

Bee-Friendly Flowers: Anise Hyssop

If you've ever sipped anisette, ouzo, or sambuca then you know what the sweet licorice flavor of anise tastes like. Yet despite its common name, anise hyssop is not related to the anise plant used to flavor anisette at all, nor the hyssop plant, for that matter. The confusion occurs because this fragrant herb has a strong licorice scent akin to anise (*Pimpinella anisum*), an herb native to the Mediterranean region. And the flowers are like those of the blue hyssop (*Hyssopus officinalis*), a European plant with many old world medicinal uses. Early settlers of the American prairies smelled and tasted anise hyssop, (*Agastache foeniculum*) and named it for the aromatic herbs they knew in Europe. Other common names include giant blue hyssop and licorice mint.



Anise hyssop grows from two to four feet tall with bright green, and sometimes purple-tinged heart-shaped leaves. Its square stems and opposite leaves tell us it belongs in the mint family. When crushed, the leaves have a strong aroma of licorice and mint, a smell much like crushed fennel seeds. The taste is surprisingly sweet, and the leaves are used in herbal teas, jams, and fresh in salads with other greens. The dried leaves can even be used in potpourri.

Anise hyssop blooms from June to September with four to six-inch spikes of tiny, lavender blue flowers.



The flowers occur in showy **verticillasters**, or densely-packed whorls. Each flower contains two pairs of protruding stamens; one pair is downward curved while the other curves upward. Each tiny tubular flower has an upper and lower lip, the lower acting as a landing platform for visiting insects.

These licorice scented flowers are as bee-friendly as you can get! They are nectar magnets for pollinators of all kinds, especially bumblebees, butterflies, moths, and beetles that feed on the nectar or pollen. The halictid bee (*Agapostemon virescens*), leaf-cutter bee (*Megachile mendica*), and the European honeybee (*Apis mellifera*) are frequent visitors. Pollinated flowers produce a super abundance of smooth, oval-shaped fruit or seeds that are technically nutlets. Goldfinches and other birds like to feed on the seeds once the blooms are finished.

Native Americans had many medicinal and culinary uses for anise hyssop. The Chippewa used an infusion of the leaves as a remedy for respiratory ailments and as a sleep aid. The leaves contain many different essential oils including methyleugenol, which is thought to have sedative properties. Another essential oil is limonene, a compound that has been found to neutralize stomach acid and promote a healthy digestive tract. The Woods Cree of Saskatchewan used the leaves for a digestive tea, as did the native tribes of the upper Midwest, who also used the plant as a food flavoring. They also burned it as incense to ease depression. The Cheyenne used anise hyssop tea to treat coughs, colds, and heart

ailments. Leaves were used in a steam bath to induce sweating and treat fevers. Anise hyssop has been commercially cultivated for methyl chavicol, a flavoring for beverages like root beer and liqueurs.

Anise hyssop grows well in hot and dry conditions, something to consider as the climate continues to change and our gardens experience extremes in weather conditions. It is easily started from seed and often blooms the first year. Just leave the seed heads in place to dry and let the seeds fall onto the bed below the plant or sprinkle the tiny seeds on top of the soil in the fall. The next spring you will be amazed at the abundance of baby plants that will emerge and grow.

Duke Farms Connection

At Duke Farms, look for the big patch of anise hyssop right on the path as you cross Duke's Parkway West with the crossing guard. It is also well established in the Pollinator House.

Want to grow anise hyssop in your garden? Buy plants or seeds from native nurseries and **never collect them from the wild!** [The Native Plant Society of New Jersey](#) is a great resource to help you find where to buy them or to get more information.

Anise Hyssop: Questions and Answers

1. What other plants inspired the name of this herb?

Answer: Anise (Pimpinella anisum), an herb native to the Mediterranean region which has a strong licorice scent and the flowers are like those of the blue hyssop (Hyssopus officinalis), a European native with many old world medicinal uses.

2. What characteristic tells us this plant is a member of the mint family?

Answer: It has opposite leaves, a square stem, and strong aroma.

3. The flowers bloom June - September in a whorled formation on the flower stalk. What is this called?

Answer: Verticillasters.

4. Anise hyssop has tiny tubular flowers with upper and lower lips. What is the function of the lower lip?

Answer: To serve as a landing platform for pollinators.

5. This plant is a pollinator magnet - name three bees that feed on it.

Answer: The bumblebee, honeybee, and the halictid bee.

6. What bird loves the seeds?

Answer: Goldfinches.

7. What are some ways anise hyssop was used medicinally by native Americans?

Answer: For respiratory ailments, sleep aid, digestive aid, treat fevers, and to ease depression

8. Why is anise hyssop a good plant for gardens as the climate changes?

Answer: It grows well in hot and dry conditions.

9. Where can you see anise hyssop at Duke Farms?

Answer: At the crossing guard and in the Pollinator House.



Additional Resources

- [Johnson Wildflower Center](#)
- [Georgetown University Medical Center, urban plants](#)
- [USDA Plants database](#)
- [USDA fact sheet](#)
- [Watch bumblebees on Anise Hyssop](#)

*Photos courtesy of Mrs. Bird's garden