. Deer are not a problem, but rabbits aren't so picky. Plants grow easily from seed and have always bloomed the first year for me. They can also be divided in spring or fall. Take semi-ripe cuttings in early summer before they bloom. This is necessary for the hybrids. I start my seeds 4-6 weeks before planting out and grow them under fluorescent lights. You may also scatter seeds directly in the garden. Oftentimes, they selfseed.

Plants can live for about 3 years, but mine never seem to make it through the winter. The Brooklyn Botanical

Garden suggests leaving the plant intact with its flower heads through the winter and pruning to about 5 inches high in spring. But, there are no guarantees. *A. foeniculum* and its hybrids are grouped along with Korean hyssop (*A. rugosa*) as small-flowered types. Cultivars of *A. foeniculum* include: white 'Alabaster,' red-violet 'Blue Adder,' lavender 'Blue Blazes,' clear blue 'Blue Fountain' and the aforementioned 'Golden Jubilee,' a 2003 All American winner with lavender-blue flowers. The hybrids are not as attractive to pollinators as the species, but 'Blue Fortune' *A. foeniculum* x *rugosa*, which has thick, powder blue spikes and blooms non-stop all summer, is a butterfly magnet. Korean hyssop (*A. rugosa*) has deep violet-blue flowers and grows up to 24 inches tall. It has attractive green foliage. 'Blue Fortune' is a cross between Korean and anise hyssop. It grows up to 36 inches high. All of the small-flowered types adapt well to ordinary garden conditions.

Desert sunrise



There are **22 species of agastaches**, 21 of which hail from the American Southwest and Mexico. In the last 10 years, many species and hybrids of the large-flowered group of *agastaches* have become available. Many have been introduced by High Country Gardens. They come in a luscious array of sunset colors that reflect their Southwest origins: shades of orange, pink, lavender-pink and rose-pink. They all have fragrant leaves and spiked blooms, but vary in flower color, fragrance, leaf size and leaf shape. They are especially attractive to hummingbirds and are often referred to as hummingbird mints. *A. aurantiaca*, *A. cana*, and *A. rupestris* endure very dry conditions and poor, well-drained soil. Most will adapt to our common garden conditions. Their culture is very similar to lavender. If you have trouble growing

them, try planting them on a sunny south- or west-facing slope or in raised beds with sandy, fast-draining soil. Plant the crown high and then mulch with crushed gravel to encourage drainage away from the plant and to absorb heat on sunny winter days. Here are a few to consider: *A. rupestris* (Sunset hyssop) has narrow, gray-green, threadleaved leaves and salmon-colored flowers with a spicy, licorice scent. *A. rugosa* x *cana* (Texas hummingbird mint) has rose-pink flowers and grows up to 36 inches. Another cross of *A. rugosa* and *A. cana*, *A. x 'Desert Sunrise'* has lavender-pink calyces with contrasting orange-pink corollas on its spikes and grows up to 4 feet. *A. barberi* x *A. Mexicana* ('Tutti-fruitti') has non-stop raspberry-red flowers that grow on 2-3 foot stems. Hummingbirds love it. Zone 6-10. Two cultivars of *A. aurantiaca* (orange hummingbird mint) are 'Just Peachy' and 'Shades of Orange.' Both have intense, mint-scented foliage. Grow these in the garden with plants that also bloom all summer such as salvias, nepetas, and yarrows. Plants with grey foliage and ornamental grasses combine well with them. Succulents and cacti provide a sculptural contrast and re-create the look of their native habitat. Since they bloom into fall, use late bloomers such as asters and goldenrod. They are great in containers, where they can be combined with annuals and tender perennials.

I've only touched on a few *agastaches* available. More and more become available each day. As I get older and less able to do intensive garden work, I'm always looking for more easy-care plants. These are great for people like me. They provide color, texture, structure, fragrance and late season bloom. If you plant them, bees, butterflies and hummingbirds will come.



Photo credits: Bing.com/ images