

# Catnip and Catmint — What's the Difference?

By Elaine Homstad, Fairfax Master Gardener

Novice gardeners often disregard botanical names. They just pick up something at the nursery, home improvement store or big-box discount store that bears the common name of a plant they think they want. Such is the case with catnip. True catnip is a perennial herb whose botanical name is *Nepeta cataria*.

## Characteristics of *Nepeta cataria*

*N. cataria* has square, hairy stalks (like all members of the mint family) and gray-green heart-shaped leaves with scalloped edges. It has rather small and unremarkable white flower spikes, often appearing only late in the season. *N. cataria* grows to about 30 inches high, has a spreading habit, and can be rather weedy looking, with a tendency to crowd out other plants around it. But this is the variety that appeals to most cats, so if you are growing it for your feline friends, be certain you get this variety.



photo: Richard Hawke, Chicago Botanical Garden

Catmint *Nepeta faassenii* Walker's Low

## Characteristics of *Nepeta*

The genus *Nepeta* is a member of the mint family (Lamiaceae), of which there are approximately 250 species. Many *Nepetas* besides *N. cataria* are called catnip, but they really should bear the common name of catmint. These are the varieties that are most commonly sold, and they actually perform better in the garden as a flowering perennial than does "true" catnip.



*Nepeta cataria* blossom

Most have longer and larger flower spikes in shades of purple, blue, pink or white. The flowers appear in late spring to early summer, last for many weeks and frequently rebloom throughout the growing season. Their gray-green foliage is attractive, and many of these varieties are less aggressive, making them good companion plants. Their range of heights makes them versatile for different settings, from rock gardens to borders to cutting gardens. The catmints work well planted in combination with regular hybrid or tea roses. Interplanted with spring flowering bulbs, particularly alliums, they can mask the bare lower branches of the rose bush or camouflage the remaining foliage of the bulbs.

A very desirable trait of all *Nepetas* is that they are generally NOT attractive to deer and rabbits because of their strong fragrance and fuzzy stems and leaves. And they do attract pollinators and other wildlife, such as bees, butterflies and hummingbirds.

## Catmint varieties

Most *Nepetas* that you will find for sale are varieties of *N. x faassenii*, *N. racemosa* or *N. subsessilis*.

### Faassen's catmint (*Nepeta x faassenii*)

A very easy-to-find variety. Its flowers are sterile flowers, which eliminates the need for deadheading to prevent self-seeding. Cultivars of this species are widely available, including

'Dropmore' — 18 inches tall, 36 inches wide, lavender-blue flowers

'Joanna Reed' — 24 inches tall, 48 inches wide, lavender-blue flowers

'Snowflake' — 12 inches tall, 12 inches wide, white flowers

'Six Hills Giant' — 30 inches tall, 48 inches wide, lavender-blue flowers

Persian catmint (*Nepeta racemosa*)

'Blue Wonder' — 18 inches tall, 38 inches wide, lavender-blue flowers

'Little Titch' — 10 inches tall, 30 inches wide, purple-blue flowers

'Walker's Low' — 30 inches tall, 36 inches wide, lavender-blue flowers

Japanese catmint (*Nepeta subsessilis*)

'Candy Cat' — 14 inches tall, 27 inches wide, light violet flowers

'Sweet Dreams' — 30 inches tall, 36 inches wide, pink flowers

### Growing catnip and catmints

Most *Nepetas* can thrive in full sun or partial shade and well-drained but not overly fertile soil. They prefer some benign neglect and do not require fertilizers and rich soil. Once established, they are also both drought-tolerant (as are most plants with gray-green foliage) and humidity-tolerant, making them ideal for local DC-area growing conditions. One caution, however: although they tolerate humidity, they can be susceptible to powdery mildew if overcrowded. They are relatively pest-free, but they can be attractive to aphids, spider mites and slugs. Also, overwatering or excessively moist or poorly drained soil can lead to root rot and death.



photo: University of Minnesota

*Nepeta x faassenii*

Catmints have a mounding tendency and can be easily divided every three to four years. Shearing back plants by about one third after their first blooms fade will encourage a second round of flowers in late summer.

Catmints and catnip can be successfully grown in containers, so if you want to grow true catnip (*N. cataria*), that is probably a better way to do it — if you can keep your housecat away from it once the plant is indoors.

### Fun facts about catnip and cats

1. Catnip contains a chemical compound called nepetalactone that triggers a response in the brains of susceptible cats.
2. Not all felines are affected by catnip, but even large cats (lions, tigers, leopards, panthers) can be. Experts estimate about 50 to 75 percent have a reaction, which is due to a genetically inherited trait. Very young kittens (under two or three months) and senior cats are less likely to react.
3. The effects of catnip on felines varies depending on whether they eat it or only smell it.
4. The effect of catnip only lasts 15 to 30 minutes.
5. Catnip is not addictive.
6. Fresh catnip is a very effective pest repellent against flies, mosquitoes, cockroaches, termites, mice and rats. It is about 10 times as effective as DEET. Unfortunately, when applied to the skin, nepetalactone loses its ability to repel insects.
7. Catnip is used by humans as a tea or infusion, as a mild analgesic or sedative, or topically for cuts by crushing and moistening fresh catnip leaves and applying the paste to the wound. Some also use it as an herb for cooking.

### Resources

Herb Culture and Use, VCE Publication 426-420

A Comparative Study of Cultivated Catmints, Richard G. Hawke, Chicago Botanic Garden Issue 29, 2007  
Pet Nutrition and Animal Wellness, Dr. Joseph Mercola