

# *Poliomintha maderensis* J. Hendrickson

## Mexican Oregano

(incorrectly identified as *Poliomintha incana* or *Poliomintha longiflora*)

**Other Common Names:** Madrean Rosemary, Rosemary Mint.

**Family:** Lamiaceae (Labiatae).

**Cold Hardiness:** Mexican Oregano is an evergreen woody shrub in USDA zones 9b to 11, a dieback woody subshrub in 9a to 8b, and often root hardy in zones 8a(7b); it tends to be a more reliable woody plant in arid regions; hardiness in zones 8 and 7 can be suspect, particularly in more mesic climates.

**Foliage:** Evergreen to semi-evergreen; simple; ovate-elliptic on vegetative stems to nearly lanceolate on flower stalks; small, ¼O to ½O long, reminiscent of those of *Salvia greggii*; bases rounded to acute; tips rounded, obtuse to acute; blades green with light colored pubescence, particularly beneath; margins entire; foliage with an oregano-like fragrance when bruised.

**Flower:** Spikes of nearly white to lavender colored tubular flowers peaking in later spring to early summer and borne periodically thereafter until frost; flowers do a reverse fade going from a light nearly white pink to a deep lavender as they mature; the five petals fuse into a long corolla that is a shallowly curved funnel-shaped tube which is slightly taller than wide; the upper lobes extending forward and the lower three lobes are partially recurved; the stamens are slightly exerted from the top of the corolla; pistils and anthers are both purple in color; although flowers are only about 1 ½O long they are showy *en masse*.

**Fruit:** Fruit seldom develops in cultivation, presumably due to the lack of a suitable pollinator or perhaps self-incompatibility.

**Stem / Bark:** Stems — light to medium green turning light brown to brown; squarish in cross-section; stiff and brittle; becoming woody over time; rather sparsely branched; pubescent; Buds — tiny; pubescent; green turning brown; Bark — brown to gray-brown; shredded with age.

**Habit:** In warm desert regions, *P. maderensis* tends to become a true woody shrub, while in cooler climates and eastern locations where growth dies back more frequently, it functions as a herbaceous perennial or subshrub; initially the plant has a rather narrow upright habit, but eventually spreads out to become a 3N to 4N tall shrub with a similar width; individual stems tend to branch little and may either be strongly erect or arch over as the inflorescences develop on the terminus; the overall texture is medium to medium-fine.

**Cultural Requirements:** Full sun to filtered shade are acceptable, with full sun preferred in all but very hot desert conditions; plants are denser and neater in appearance if treated as a herbaceous perennial and pruned back to the woody base each winter; less severe periodic pruning when growing the plants as shrubs helps maintain a more uniform habit; although tolerant of various soil types, soils be well drained or root rots will develop; Mexican Oregano not only tolerates, but may actually grow best in neutral to alkaline soils; good air movement will reduce foliar fungal pathogens.

**Pathological Problems:** Mexican Oregano suffers from very few disease or pest problems when grown on a suitable site; root and stem rots due to excess soil or atmospheric moisture are the principal limitations.

**Ornamental Assets:** The profusion of tubular light pink to lavender flowers are the primary asset; good adaptation to hot arid climates and moderate deer resistant are also pluses.

**Limitations & Liabilities:** Intolerance to excess soil moisture and limited cold tolerance are the primary liabilities; also refined is not a term often applied to this species' growth habit.

**Landscape Utilization:** Since flowering occurs on the current season's growth, Mexican Oregano can be effective as shrubs, subshrubs, herbaceous perennials or even annuals in colder climates; it provides good color from late spring to frost and is a source of hummingbird nectar; butterflies are also attracted and its fragrance might merit inclusion in a scent garden; perhaps its best use is in naturalized settings for arid climates.

**Other Comments:** *Poliomintha maderensis* is sometimes used as a spicier substitute for the true Oregano (*Origanum vulgare*) in southwestern cuisine; reported by some to have been brought into the regional nursery trade by the noted horticulturist Mr. Lynn Lowrey, while others trace its introduction back to Mr. Rusty Crowley of Casa Verde Growers in San Antonio; either way it is a popular plant for Southwestern U.S. gardens; plants have proved rather short-lived in College Station and Houston, but fair much better in the Hill Country and South Texas; the genus name derives from the Greek words for hoary or whitish-gray (polios) and mint (mintha); the specific epithet refers to the plant's native location in Mexico.

**Native Habitat:** Central Coahuila in Mexico.

**Related Taxa:** There is considerable controversy over the correct species identity of the plants in the nursery trade being sold as Mexican Oregano; initially it was often sold under the name of *Poliomintha incana* (J. Torrey) A. Gray which is actually a different species native to the Southwestern U.S., later under then name *Poliomintha longiflora* A. Gray, and now there is evidence to suggest that *Poliomintha maderensis* J. Hendrickson is the correct designation; many of the plants in the trade are very closely related as propagation is typically vegetative; it might be useful to return to the wild populations to see if greater variation in traits such as flower color or growth habit can be found.

***Poliomintha incana*** (J. Torrey) A. Gray  
(*Hedeoma incana*)

### **Desert Rosemary**

- C *Poliomintha incana* is also known as Hoary Rosemary Mint or Rosemary Mint; this native of the Southwestern U.S. and Northern Mexico grows to be a 3N to 4N tall shrub, subshrub, or herbaceous perennial; numerous erect stems branch from a woody base; Desert Rosemary is grown for its gray-green to silver-green fragrant foliage, rather than its flowers; the gray-green coloration comes from the dense fine silver to white hairs on the surface of the small green linear-lanceolate leaves; flowers on *P. incana* are much smaller and less showy than those on *P. maderensis*; the foliage has a pungent aroma when bruised.
- C Desert Rosemary is root hardy in USDA zone 8, with stems hardy in 9 to 11; the primary use of this species is for its gray-green to silver-green foliage and general durability; it is very heat and drought tolerant and is at home in desert landscapes; the specific epithet means gray or hoary.

***Origanum vulgare*** L.

### **Oregano**

- C *Origanum vulgare* is also known as Common Oregano, Pot Marjoram, True Oregano, or Wild Marjoram; this Old World stoloniferous herbaceous perennial is famous for its use as the culinary herb oregano; the rounded mounding plants grow 120 to 240 tall depending upon the site conditions and cultivar; Oregano is native to dry gravelly infertile sites, but is adapted to a wide range of soil types; plants have naturalized locally in the U.S. in USDA zones 5(4) to 8(9), but tend to suffer in the heat of warmer parts of Texas.
- C The 1/20 to 10 long opposite sparsely pubescent ovate leaves are medium green to yellow-green in color and emit an aromatic scent when crushed; stronger scented foliage occurs in full sun than partial shade; the small 1/40 long two-lipped flowers are white, pink or purple in color and can be found in terminal or axillary spikes from late spring or early summer to frost.
- C The genus name derives from the classic Greek name "origanon" for Oregano and the specific

epithet means common.

**References:** Irish, 2006; Ryan, 1998; Welsh, 1989.

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