

Farm in mint condition

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A hundred years ago, England's mint had an international reputation for excellence and quality, but rising labour costs and the need for growers to concentrate on essential foods during the 1940s resulted in its decline and disappearance from commercial production.

Now, though, England's reputation for excellence has been reinstated, thanks in no small way to Sir Michael Colman (*pictured right*). His company, Summerdown Mint, is a unique supplier in the UK of pure, single-estate peppermint oil, distilled on his Hampshire farm from his own crops.

"My family had a traditional, farming background. We prided ourselves on taking care of the crop — from the farm to the producer," explains Sir Michael. He worked for many years in the family business, Colman's Mustard, and went on to become chairman of Reckitt and Colman plc.

"When I retired, I wanted to do something else related to food and farming."

Mint has been recognised as a staple of the culinary and medicinal garden for centuries. The ninth century abbot

of Reichenau Monastery on Lake Constance wrote that if anyone could name all the properties of mint, they would know how many fish swam in the sea.

Peppermint was apparently first discovered in Britain in Hertfordshire in 1796, and subsequent commercial cultivation centred around Mitcham in



Surrey, where the light, sandy soil favoured it.

"We've a 2,000 acre (800 ha), essentially arable family farm," Sir Michael continues. "Recognising the pressures on modern farming like our neighbours, we'd been trying for some years to identify speciality crops which might be commercially successful."

"Our soil is particularly suitable for mint. It's free draining, light and chalky, though a bit stony, and we only average thirty-nine inches (100 cm) of rainfall annually."

It's temperate here too. Usually not too hot in summer and not too cold in winter — although actually, mint can cope with cold.

"The traditions of mint farming in England had all been lost by the time we started. We had to find out how to do it all over again, learning from American growers. They'd taken over as producers of quality mint."

Mint (*Mentha*) is a genus of perennials, with numerous varieties and hybrids. Whilst native to the Mediterranean and Western Asia, all are now grown worldwide in the temperate climates. Many are semi-evergreen. Like other members of the Labiatae family, mints are characterised by square stems, paired leaves and small summer flowers, ranging in colour from purple to white. They have creeping, underground root systems. Many domestic gardeners perceive them as invasive and prefer to keep them in pots.

In England, mint had been cultivated by plant growers and nurseries



Harvesting Black Mitcham mint at Summerdown in Hampshire.

rather than traditional farmers. In part, this had arisen because the rose growers of Surrey had observed that, by rotating mint every few years with roses, their soil was 'cleaned' and they could return to growing the more lucrative roses without any of those problems of disease which can occur when they are grown for too long in the same area. Indeed, Sir Michael



Above, farm manager Ian Margetts in the distillery at Summerdown; left, examining the mint flowers before harvest.

observed that he had noticed a similar improvement in the crop from a wheat field when he replanted after a period of trialling mint there.

Mentha piperita, the variety known as Black Mitcham (the name derived from its dark, almost black stems), is a very traditional mint, although quite rare today. It is considered superior to all others so it was naturally Sir Michael's choice.

"I felt we had a real opportunity to establish pure, estate-grown, English

mint here. We introduced our first crops in the mid-1980s and developed the processes during the early 1990s.'

Ian Margetts, the farm manager, had to make a number of visits to Oregon in the USA to learn about procedures.

"First, we had to learn how to grow the crop," Ian explains. "Although there were two other companies in the UK working with mint, distillation knowledge was generally lacking here.

"I got a great deal of help from the Oregon growers and, subsequently, we've been able to develop and obtain the necessary distillation equipment, either by making it ourselves or by buying it from the States.

"Our oil is unique because it is made from quality plants grown and distilled here with no blending."

A certain acreage is dedicated to mint for tea. The leaves from the Black Mitcham plants are stripped off in June, dried down to four per cent moisture and then put into sealed bags. These dried leaves may then either be milled and infused with Summerdown's peppermint oil to be made up into Summerdown's own teabags, or sold on to other tea manufacturers. Adding the pure oil to the milled mint leaves makes Summerdown's tea particularly aromatic and refreshing.

The acreage set aside for peppermint oil production is harvested later (July-August), when the flowers are out and fields appear a mass of purple blue.

"The crop should be dry," explains

Ian. "It's cut and fed directly into a mobile still which is then taken to the distillation barn. There, steam is fed into the bottom of the sealed still and, after about four hours' cooking, the oil and water escape through a pipe at the top to a pyramid-shaped condenser where the waste water is removed.

"It sounds straightforward, just a question of how much pressure, how much steam and how long the process should take.

"But we've learnt from experience that we have to make adjustments according to the harvesting conditions and that it's a very delicate balance, varying from crop to crop."

"We have a gas chromatographer for accurate separation and analysis, but I think Ian's instinct is better," interjects Sir Michael.

"The oil is stored in stainless steel tanks for the first year," Ian continues. "Then it's transferred into lacquer-lined steel drums so it cannot eat its way out. It's highly corrosive to unprotected metal. And like wine, the scent changes from fresh and sharp just after harvesting, becoming smoother as it ages."

Summerdown's pure, single-estate peppermint oil is used not only in its own products but also by a number of other discerning companies. ■

For further information, contact Summerdown Mint, Estate Office, Malshanger, Basingstoke, Hants RG23 7EY; telephone 01256 780252; www.summerdownmint.com.