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## **Outrageous Oregano**

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Editors note: Many thanks to Chuck for sharing this article about oregano. Chuck is a nationally known expert in herb culture and use. He teaches and conducts extension programs in vegetables and herb production at U of I.

Most Americans associate the flavor of oregano with Italian foods, especially pizza. This is appropriate because oregano was not a familiar herb in most of North America until GIs, returning from World War II duty in Italy, brought home a taste for the foods they had "discovered" during their stay there. One of the most distinctive and memorable herbs used in this cuisine was oregano. The establishment and growth of Italian cuisine following the war has made the warm, spicy flavor of oregano one of the most familiar to the American palate. Make a pizza without tomatoes, and people will still recognize it, but make it without oregano, and almost no one will know what it is.

### **Botany, History, and Lore**

The world of oregano and marjoram nomenclature is somewhat confused and confusing. To some extent, oregano is a flavor, more than an individual plant. True oregano comes from the genus *Origanum*, but Mexican Oregano, *Lippia graveolens*, and Cuban Oregano, *Plectranthus amboinicus*, also have the scent and flavor known as oregano, although Cuban Oregano is not used in cooking.

The "true" oreganos, genus *Origanum*, are aromatic, herbaceous perennials which have erect, hairy, square stems which mark their membership in the mint family. They have 1/4 inch long, tubular, purple to white flowers in terminal spikelets, also fairly typical of mint relatives. The leaves are opposite, oval to pointed, and range from less than one, up to two inches long. Plant heights vary from 6 inches to 2 feet.

Oregano means "joy of the mountains" in Greek, denoting its original home in the highlands around the Mediterranean. On warm summer days, the scent of the plant fills the air in these hills. It has a 1300 year history of medicinal use. *Origanum vulgare* has escaped and naturalized in the eastern US.

### **Culinary Use**

Greeks, Italians, and Spaniards were the first to fall in love with the flavor of oregano and use it creatively in their cuisines. Through the Spanish, it was introduced to Mexico and became an important culinary herb there. Many popular Mexican dishes now incorporate oregano as a matter of course.

Good culinary oregano has a hot, peppery flavor with a hint of clove and balsam. When choosing plants or the fresh oregano, it is best to taste a tiny bit of a leaf. It should bite back with a sharp and intense sensation. Seedling plants, even from seeds of tasty plants, vary widely in their culinary intensity, so individual cultivar selection is really important.

Oregano is used in a wide variety of sauces and tomato dishes, pizzas and pastas, salads, soups, stews, meats, vegetables, cheeses, chilis and other Mexican dishes, breads, and herb blends. It is also infused in oils and vinegars. It combines well with garlic, thyme, parsley, and olive oil. Because of its intense flavor, it should be used in small amounts at first, with more added if the dish demands more "zip".

### **Popular Varieties**

What is the "true" oregano? While there is regional support for many species, varieties, and cultivars, most culinary experts agree that it is *O. vulgare* var. *hirtum* (AKA *heracleoticum*), usually known as Greek Oregano, that gives the truest biting, pungent flavor. While the intensity still varies from plant to plant, this is a dependable variety for culinary use.

Other contenders for use in the kitchen include *O. onites*, Cretan Oregano; *O. xmajorica*, Italian Oregano; *O. 'Kaliteri'*, Kaliteri Oregano; and *O. maru*, Syrian Oregano. Sweet Marjoram, *Origanum majorana*, is another member of this genus whose flavor is so much sweeter and more subtle that it is usually treated as a separate herb.

Mexican Oregano, *Lippia graveolens*, also known as Puerto Rican Oregano, is a member of the verbena family, with cream colored flowers and ovate leaves. It is a tender perennial, except in the south and southwest. It is the most common type in areas of high heat. In areas where there is frost, plants should be grown in pots and brought indoors for the winter. A greenhouse or bright south window should keep these specimens growing until frost-free weather returns.

### **Hardiness**

Winter survival varies widely with species and varieties. *O. vulgare* is hardy into Zone 4. *O. vulgare hirtum* is marginal in Zone 5. Sweet Marjoram, Kaliteri, Hopley's Purple, Italian, Kent Beauty, *Microphylla*, Syrian, and Turkestan Oregano are tender perennials which will survive only in the warmest zones. In areas of freezing weather, these must be

overwintered in warm sunny locations indoors, or treated like annual plants. In marginal areas, where winter temperature fluctuations test the plant's hardiness, a substantial mulch can enhance survival, as can planting in protected microclimates.

### **Propagation**

Most oreganos do not come very true from seed, especially with regard to flavor. For this reason, it is best to start with a plant that can be tasted for intensity, and then propagated vegetatively.

Stem tip cuttings, root cuttings, or crown divisions will all work reasonably well with oregano. Intermittent mist or mini greenhouses should be used to keep the air saturated with moisture while cuttings form new roots. Freshly stuck cuttings need to be kept out of direct sunlight to prevent damage. A quick dip in a mild strength rooting hormone may speed the process of root regeneration.

There are some acceptable seed strains available, although their plants may still vary quite a bit in flavor. If seeds are used, they should not be covered, but instead just pressed onto the surface of the germinating mix, with the mix kept moist until germination begins. Oregano's germination is enhanced by light.

### **Culture**

Since good drainage and soil structure are essential, amending the soil in the planting bed with well-rotted organic matter or compost before planting is recommended. The site should be kept as weed free as possible after planting. Allow plenty of room between plants for branching roots to spread out. A moderately rich soil with a near-neutral pH would be ideal. Raised beds can improve internal drainage and aeration of the soil, especially in heavy soil.

Oregano should be planted into the garden after the danger of hard frost is past in the spring. After plants are established, they should be fed every 2-4 weeks with a half strength mixture of a balanced soluble fertilizer such as 10-10-10. Once growth is vigorous, frequent cutting will increase production and encourage tasty new shoots. Oregano is reputed to make a good companion plant for beans.

Greek Oregano may need protection for the winter in Zone 5. Therefore, applying a generous layer of loose, airy mulch in November or December, after cold weather has begun, is wise. It must be removed in April, before new growth is distorted or damaged by the mulch material. If there is any doubt about winter survival, a plant with great taste is worth bringing inside and coddling through the winter.

*O. vulgare* must be planted where its spread can be controlled and will not overrun its neighbors. The coarser and much more vigorous *O. vulgare* will overpower the more delicate Greek (*O. v. var. hirtum*) if they are planted side by side. It may be best to relegate wild oregano to the cutting garden, or a large, semi-wild border, where it can roam a bit without damaging its neighbors.

## **Harvesting**

Harvest may begin when plants are still small, about 6 inches high. As the stem tips are removed, leave 2-3 pairs of leaves, so that the plant can produce side shoots from the leaf axils. This early harvest or pruning actually makes the plant branch and become more compact and sturdy.

The first main harvest should be made just as the plants are about to flower. If plants are allowed to flower fully, plant growth will be slowed or stopped, and flavor may decline. After a heavy cutting, oregano will usually regrow in time for a second cutting. However, the plants should not be cut too drastically in the fall, especially where winter hardiness may be an issue.

## **Preserving**

Unlike many other herbs whose flavor oils are highly volatile and perishable, oregano maintains comparatively high quality when hung in small bunches and air dried. Once the bunches are thoroughly dried (crisp), the leaves should be removed from the stems whole and stored in a tightly closed container, preferably glass. The leaves can then be chopped or crushed when adding to a recipe, so that the utmost flavor is retained.

Oregano leaves and tender stems can be infused in vinegar or oil, either alone or in combination with other herbs. Leaves are placed in a clean container, and warm vinegar or oil is poured over them. The mixture should steep for 3 or 4 weeks. After the flavor has been thoroughly extracted from the herbal material, it needs to be strained out of the vinegar or oil, using coffee filters or some other fine mesh material. Once clear, the infusions will keep for 6-12 months when stored in moderate temperature, in the dark, in tightly closed containers.

## **Pests**

Oregano can be susceptible to various root rots and fungal leaf diseases. Good soil drainage should help minimize root rots. Raised beds are recommended if root rot has been a problem. Good air circulation and drainage will help to dry foliage after a rain, and a mulch will help to keep disease spores from splashing onto the foliage.

Possible insect pests include spider mites, aphids, and leaf miners. The first two can be controlled to some degree by spraying the plants with a high-speed jet of water, especially the undersides of the leaves. Insecticidal soap may also be used if the condition persists. Leaf miners must be caught before they burrow into the leaves, where they are fairly impervious to spray treatments. Check local recommendations for the timing of control measures.

## **Medicinal Use**

Compared to its long medicinal history, culinary use of oregano is a relatively recent development. The Greeks used it as an antidote for narcotic poisoning, convulsions, and dropsy. A tea was used for chronic coughs and asthma, and an infusion of leaves was used to treat indigestion, coughs, and headaches. An infusion taken before an ocean voyage was thought to prevent seasickness. It was also used to relieve toothache. Warm

poultices of oregano leaves generally soothed painful swellings, and a muslin bag filled with oregano leaves steeped in a steaming bath was recommended for relief of aches and stiff joints. Oil of oregano was even reputed to be a topical hair restorer for bald men.

### **Ornamental Use**

Although it is an invasive plant with very little of the desired oregano flavor, *O. vulgare*, the wild oregano, dependably produces lovely flowers in a range of colors from pale pink to dark purple. These are beautiful in the landscape and effective in flower arrangements, both fresh cut and dried. 'Hopley's Purple', 'Kent Beauty', and 'Herrenhausen' are cultivars selected for especially attractive foliage and flowers.

In the landscape, several selections of *O. vulgare* offer colorful foliage and flowers. In addition to those mentioned above, there are four golden or variegated leaf varieties available in the trade. They make excellent ground cover plants in partial shade. Full afternoon sun has a tendency to scorch the leaves of these varieties. Cultivar names to look for include 'Aureum' with pale golden leaves (a variety which dates back to the early 17th century), 'Dr. Ietswaart' with golden, crisped leaves, (named by Betty Rollins and Art Tucker), 'Jim Best' with golden streaked leaves (so named because it is supposed to have originated in Jim Best's garden), and 'White Anniversary' with white-edged, crinkled leaves (very susceptible to heat).

### **In Conclusion**

Properly informed and prepared, the gardener can taste culinary oregano plants and select the best for inclusion in the kitchen herb garden. Ornamental types may also be chosen, based on visual observation and plant description, for use in garden design and floral arrangements.