

Growing Thyme

Thymus vulgaris

Whether it's winterthyme or summerthyme, the Thyme is right. This delightful little herb native to the Mediterranean region has been a favorite of herbalists, gardeners, culinary aficionados, warriors and poets for millennia. Kipling compared it to the perfume of the dawn of paradise. Ancient Greek and Roman soldiers used it for a symbol of bravery and bathed in it for strength while their maidens wore thyme wreaths in their hair in the belief they would be irresistible. Sumerians in 2750 BC used it for poultices and in 1663 it was used in soup and beer to counteract shyness. Today it is commonly used in pharmaceutical preparations for cough drops, mouthwashes and vapor rubs.

Herbs are my passion, and Thyme is one of my favorites. The species are many and varied, but that special aroma is unmistakable. Garden paths of Thyme truly do remind you of Kipling's paradise. My husband's choice is the tiny leaved "Mouse-ear" variety, which makes an enchanting path. Since Thyme is inherently wild, this perennial will ramble all over your garden with little supervision. In fact, most Thyme succumbs because it receives too much care. All it needs is sunshine and well-drained soil to thrive. *Do not fertilize. Do not over water.* Just leave it alone and let it grow.

Thyme can be grown from seed or cuttings. Gathering seed yourself can be a trial as they have a mind of their own. It's difficult to tell exactly when the seeds are ready and easy to miss them altogether. One way to harvest seeds is to put a small "net" over the plant and catch the seeds as they mature. Part of pantyhose would work. So would sheer nylon fabric. I prefer to buy my seeds and I prefer organic. I list a couple of reputable companies in the resource section. Seed can be sown directly in your garden in moist soil, cover lightly.

I'm trying something new this year -- I am going to "pre-germinate" by putting seeds in a paper towel in a jar. After sprouting, I'll plant them in those little "peat pots" until they are large enough and the weather is warm enough to transplant outside. I'll let you know how that turns out.

Cuttings are taken from wood stems that "snap". Put them in moist soil in semi-shade. They cannot tolerate full sun until they have a good root system, about six months.

If your mature Thyme plant dies back or looks less than vibrant in the center, it's time for action. Water thoroughly and allow to set overnight, and then broadcast moist soil over the outlying stems. The Thyme will put out new shoots in a couple of months.

Thyme survives cold weather admirably and is a perennial in zones 4-9. Woody plants are especially susceptible to frost and should be pruned. To eliminate this problem cut back older plants by three fourths every year. Thyme will also benefit from a small layer of sand before heading into winter.

I have two beautiful old Oaks in my yard whose leaves are great for mulch. After taking this photo, I raked leaves over the Thyme and left it alone. The ice and snow covered the leaves with a blanket of

insulation. In March I peeked under this winter blanket and there was the Thyme, green and anxious to begin growing.

Thyme's medicinal qualities are many: antibacterial, antiseptic and anti-spasmodic. It's great for infected scratches and scrapes, is an excellent expectorant.

Thyme butter: 1 part thyme leaves stripped from stem; 3 parts butter. Mash together. Will keep for 1 month in frig.

Got a little cough or sore throat? Thyme causes the mucous membrane to "weep" making it easier for the body to expel mucous. Try this traditional remedy: 1-2 teaspoon dried thyme, 1 teaspoon honey in one cup boiling water. Steep until room temperature, strain. Drink up to three times per day.

Bath Thyme: Tie a small bunch of Thyme under tub faucet. Run a hot bath and luxuriate in the exotic aroma. The volatile oils will penetrate your skin to help ease arthritic discomfort. The oils are also dispensed into the air via the steam. When inhaled it is uplifting, stimulates the respiratory system, helps relieve asthmatic spasms, bronchitis & pneumonia. As an added bonus, it kills the bacteria in the air. Essential oil of Thyme can be used in a diffuser with the same affect.