

Oregano and Marjoram

ABG Herb Study Group Presentation, April 2018, E. Bluemink

Family: Mint (*Lamiaceae*: lay-mee-AY-see-eye or –ee; previously *Labiatae*: lay-bee-AH-tie or –tee)

Genus: *Origanum*: oh-RIG-a-num

Species: ~44 species, 6 subspecies, 3 botanical varieties, 18 naturally-occurring hybrids

Hardiness: Zone 5-9

Overview:

The genus *Origanum* is comprised of species native to rocky, mountainous soils of the Mediterranean and Eurasia. Some grow only a few inches high and others grow nearly 3 feet tall. Their growth habit is erect or trailing. Culinary types are typically rich in volatile oils containing carvacrol and thymol.

Origanum species crossbreed easily and common names are used interchangeably (e.g. wild marjoram = common/wild oregano).

The principal groupings are oregano and marjoram, *O. vulgare* (vul-GAY-ree) and *O. majorana* (may-joh-RAH-nah). In general, oregano is hardier, with a more pungent flavor, and marjoram is less hardy, with a more delicate and floral flavor. The shape and form of the calyx (the swelling below the flowers) rather than the flowers and leaves is the principal way to differentiate between *Origanum* species. Flowers can be purple, pink, or white. The bracts of some species look like hops – also in the Mint family.

History:

“Sometimes called the “prince of herbs,” the name Origanum was first used by the ancient Greek physician Hippocrates (460-370 B.C.), and is thought by most authorities to have originated from the Greek words for mountains (oreos) and brightness/joy/beauty (ganeos). Oregano and marjoram were commonly called “joy of the mountains” due to their beauty and abundance on the Mediterranean mountainsides, where they grew wild.” – Oregano and Marjoram: An Herb Society Guide of America Guide to the Genus *Origanum* (2005)

Origanum species and varieties have important culinary, fragrant and/or ornamental uses. Medicinal use is mostly historic but *O. dictamnus* (Dittany of Crete) continues to be used for many ailments on the island of Crete.

Culinary Uses:

Oregano:

Oregano is used in many Mediterranean and Mexican dishes, especially casseroles, tomato-based sauces, pizza and chili. Cooks often prefer the spicy flavor of *O. vulgare* subsp. *hirtum* (Greek oregano) but other culinary favorites include *O. majoricum* (Italian oregano) and *O. syriacum* (za'atar). Oregano intensifies in flavor when dried and is often preferred that way when added to certain dishes.

Before planting oregano for culinary use, check labels carefully. What is usually labeled as Common Oregano or Wild Marjoram (*O. vulgare*, *O. vulgare* subsp. *vulgare*) can be a hardy, attractive, and butterfly-attracting perennial, even in Anchorage, but its flavor is vastly inferior to the culinary types due to lack of certain volatile oils.

Marjoram:

Fresh marjoram can easily replace basil in summer dishes. It has a delicate aroma and is best added to a dish at the end of cooking, especially if used fresh. When dried, marjoram is a great substitute for dried oregano.

If you aren't buying Sweet Marjoram (*O. majorana*) you may end up with a plant more like oregano. Plants labeled as Wild Marjoram are the same as the non-aromatic Common Oregano (*O. vulgare* subsp. *vulgare*). Also, if a plant is labeled as Pot Marjoram it could be one of several different *Origanum* species. None of these will have the distinctive flavor of Sweet Marjoram.

Medicinal Uses:

Oregano and marjoram have been used for medicinal and health purposes. These uses have mostly died away but the essential oils are promoted for various health benefits. Dittany of Crete (*O. dictamnus*) continues to be brewed in teas as a tonic and digestive aid, and as a topical treatment. It is used in Crete for many ailments and diseases.

Carvacrol has antibacterial, antifungal, and antimicrobial properties and is highly concentrated in some *Origanum* plants (e.g., Greek Oregano, *O. vulgare* subsp. *hirtum*) while nearly absent from others. Carvacrol is present in other herbs in the Mint/*Lamiaceae* family such as *Lippia graveolens* (Mexican oregano) or *Plectranthus amboinicus* (Cuban oregano), as well as the various *Monarda* (beebalm) species. Some *Origanum* species also contain thymol, which smells like thyme and also has antibacterial and antiseptic uses (active ingredient in commercial mouthwash and some toothpastes). Thymol has been used to combat infections, internal parasites, mites, growth of mold in bee colonies, and as a medical and general-purpose disinfectant. Other genera that include thymol are *Thymus* (thyme) and *Monarda* (bee balm).

Cautions: Some are allergic to *Origanum*; a few sources caution against excessive use during pregnancy because it may stimulate uterine bleeding, etc.

Other Uses:

- Oils from *O. majorana* and *O. vulgare* are used to scent soaps, lotions and fragrances.
- *O. dictamnus* (Dittany of Crete) and other *Origanum* species are used in herbal liquors such as vermouth, absinthe and Benedictine.
- Many ornamental species are used in dried floral arrangements.

Major species:

Culinary

Various subspecies of *O. vulgare*

- *O. vulgare*, subsp. *hirtum* or Greek Oregano; also called winter marjoram
- *O. vulgare*, subsp. *humile* or dwarf marjoram; also called creeping oregano and compact/dwarf Greek Oregano

O. syriacum or za'atar; also called Syrian/Lebanese Oregano or "hyssop" in the Bible

O. onites or Cretan/Turkish Oregano/rhigani/rigani; sometimes called pot marjoram

O. majoricum or Italian Oregano; also called hardy marjoram

O. majorana or Sweet Marjoram; sometimes called pot marjoram or knotted marjoram

Ornamental

- Kirigami Oregano
- Golden Oregano (*O. vulgare* subsp. *vulgare* "Aureum"),
- Kent Beauty
- *O. dictamnus* or Dittany of Crete
- Mounding Marjoram (*O. majorana* 'Betty Rollins')
- *O. rotundiflorum*

Medicinal

- *O. dictamnus* or Dittany of Crete

Culinary Notes:

O. vulgare subsp. *hirtum* - Many consider this the best oregano for cooking; spicy flavor; tiny white flowers.

O. onites – Sharp, peppery flavor with a thyme-like scent; goes well with Greek dishes.

O. majorana – Complements a wide variety of dishes; a tender annual but can flourish in an Anchorage garden when grown in a sunny, protected spot.

O. majoricum – A cross of sweet marjoram and *O. vulgare* subsp. *virens*); less spicy than Greek oregano and more hardy than sweet marjoram.

O. syriacum – Has a thyme or oregano flavor; used to make za'atar seasoning blend.

Notes from Alaska Gardeners:

Debbie H. (W. Anchorage)

Has been growing 'Hot and Spicy' oregano for years:

- With it overwintering for at least three winters outside
- In a sunny location under the southern edge of my raspberry patch.
- I mulch my raspberries with leaves and chopped up canes, no fertilizer applied.
- The soil stays moist most of the time.
- It is a good grower, betting about 2 feet tall and wide (and lots of flowers.)
- It does not seem to be hot or spicy to me when grown in the ground, like I remember it was in the pot.

Elizabeth B. (E. Anchorage)

Culinary types seem to grow best on deck in full sun and drying out between watering. They flourish through early fall if protected from too-wet conditions. Common Oregano/Wild Marjoram grew like a perennial weed in the ground despite its less sunny spot; it attracts lots of bees and butterflies/moths.

Ginger H. and Cathy S. (ABG Herb Garden)

- Golden Oregano wintered over a few years.
- Turkestan Oregano (*vulgare* ssp. *gracile*) planted in 2016; it produced like gangbusters and was beautiful.

Main Sources:

- *Oregano and Marjoram: An Herb Society of America Guide to the Genus Origanum* (2015)
- *Vegetable Literacy*, Deborah Madison
- *An Alaska Herb Garden*, UAF Cooperative Extension
- Herbalpedia
- ThePlantList.org
- Wikipedia