

## Biological Characteristics, Nutritional and Medicinal Value of Catnip, *Nepeta cataria*



Fig. 1. Catnip plant, *Nepeta cataria*

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Scientists at Southern University are collaborating with Dr. James E. Simon of Rutgers University to investigate the feasibility of growing catnip (*Nepeta cataria* L.) in Louisiana. The purpose of this project is to evaluate the performance of catnip as a niche market herb under Louisiana weather conditions. This bulletin presents the basic information on biological characteristics, food use and medicinal values of catnip.

### Introduction

Catnip, native to dry regions of the Mediterranean, Europe, Asia, Eurasia and Africa, was introduced to America by the early settlers as a garden herb, and was later naturalized in North America. Catnip has been used for ornamental and culinary purposes as well as a domestic folk-medicine remedy.

### Botanical description

Catnip shares the same family with mint plant. It is a perennial herb that has square stem, opposite leaf arrangement. It bears many small purple-spotted white or pale lavender tubular flowers, which are tightly clustered at the end of the floral branches. The plant can grow up to about 3 feet high and blooms in summer. The leaves are heart-shaped with scalloped edges ranging from grey green to green color and are often crowded toward the top of the plant. The plant can be propagated from seeds or from root divisions.

### Ecology

Catnip plant grows well in well-drained soil with pH ranging from about 5 to 7.5, and is considered hardy under Louisiana conditions. It grows well in area with full sun and with an annual temperature of 45<sup>0</sup> – 66<sup>0</sup> F.

### Food use

- Catnip leaves are used to add flavor to sauces, soups and stews.
- The dried leaves, seeds or powdered roots can be used as herbal tea.

### Non-food use

- The fresh, dried and crushed catnip leaves can be used to stuff cloth pouches to make cat toys, which encourages the cat to play, and it appears to be harmless and non-addictive.

- Catnip oil can be used as natural insecticide.
- Thymol extracted from Catnip can be used as fungicide and preservative. Thymol is a crystalline phenol with aromatic odor and antiseptic properties.

- Catnip has been used for relief of insomnia.
- The juice of catnip leaves can be used to stimulate menstrual flow.

### Medicinal uses (Caution: please seek professional advice before using catnip)

- Leaves can be chewed to alleviate toothache.
- Catnip tea has been shown to have anti-cholinergic effects and has been used to relieve intestinal cramps and gas discomforts.
- Taken as hot infusion, catnip promotes sweating and is beneficial for cure of colds, flu and fevers.
- Catnip is believed to help prevent miscarriage and pre-mature birth and allay morning sickness.

### References

Non-timer forest products (Fact sheet no. 4), Virginia Tech University.

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Simon, J. E., A. F. Chadwick and L. E. Craker. 1984. Herbs. An Indexed Bibliography 1971-1980. The Scientific Literature on Selected Herbs and Aromatic and Medicinal Plants of the Temperate Zone. Archon Books, 770 pp., Hamden, CT.

### For more information on catnip, please contact:

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Fig. 2. Catnip grown in the horticultural experiment farm at Southern University



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