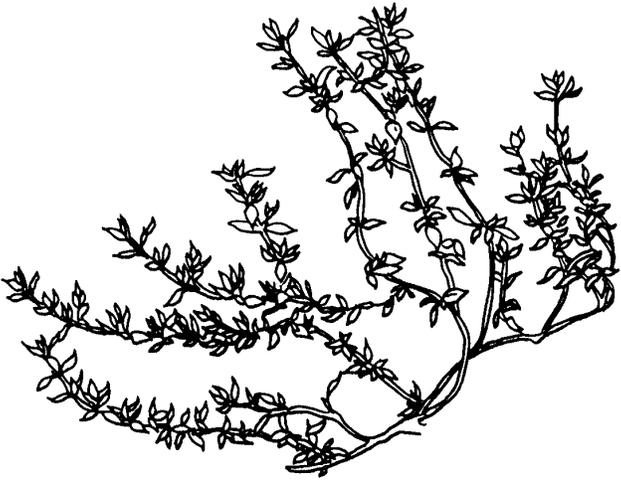


An Herb Society of America Fact Sheet

Thyme



Culinary Types:

Thymus ×citriodorus (lemon thyme)

Thymus ×citriodorus 'Aureus' (golden lemon thyme)

Thymus herba-barona (caraway thyme)

Thymus vulgaris (French thyme, common thyme)

Thymus pulegioides (wild thyme)

Description

Thymes, some 400 or more species of them, form a huge genus of the *Lamiaceae*, or mint family (formerly called *Labiatae*). Most are small woody subshrubs and perennials, many-branched and aromatic, with small leaves and two-lipped flowers. The aroma comes from essential oils glands in the leaves, calyces and corollas (flowering parts).

The leaves may be green, grey, variegated with gold or white, smooth or hairy, and are variable in shape. Some thymes are upright, growing to 18 inches, some are shorter and spreading, some are very short and mat-forming. Many have a mounding habit, broader than tall, that is very attractive. The spreading mounds and mats make beautiful edgings to the garden and the mats will creep into cracks between flagstones or bricks. They look wonderful placed where they can cascade over a wall. Thymes may bloom anywhere from April to November, depending on variety, in white, pink, lavender or magenta tones.

Culture

Some thymes may be grown from seed, if morphological character is not important, but a beginner probably should start out with plants bought from a nursery, if only to see the great choices of forms and varieties available, and to use the nose to test the variety of aromas. Plant thymes in well-drained soil that is alkaline, not acid, in full sun if possible, or at least one half day of sun. A lemon thyme in full sun can spread to 2 feet in width in one season. You may find an upright form easier to harvest and to wash clean of dirt than a more prostrate form. It is a good practice to mulch thymes with calceolareous (limestone) gravel, for cleanliness, light reflection on the leaves and good drainage around the crown. The flowers are very attractive to bees, making harvesting difficult during bloom time, though some growers work among the bees by rubbing their hands with thyme. Spent flower heads may be removed when they become unsightly. As with other herbs, pinching off the tip growth of non-flowering branches will promote bushiness. Do not prune in the spring before all danger of frost is past, and stop clipping about a month before frost in the fall. You may prune woody branches, but never prune below the point where you can see new growth – prune just above it. The best winter protection is health, good drainage and snow cover; a mulch of pine boughs laid over the plants after the soil is frozen may be helpful in northern climates.

Uses

The best way to choose a culinary thyme is to rub the foliage and sniff, then follow your nose. The most widely used in the kitchen are strains of *Thymus vulgaris*, which may be sold as common, English or French thymes – or sometimes as winter thyme. Thyme has many uses: in chicken broth or stuffing; in clam chowder and marinades for meats or fish; in sauces; with onions, carrots or peas; in egg dishes with other sweet herbs; even in a baked apple dessert. The flavor can be captured in oils or butter. The caraway-scented form (or chemotype) of *Thymus herba-barona* has a historical association with roast beef (baron of beef). Lemon thyme, *T. xcitriodorus*, is recommended for fish, for tea, and for salad dressings, or anywhere a milder thyme is desired. Thyme is a common ingredient in a French *bouquet garni*. A favorite herb jelly made from thyme infused from thyme blossoms is actually from nectars of other genera, most likely *Satureja* and *Thymbra*. Thyme has been used since ancient times for its antibacterial and antifungal properties (it was one of the Egyptian mummification herbs); it was used as a fumigant and as temple incense and medicinally in many ways. Today, the essential oil thymol is used extensively in mouthwash, toothpaste, and anti-rheumatic ointments. *Thymus vulgaris* has been used as an antispasmodic ingredient for herbal sore throat and cough preparations, but some sources suggest that it should not be used during pregnancy.

Varieties

Thymus xcitriodorus 'Aureus' is a gold-edged form of lemon thyme, very attractive in the garden. *Thymus* 'Argenteus' is a white-edged thyme, often labeled 'Silver Thyme,' which may have a lemon scent, but it cannot compete with *T. xcitriodorus* for culinary use. Other variegated thymes are forms or varieties of non-culinary species.

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