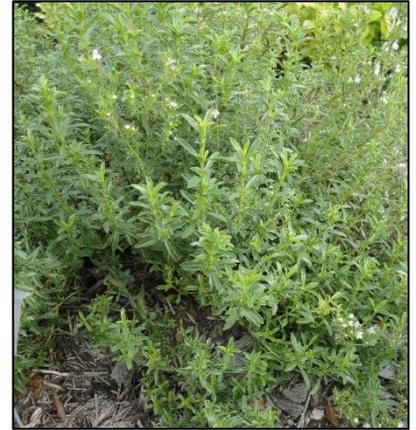


Savory – Herb of the Satyrs

Satureja montana/Satureja hortensis

History and Lore

- These members of the mint family (*Labiatae*) are native to western Asia, southern Europe, and northern Africa, i.e., the Mediterranean area, and have been used to enhance the flavor of food for over 2000 years.
- The genus name “Satureja” was derived from “satureia” (meaning “of the satyrs”) given to these plants by Pliny the Elder in his encyclopedic “Natural History”. According to folklore these mischievous, promiscuous, half-man half-goat creatures were thought to have lived in fields of savory and eaten the plant to obtain their great sexual stamina. (The annual, summer savory, is thought by some to be an aphrodisiac and is often used in love potions.)
- Another, perhaps more plausible, theory for the derivation of the genus name is that it is from the Hebrew word “za’atar” (borrowed from Arabic) which refers to plants in the eastern Mediterranean that have an oregano-like fragrance.
- Romans soldiers are believed to have introduce savory to northern Europe and England. It was brought to North America by early colonists. William Byrd II, who lived at Westover on the James in the early 18th century, listed savory as one of the favorite herbs in Virginia gardens.
- Named the 2015 Herb of the Year by the International Herb Association.



Description & Cultivation

Two types of savory are most commonly grown today:

- **Summer savory** (*S. hortensis*)

Annual (*'hortensis'* means “of the garden” referring to the fact that it is a commonly grown culinary herb.) It thrives in full sun with routine watering and occasional fertilization. Does not thrive in high heat and humidity of the southern US. Plant is ~18” tall and wide with 1-1.5” with narrow, oblong leaves and small, white or purple bilabiate flowers. Easily grown from seeds planted in warm spring soil after threat of frost has passed. Compact cultivars such as ‘Aromata’, ‘Midget’, ‘Saturn’, and ‘Shorty’ are available.

- **Winter savory** (*S. montana*)

Perennial (Z: 5-9) (*'montana'* means “of the mountains” referring to the fact that it grows natively in mountainous regions.) It thrives in full sun with good drainage and occasional watering (does best in lean soil). Trim back occasionally to encourage new growth and less woodiness. The species is a shrub ~ 18” tall and wide with 1/4-1/2” narrow leaves and white or purple bilabiate flowers. (The cultivar in our garden (‘Nana’) is shorter than the species and seems to not need pruning to encourage bushiness.) Plant drops its leaves in our winters, but do not trim back stems because new leaves will emerge on them in the spring. Propagate from stem cuttings or layering.

Uses

- **Culinary**

-Tastes like a cross between thyme and oregano. Winter savory is stronger and more peppery.
-Known in Germany as the “bean herb”. It improves the flavor of all types of beans and aids in digestion minimizing flatulence.

-One of the main herbs in Herbes de Provence (usually summer savory).

-Used to flavor meats, stuffings, and sausages.

See *Herb Society of America's Essential Guide to Savory* for a number of recipes using savory

- **Medicinal**

-Not really noted for its medicinal properties today.

-Summer & winter savory have antibacterial, antifungal, and antioxidant effects (primarily due to the phenolic compounds thymol and carvacrol)

-Formerly used in traditional European herbal medicine to ease gas pains, as an expectorant, and to ease diarrhea.

-Rubbing a bruised sprig on bee stings eases the pain.

-Summer savory is thought to enhance sexual desire; winter savory lessens the sex drive.

-Not recommended for medicinal use by pregnant women.

- **Commercial**

-Oils of both types of savories are used in soaps, perfumes, cosmetics, mouthwashes, etc.

-Summer savory makes good bee pasturage – makes excellent honey.

-Pink savory infusions historically been is used to wash out wine barrels before filling with the new harvest.

Other interesting *Satureja* species (genus contains ~52 species today)

Lemon winter savory (*Satureia montana* var. *citriodora*) Perennial (Z: 5-8); 6-15” T x ~18” W; clean, lemon fragrance; Flavor resembles lemon thyme.

Creeping savory (*Satureia spicigera*) Perennial (Hardy to 0° F – Zone 7); 3-6” T and spreading; full sun, good drainage, lean soil; aroma and flavor similar to winter savory.

Purple winter savory (*Satureia subspicata* or *Satureia montana* subsp. *illyrica*) similar habit to winter savory but with bright purple flowers.

Pink savory (*Satureia thymbra*) Perennial (Z:8-9) full sun, lean, well-drained soil; flowers are a soft to rich pink.

References:

- Flowers, Henry and Sara Holland (ed.), *Herb Society of America's Essential Guide to Savory*, Accessed June 6, 2019 from the internet at: https://www.herbsociety.org/file_download/inline/01ceb540-a740-4aa5-98e7-0c40b1f36c21
- Mitchell, Patricia B., *Colonial Spices & Herbs*, 1997, p. 30.

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