

Candy Canes- Flavored by Central Oregon Peppermint

By: Katie M. Ralls

With the holiday season officially upon us, we are flooded with images and symbols of the holidays. A more prominent symbol of the holiday season is the candy cane. Candy canes began as all white, straight, sugar sticks. In 1670, the choir master at the Cologne Cathedral in Germany had the sticks bent into cane shapes, to represent a Shepherds hook, and then handed them out to children who were attending the holiday church services. It was early in the 20th century that the red stripes and peppermint flavoring were added to the candy canes. It may come as a surprise to many Central Oregonians that the candy canes they enjoy, may be flavored with peppermint grown locally!

Peppermint (*Mentha X piperita*) is a hybrid mint plant, resulting from the cross of watermint and spearmint plants. In the early 19th century, commercial mint varieties were introduced in the United States on the East coast but it wasn't until the 1920s that commercial mint spread to the northwest. Today, Oregon leads the United States in production of peppermint growing nearly 35% of the nation's total. Approximately 90% of US mint oil is produced for toothpaste, chewing gum and other confectionary items.

Peppermint is either planted in late fall or in spring, using specialty mechanical planters. Since mint is a perennial plant that does not produce seeds, it is planted using stolons (horizontal runners that grow roots) produced by existing plants. Mint stolons are dug from existing fields and then planted within a few days due to their short shelf life. Mint is harvested from late July to mid August. Maximum oil yield is highly dependent upon environmental conditions. Long, warm, sunny days, increases the oil production which is stored in glands on the underside of the leaves.

Once the mint is ready to harvest, it is cut and windrowed much similar to how hay is harvested. The crop then remains in field for 2-3 days to dry before being collected for distillation. Once it has dried, it is chopped and blown into an enclosed trailer (tub) and transported to the distiller. At the distillery, the mint oil is extracted from the leaves using steam. Pressurized steam is forced into and released through tiny holes in tubes into the bottom of the mint tub. That steam then rises through the chopped mint and the oil is vaporized. The oil and steam vapors then pass through an outgoing vapor line at the top of the tub piped into water cooled condensers where the vapors cool to form an oil. Once the oil has risen to the top of the water, it is skimmed off and drawn into 55 gallon drums. 55 gallons of mint oil can be used to flavor approximately 5 million sticks of chewing gum or 400,000 tubes of toothpaste! Mint fields are generally in production for 3-5 years before being replaced with another crop.

Over 1,000 acres of peppermint were planted and harvested in Central Oregon during 2012, yielding an average of 80 pounds per acre, grossing nearly \$2 million. To learn more about peppermint and to see where it is growing in Jefferson County, visit the peppermint page on the Jefferson County Seed Grower's website (www.jeffcoseed.com/crops/peppermint).