

LAMIACEAE · MINT FAMILY

Yerba Buena

Clinopodium douglasii

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OHLONE · POMO · MIWOK · MANY CALIFORNIA TRIBES

Native Range: Western North America — British Columbia south through California to Baja California

⊕ About This Plant

Yerba buena ('good herb' in Spanish) is a delicate, trailing ground cover with small, rounded, sweetly aromatic leaves and tiny white to pale lavender flowers. It creeps along the forest floor, rooting at nodes, forming soft mats of fragrant foliage. The scent is a clean, minty sweetness — gentle and refreshing.

This is the plant that gave San Francisco its original name — the settlement was called Yerba Buena before it was renamed in 1847. Spanish missionaries recognized its medicinal value and adopted the name from local indigenous peoples who had been using it for centuries. It is one of the most beloved native ground covers for shaded California gardens.

Growing Conditions

LIGHT

Part shade to full shade

WATER

Low to moderate — prefers some moisture but surprisingly drought tolerant in shade

SOIL

Rich, well-drained forest soil

HARDINESS

USDA Zones 7–10

MATURE SIZE

2–4 inches tall, spreading as ground cover

GROWTH RATE

Moderate — spreads by rooting stems

BLOOM

Tiny white to pale lavender flowers, April–September. Subtle but charming.

HABITAT

Shaded forest floors, under oaks, in coastal fog belt woodlands. Often found trailing over logs and rocks.

Traditional & Cultural Uses

Tea & Beverage

Yerba buena leaf tea is perhaps the most universally enjoyed California native plant tea. Leaves were steeped fresh or dried for a sweet, minty, refreshing drink. It was and remains a daily pleasure tea — not just medicine but genuine enjoyment.

Digestive Aid

Tea was used to ease stomachache, gas, colic, and general digestive discomfort. The carminative properties of the mint family oils are gentle and effective.

Fever & Cold Remedy

Warm tea was used to reduce fevers, ease cold symptoms, and promote sweating during illness.

Pain Relief

Poultices of leaves were applied for headaches and toothaches. The mild analgesic properties provided gentle relief.

A LIVING RELATIONSHIP

Yerba buena is the 'good herb' — simple, gentle, and genuinely helpful. It doesn't shout for attention; it covers the ground quietly and offers a cup of the sweetest tea you've ever tasted when you need it. San Francisco was named after this plant, and the name was well-earned. Sometimes the most powerful plants are the humblest ones.

Medicinal Uses

Digestive Comfort

The primary medicinal use — leaf tea for stomachache, gas, nausea, and colic. Safe and gentle enough for children.

Fever Reduction

Warm tea promotes sweating and helps reduce fever during colds and flu.

Headache & Pain

Applied as a poultice or drunk as tea for headaches, toothaches, and mild pain.

General Wellness Tea

Enjoyed broadly as a health-promoting daily beverage — not just for illness but for maintaining wellbeing.

Ecological Role

Ground cover — Forms a living carpet under trees, suppressing weeds and retaining soil moisture.

Pollinator support — Small flowers attract tiny native bees and beneficial insects.

Soil protection — Trailing stems and rooting nodes prevent erosion on forest floors and shaded slopes.

Indicator species — Presence indicates healthy, undisturbed woodland conditions.

Propagation

- 1 **Stem cuttings:** The easiest method — cut sections of trailing stem with roots already forming at nodes. Plant directly in moist, shaded soil.

2 **Division:** Lift and divide established mats in fall or early spring.

3 **Seed:** Very small seed, surface sow on moist soil in shade. Germination is slow and spotty. Vegetative methods are far easier.

