

Thyme – Intriguing Uses from Embalming Mummies to Giving Soldiers Courage

Thymus vulgaris



Common thyme - German thyme - Garden thyme or just thyme

Thyme is an herbaceous perennial in the Lamiaceae family. There are about 350 species of small evergreen, aromatic, mostly woody-based perennials and sub-shrubs belong to this Eurasian genus which occur mainly on dry grassland and calcareous soils. Most widely used are *Thymus vulgaris* - common thyme and *Thymus citriodorus* - lemon thyme. There is no consensus on the origin of the genus name, *Thymus*. It may come from the Greek word 'thumos' (meaning courage, strength) or it can be attributed to the Greek word 'thymiama' (meaning incense, smoke).

History

Thyme has been used as far back as ancient Egypt, where it was used as part of the embalming process. Thyme and rosemary were rubbed on the corpse before being wrapped as part of the mummification process. The Egyptians also used thyme as a pain reliever and in many of their medicines.

The Romans thought that eating thyme before or during a meal would cure poisons making it especially popular among roman emperors. Thyme was also given to Roman soldiers upon their leaving for battle as a sign of courage. The Romans grew thyme also extensively for bee culture.

The Greeks considered thyme an emblem of bravery. They also used thyme to perfume their temples. They also associated thyme with style and elegance.

The tradition of giving thyme as a farewell gift to soldiers continued on throughout the middle ages in England. When the Black Death hit in Europe thyme was used in many medicines as a treatment. In the Victoria Era nurses would often bandage wounds with thyme solution.

Medicinal uses

Thyme's essential oil, thymol, is used as disinfectant and an antiseptic. The oil varies considerably in composition between species and from plant to plant. The oil of *Thyme citriodorus* (lemon thyme) is considered a lesser irritant than other thyme oil and is used in aroma therapy for asthma and other respiratory complaint notably in children. Thymol oil is used in aromatherapy for aches and pains, exhaustion, depression, upper respiratory tract infections, skin and scalp complaints.

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Thymus vulgaris – an aromatic, warming astringent herb- is used as an expectorant, improves digestion, relaxes spasm and controls coughing. It is strongly antiseptic and anti-fungal.

Internally (as a dried tea) it is used for dry cough, whooping cough, bronchitis, bronchial mucus, asthma, laryngitis, indigestion, gastritis and diarrhea.

Contraindicated during pregnancy!

Culinary uses

Thyme is most commonly paired with rosemary and sage. It also goes well with a variety of other species like garlic seasoning, oregano, onion powder and cayenne pepper. It is an essential part of bouquet garni – “ Herbes de Provence “ and it is used in many Italian and French dishes.

Fresh or dried leaves and flowering tops are used to flavor soups, fish, meat, sausages, marinades, vinegars, stuffing, and baked or sautéed vegetables - especially mushrooms and zucchini. It retains its flavor well in slowly cooked dishes.

Culture

Many species of thyme are good garden plants having a neat habit, fragrant foliage and colorful flowers. Their small size ideally suited for crevices in paving, rock gardens, walls and containers. Thyme flowers are attractive to bees!

Zone: 5-9

Height: 0.50-1.00 feet spread 0.50-1.00 feet

Bloom time: May to July with pale purple flowers

Light: Full sun

Water: dry to medium

Cut back plants to limit woody growth or stimulate new growth. Harvest leaves throughout the summer. Plants tend to become overly woody and loose after several years at which point replacement should be considered.

Sources

The herb society of America New Encyclopedia of herbs and their uses - Deni Brown

www.missouribotanicalgarden.org

www.kraeuter-buch.de

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