

Thyme



Thymus vulgaris

Photo: Andyciodia 4/23/05

Botanical Description

There are approximately 100 species of thyme. However, three of these species are most prominent: garden thyme, European wild thyme, and lemon thyme.ⁱ Thyme is very aromatic and generally reaches a height of four to eight inches high. The aroma mostly comes from the leaves, which is the part of the herb most commonly used. The leaves are generally used fresh or dried. They can be added to a dish for flavoring as a sprig of thyme, to later be removed before eating. The leaves are generally less than a half an inch long and are an oval shape.ⁱⁱ

Cultivation

If planting from seed thyme should be planted in late March or early April. Seeds should be placed 8-9 inches from each other about a half in deep. Thyme thrives in dry stony soils that are warm. The roots can also be divided and replanted throughout the months of May to September.ⁱⁱ

Origin

Thymus was Greek for “courage” and thus is associated with the herb’s invigorating qualities.ⁱⁱⁱ It originated in the Mediterranean region, northern Africa and parts of Asia.^{iv}

History

Thyme represented style and superiority to the Ancient Greeks as well as chivalry in the Middle Ages.

Thyme dates back to medieval times when it was commonly grown in pots and gardens. It grew in popularity for its flavoring.^v In other areas of the world, wild thyme was found in the mountains of Spain and other areas in Europe on the Mediterranean. It was also prevalent in Asia Minor, Algeria, and Tunisia.ⁱⁱ The Ancient Greeks often bought bouquets of thyme in outdoor markets for its beauty and fragrance.^{vi}

Early colonists imported thyme from Sicily and Corsica for its flavoring qualities in beef. Also, from the fifth to seventeenth centuries, thyme was valued for its ability to fight spreading plagues. Also, in World War I, the herb was used as an antiseptic.ⁱⁱⁱ

Uses

Culinary

Thyme is often a key ingredient in poultry seasoning for chicken and turkey as well as other dishes with fish and meats. It is commonly found in sauces, marinades, sausages, and soups as a flavoring ingredient.^{vii}

In *Complete Cook*, J.M. Sanderson offers directions for drying thyme and other sweet herbs. He notes the importance of having dried herbs on hand in the kitchen. He recommends gathering a bundle of herbs like thyme, marjoram, savory, sage, mint, balm, and hyssop when full grown and about to flower. The herbs must be fairly dry and free of dirt or insects. He then explains that in order to dry the herbs the fastest, they should be placed in a sunny spot or Dutch oven. Once dried, the leaves should be taken off and rubbed to a powder. The herbs can then be used as flavoring in soups, meats and other dishes.^{viii}

In 1807, Susannah Carter compiled a cookbook that presents English contributions to American cooking. She provides a recipe for stewed veal. Thyme was a common accompaniment to any meat dish. In this recipe, while the under-roasted veal is cooking, she adds water in addition to flavorings in the form of salt, pepper, grated nutmeg, sweet marjoram and lemon thyme. She notes that lemon thyme can be substituted for lemon peel for its similar taste. The spices and herbs flavor the stewed meat and the dish is served with the sauce on top.^{ix}

While in 19th Century America, thyme was most commonly found as a flavoring; in Spain it was often infused in vinegar to pickle olives.ⁱⁱ

Medicinal

Pliny recommended that sniffing or sleeping on thyme leaves as a remedy for epileptics. It also was advised to induce urination and loosens tightness of the chest and lungs.^{vi} One ounce of the pounded herb infused in one pint of water with honey was useful to cure whooping cough. Dioscorides also prescribed drinking the herb infused with honey to soothe asthma and rid the skin of warts.^v

An ointment containing thyme was useful to reduce swelling, warts, sciatica and spleen pains.ⁱⁱ Its active agent in the form of oil, thymol was also considered effective in cough drop recipes. Bees are also attracted to thyme. As a result, many used the herb as a flavoring in honey.ⁱⁱ

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- ⁱ Ortiz, Elisabeth L., ed. The Encyclopedia of Herbs, Spices, and Flavorings. New York: DK, 1996.
- ⁱⁱ Grieve, M. "A Modern Herbal-Thyme." Botanical.Com-a Modern Herbal. 11 Mar. 2008 <<http://botanical.com/botanical/mgmh/t/thygar16.html>>.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Kowalchik, Claire & Hylton, William H. (1987). Thyme. In *Rodale's Illustrated Encyclopedia of Herbs* (p. 487). Washington D.C: Rodale Press, Inc.).
- ^{iv} PDR for Herbal Medicines. Montvale, NJ: Medical Economics Company, 1998. 1184-1185.
- ^v Freeman, Margaret B. *Herbs for the Medieval Household*. The Metropolitan Museum of Art: New York, 1943.
- ^{vi} Krutch, Joseph Wood, Herbal. G.P. Putnam's Sons: New York, 1965, 94.
- ^{vii} Allen, Gary. The Oxford Encyclopedia of Food and Drink in America. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004.).
- ^{viii} Sanderson, J.M. "Complete Cook." The Historic American Cookbook Project 13 March 2008 <http://digital.lib.msu.edu/projects/cookbooks/html/books/book_23b.cfm>.
- ^{ix} Carter, Susannah. "The Frugal Housewife." The Historic American Cookbook Project 13 March 2008 <http://digital.lib.msu.edu/projects/cookbooks/html/books/book_02.cfm>.