

Nepeta cataria

[Synonyms : *Calamintha albiflora*, *Cataria vulgaris*, *Nepeta bodinieri*]

CAT-MINT is a perennial. Native to Europe, and eastern and western Asia, it has small blue- or purple-dotted, white flowers.

It is also known as *Aitokissanminttu* (Finnish), *Calaminta* (Spanish), *Cataria* (Italian), Cat-in-clover, Catnep, Catnip, Catrup, Cat's heal-all, Cat's paws, Catswort, *Chataire* (French), Common cat-mint, Dogmint, *Echte Katzenminze* (German), English catnip, Field balm, *Gewöhnliche Katzenminze* (German), *Katario* (Esperanto), *Kattmynta* (Swedish), *Katzenminze* (German), *Mintys y Gath* (Welsh), Nep, *Népéta des chats* (French), Nep-in-a-hedge, *Nept* (German), Nip, and *Šanta kočičí* (Czech).

The flowers are pollinated by bees.

Greenish essential oil can be extracted from cat mint.

Warning – cat-mint is mildly hallucinogenic if smoked. Large doses of warm cat-mint tea can cause vomiting.

Cataria is derived from a late Latin word *cathus* meaning 'of cats'.

Cat-mint's odour acts like a feline aphrodisiac – an effect that is not achieved if the plant is included in the animal's diet. Cats (large and small whether male, female or castrated) are almost compulsively attracted to it when it has been bruised and they will lie down in the middle of the growing plant wherever it is – hence the name catnip or cat-mint. But rats and insects are said to dislike the smell of the plant and this may lend it to acting as a protective edging for crops.

The plant used to be valued for its culinary and medicinal uses and, because of the mildly hallucinogenic properties in the dried leaves, was smoked to ease life's stresses.

The French in particular have picked the young shoots and leaves as seasoning.

It was probably the hallucinogenic properties that fostered the belief that the plant could instil courage, and it has been claimed that public hangmen in England chewed the plant as they performed their duties.

In North America it came to be known to many Indian tribes and some of the Chippewa used the leaves to make a tea.

Authorities note observations by the Okanagan-Colville Indians that skunks eat the plant.

For North American Indian tribes the plant's medicinal qualities have been especially respected – not least among the Quileute and Hoh Indians who believed it to be safe for children. Okanagan-Colville, Iroquois and Cherokee Indians all took it as a remedy for colds (and the Cherokee gave it to adults and children alike). Both Iroquois and Cherokee tribes also prescribed it for coughs, and they and the Menominee used it as a sedative – one that the Iroquois chose for children particularly. It was taken for wind by Iroquois and Cherokee adults and Mohican children, and the Cherokee also used it for stomach upsets. While Iroquois Indians turned to it for treating vomiting, diarrhoea, sore throats and children's headaches, the Menominee used the plant to cause sweating and treat pneumonia. It provided pain relief for Rappahannock babies, and was used for female problems by the Cherokee. Some of the Chippewa took it for blood disorders, and the Iroquois, Cherokee and Chippewa tribes all used it to ease fever. In addition Cherokee Indians chose it for treating convulsions, worms and boils, the Keresan regarded it as a stimulant, and the

Shinnecock smoked the dried leaves to ease rheumatism. Not least it provided a tonic for children in the Delaware and Rappahannock tribes.

Today the essential oil is used by the perfumery industry.

Medicinally, the plant was used by herbalists (and is still valued today) for the treatment of feverish colds. A tea made from the leaves has also been recommended for nursing childish diseases such as measles and chickenpox, and also for some period problems, wind, headaches, fevers, insomnia, nervousness and hypertension. The fresh leaves are chewed to ease toothache.