

2005 Herb of the Year

OREGANO

Did someone say 'PIZZA'?

Yes, this year's herb of the year is the indisputable pizza champion ...Oregano!

The name Oregano is derived from the Greek words 'oros' for mountain and 'ganos' for joy, meaning 'joy of the mountain'. It was thought to manifest happiness and was woven into garlands for couples to wear at weddings and also planted on graves for happiness in the afterlife.

The Roman cook Apicius frequently recommended 'organy' to season sauces. While Europeans must have been vaguely familiar with it since 1557, when John Gererd called it 'bastard marjorome of Candy' (Ceylon). According to Frederick Rosengarten in 'The Book of Spices', it was introduced into North America only after World War II, when soldiers returned from Italy with a taste for pizza laden with oregano. In the 25 years that followed the demand for oregano increased 6,000 times! Oregano has been substituted for marjoram- another member of the *Origanum* genus, which gets a better price, or marjoram supplied when the more popular oregano was in short supply.

Oregano belongs to the genus *Origanum* of which there are 36 species of perennials and sub-shrubs mostly native to Europe and Asia. Although there is quite a bit confusion over which oregano is which, the variety generally considered to be the 'True Oregano' is *Origanum vulgare hirtum* or Greek Oregano. It originates from the mountains of Greece and is widely employed in Italian, Greek and Spanish cuisine.

Belonging to the Labiatae family (like the mints), oregano tends to grow in bushy mounds about 75cm tall and 60 to 90 cm wide. White or pink flowers are found on small spikes from July to September and the leaves are oval in shape and up to 3.75cm long. It is a very hardy perennial in zones 5 to 11. Oregano prefers full sun and well drained slightly sandy, fairly dry soil with a pH of 4.5 to 8. Easily propagated by both seed and cutting or by root division. Makes a lovely fragrant border or a taller groundcover.

Some of the other related species include Pot Marjoram-*O. onites*) with white sometimes purple flowers and *heracleoticum*, with white sometimes pink flowers are also sold as common oregano. According to Gertrude Foster, who worked with the Bailey Herbarium at Cornell University in New York State, *O. heracleoticum* is the winter marjoram of English herbals that was cultivated in the 18th Century for marketing earlier in the year than sweet marjoram. There is also Golden Oregano-*O. vulgare* var. 'Aureum', Dittany of Crete-*O. dictamnus* is a very ornamental and very tender herb used in wreath making, with pink-purple flowers that hang in loose panicles. To add even more to the oregano confusion, *Coleus amboinicus*, popular in Puerto Rico; *Monarda fistulosa* cv. *Menthifolia*, from New Mexico; *Thymus nummularius*, from Spain; and the Mexican *Lippa graveolens* all have an oregano-like flavour and have been sold as oregano.

One other species, which adds even more confusion to our already confused state is Wild Oregano, *Origanum vulgare*, also known as Common Marjoram. This is the medicinal variety used for the popular herbal remedy 'Oregano Oil or Oil of Oregano'. This species lacks the true oregano flavour and aroma. It is hardier than Greek Oregano, surviving nicely in Zone 4 and taller with purple or pink flowers in clusters. Easy to grow and great for attracting honeybees.

Greek Oregano has a peppery, zesty flavour suggestive of thyme and sage. It is the most widely used herb in Greek cuisine. Sprinkle it on vegetables, meat, poultry, and fish with olive oil and lemon juice. And of course it will brighten up any pizza! Often used in combination with marjoram and basil in cheese, tomato, bean and egg dishes. Oregano can be used in teas, it became known as the '*Thé Rouge Tisane*' of France and has also been used as a beer flavouring.

Oregano is an expectorant and antiseptic. Known to improve digestion and reduce muscle spasms and inflammation. It also encourages menstruation, helps respiratory problems and is considered a weak sedative and is sometimes used to treat nervous headache and irritability or cramps. Oregano also has the ability to kill intestinal worms and the diluted essential oil can be rubbed on insect bites, toothache, and skin fungi such as athlete's foot. The essential oil is sometimes used in baths and as an inhalant steam for respiratory congestion.

Commercially the essential oil is used as food flavouring and in toiletries, particularly men's colognes-no, sorry guys... rubbing pizza sauce on your neck does not create the same effect! The leaves also produce a dye and the dried flowers are used for wreath making.

What ever your pleasure there is an Oregano for you- cooking, gardening, health care, crafting.....

So many oreganos.....so little thyme!