

News Release:

Rhonda Simmons, Senior Research Assistant
Central Oregon Agriculture Research Center
541-475-7107

Rhonda.simmons@oregonstate.edu

The Season of Candy Canes

The candy cane is one of the most popular symbols of the season. It is traditionally white with red stripes and flavored with peppermint. Peppermint is a classic winter flavor associated with the holidays. It may surprise you to know that central Oregon is a prominent producer of peppermint for oil. Many candy cane makers use central Oregon peppermint because it is well known for its consistent clear, cool, minty flavor. When you make a product that is known for its single flavor, like a candy cane, you want to use top quality ingredients.

What makes our area favorable to growing peppermint? We are north of the 41st parallel, where the right amount of daylight, cool evenings and warm days to produce the best quality of oil anywhere in the world.

You might not recognize the three-foot-tall dark green fields along the highway, but during August you might smell the mint while driving by. When the crop matures it is swathed like alfalfa, leaving mounded rows of "hay," or cut mint. The hay is left to dry, then picked up by a mechanical chopper and blown into specially designed trailer.

The mint is distilled in these trailers that are transported to the distilling area where steam is used to extract the oil stored in glands on the underside of the peppermint leaves. Steam lines are hooked to the bottom of the tub and vapor tubes are hooked to the top. Steam moves through the mint hay, removing the oil as vapor.

Using steam distillation helps maintain the properties of the oil, preventing the oil quality from decomposing. The vapor mixture is cooled and condensed, usually yielding a layer of oil and a layer of water. The oil is separated from the water and poured into 55 gallon drums.

The high quality mint oil is then sold to flavoring companies all around the world. Peppermint oil is used in many products including candy, toothpaste, mouthwash, and chewing gum. An acre of mint produces about 70 pounds of oil. One pound of peppermint oil can flavor 40,000 sticks of gum or 1500 tubes of toothpaste. That is a powerful little plant!

Peppermint is also used as insect repellents, fragrance in soaps, and in aroma therapy. Peppermint isn't just used as oil; leaves are used in composting, teas, as garnishes, and as chewing tobacco substitutes. In 2011, Oregon produced 23,000 acres of peppermint worth 49 million dollars to Oregon's economy.

As you sit around the fire this winter enjoying your cup of peppermint hot chocolate and enjoying a candy cane, remember it may have all started with your local farmers in a sunny, summer field right here in central Oregon. Happy Holidays.