

COMMON THYME (Thymus Vulgaris)

By Karen

My dog, Herbie, is appropriately named when he returns from our morning walk as he smells quite strongly of the wild thyme he has trampled through, especially when it is in flower.

When I first came to Spain I mistook the colourful clumps of pink-purple flowers scattered around the countryside for heather until I came close enough to identify the plant.



Because it can tolerate drought conditions and likes a hot sunny climate there is very little to stop this aromatic herb from growing wild in the scrubland and hills of Southern Spain.

There are over 100 varieties of thyme and as with the cultivated varieties, common thyme picked from the wild can be used fresh in cooking and also retains a good deal of flavour when the sprigs are dried. Once dried it can be left as sprigs for use in a bouquet garni or leaves and flowers stripped from the woody stem and stored in jars. Drought conditions tend to concentrate the oils, producing a more potent herb. When cooking with thyme be sure to add it early in the process so the oils, and thus the flavour, has time to be released.

The use of thyme has been recorded as far back as 3000 BC when it was used as an antiseptic by the Sumerians. The early Egyptians also used thyme as one of the ingredients in their mummification process.

The Romans associated thyme with courage and vigour, bathing in waters scented with thyme to prepare themselves for battle. During the Middle Ages, European ladies embroidered a sprig of thyme on tunics for their knights, as a token of courage.

More recently, herbalist Culpeper recommended an infusion of thyme to relieve "the headaches occasioned by inebriation."

In literature, thyme is often associated with the activities of fairies. Shakespeare's Oberon, king of the fairies, speaks of knowing "...where the wild thyme grows." The English variety of wild thyme referred to has the highest concentration of volatile oils, which probably accounts for its use as one of the main ingredients in a 17th century recipe which "enables one to see the Faeries."