

Oregano Herb Profile

Also known as

Origanum vulgare, Common and Wild Marjoram, Greek Oregano and Winter Oregano.

Introduction

Oregano is a warm and aromatic yet slightly bitter herb in the mint family. Good quality oregano has a pungency that numbs the tongue. The best quality oregano is grown in a warm, dry climate. The name is derived from the Greek, meaning "mountain of joy". The Greeks used the leaves as a poultice for aching muscles, and the Romans used it for scorpion and spider bites. Sunlight encourages the concentration of the essential oils that give oregano its flavor. Two other herbs are used in the same ways as common oregano but have different culinary and medicinal properties. Mexican oregano is a plant in the verbena family that has an even stronger flavor, while marjoram is a closely related plant that lacks oregano's essential oil and has a different, gentler "mouth feel."

Constituents

Carvacrol, thymol, limonene, pinene, ocimene, caryophyllene.

Parts Used

Dried leaves and flowering stems.

Typical Preparations

Capsules, tinctures, teas, or essential oil. Most commonly used as a flavor and spice in culinary dishes.

Summary

The leaves and flowering stems are strongly antiseptic, antispasmodic, carminative, cholagogue, diaphoretic, emmenagogue, expectorant, stimulant, stomachic and mildly tonic. Oregano is taken by mouth for the treatment of colds, influenza, mild fevers, indigestion, stomach upsets and painful menstruation. It is strongly sedative and should not be taken in large doses, though mild teas have a soothing effect and aid restful sleep. Used topically, oregano is one of the best herbal antiseptics because of its high thymol content.

Precautions

Not known to be safe during pregnancy.

Botanical: *Origanum vulgare* (LINN.)

Family: N.O. Labiatae

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---Parts Used---Herb, oil.

---Habitat---Generally distributed over Asia, Europe and North Africa; grows freely in England, being particularly abundant in calcareous soils, as in the south-eastern counties.

The name *Origanum* is derived from two Greek words, *oros* (mountain) and *ganos* (joy), in allusion to the gay appearance these plants give to the hillsides on which they grow.

---Description---It is a perennial herb, with creeping roots, sending up woody stems about a foot high, branched above, often purplish. The leaves are opposite, petiolate, about an inch long, nearly entire hairy beneath. The flowers are in corymbs, with reddish bracts, a two-lipped pale purple corolla, and a five-toothed calyx, blooming from the end of June, through August. There is a variety with white flowers and light-green stalks, another with variegated leaves. It is propagated by division of roots in the autumn.

When cultivated, the leaves are more elliptical in shape than the Wild Marjoram, and the flower-spikes thinner and more compact. Marjoram has an extensive use for culinary purposes, as well as in medicine, but it is the cultivated species, *Origanum Onites* (Pot Marjoram), *O. Marjorana* (Sweet or Knotted Marjoram), and *O. Heracleoticum* (Winter Marjoram) that are employed in cookery as a seasoning. They are little used for medicinal purposes for which the Wild Marjoram is employed.

---History---Marjoram has a very ancient medical reputation. The Greeks used it extensively, both internally and externally for fomentations. It was a remedy for narcotic poisons, convulsions and dropsy. Among the Greeks, if Marjoram grew on a grave, it augured the happiness of the departed, and among both the Greeks and Romans, it was the custom to crown young couples with Marjoram.

Either *O. Onites* or *O. Majorana* is supposed to be the plant called 'Amaracus' by Greek writers.

The whole plant has a strong, peculiar, fragrant, balsamic odour and a warm, bitterish, aromatic taste, both of which properties are preserved when the herb is dry. It yields by distillation with water a small quantity of a volatile oil, which may be seen in vesicles, on holding up the leaves between the eye and the light, and which is the chief source of its properties as a medicinal agent. 1 lb. of the oil is produced from about 200 lb. of the herb, which should be gathered when just coming into flower, early in July. Large quantities of it are still gathered and hung up to dry in cottages in Kent and other counties for making Marjoram tea.

The 'swete margerome' was so much prized before the introduction of various foreign perfumes that, as Parkinson tells us, 'swete bags,' 'swete powders' and 'swete washing water' made from this plant were widely used. Our forefathers also scoured their furniture with its aromatic juices, and it is one of the herbs mentioned by Tusser (1577) as used for strewing chambers.

The flowering tops yield a dye, formerly used in the country to dye woollen cloth purple, and linen a

reddish brown, but the tint is neither brilliant nor durable. The tops are also sometimes put into table beer, to give it an aromatic flavour and preserve it, and before the introduction of hops they were nearly as much in demand for ale-brewing as the ground ivy or wood sage. It is said that Marjoram and Wild Thyme, laid by milk in a dairy, will prevent it being turned by thunder.

Goat and sheep eat this herb, but horses are not fond of it, and cattle reject it.

---Medicinal Action and Uses---Marjoram yields about 2 per cent of a volatile oil which is separated by distillation. This must not be confused with oil of Origanum, which is extracted from Thyme. Its properties are stimulant, carminative, diaphoretic and mildly tonic; a useful emmenagogue. It is so acrid that it has been employed not only as a rubefacient, and often as a liniment, but has also been used as a caustic by farriers. A few drops, put on cotton-wool and placed in the hollow of an aching tooth frequently relieves the pain. In the commencement of measles, it is useful in producing a gentle perspiration and bringing out the eruption, being given in the form of a warm infusion, which is also valuable in spasms, colic, and to give relief from pain in dyspeptic complaints.

Externally, the dried leaves and tops may be applied in bags as a hot fomentation to painful swellings and rheumatism, as well as for colic. An infusion made from the fresh plant will relieve nervous headache, by virtue of the camphoraceous principle contained in the oil.

---Cultivation---The Marjorams are some of the most familiar of our kitchen herbs, and are cultivated for the use of their aromatic leaves, either in a green or dried state, for flavouring and other culinary purposes, being mainly put into stuffings. Sweet Marjoram leaves are also excellent in salads. They have whitish flowers, with a two-lipped calyx, and also contain a volatile oil, which has similar properties to the Wild Marjoram.

Winter Marjoram is really a native of Greece, but is hardy enough to thrive in the open air in England, in a dry soil, and is generally propagated by division of the roots in autumn.

Pot Marjoram, a native of Sicily, is also a hardy perennial, preferring a warm situation and dry, light soil. It is generally increased by cuttings, taken in early summer, inserted under a hand-glass, and later planted out a space of 1 foot between the rows and nearly as much from plant to plant, as it likes plenty of room. It may also be increased by division of roots in April, or by offsets, slipping pieces off the plants with roots to them and planting with trowel or dibber, taking care to water well. In May, they grow quickly after the operation. May also be propagated by seed, sown moderately thin, in dry, mild weather in March, in shallow drills, about 1/2 inch deep and 8 or 9 inches apart, covered in evenly with the soil. Transplant afterwards to about a foot apart each way. The seeds are very slow in germinating.