

# The Herbalist

By Dr. Kathy Girard, URI Master Gardener



## Thyme (*Thymus vulgaris*; Family Labiatae)

Thyme is a small, shrubby perennial herb with tiny, smooth oval leaves. The undersides of young leaves are red and the plant is covered with pink or violet tubular flowers in late May and June. The entire plant is pleasantly fragrant, and because bees are strongly attracted to its flowers it is often planted in Mediterranean fruit orchards to ensure pollination of trees.

This herb has a storied history as a medicinal and culinary plant. Culpepper noted that thyme is "...a noble strengthener of the lungs, as notable a one as grows, nor is there a better remedy growing for hooping cough. An ointment made of it takes away hot swellings and warts, helps the sciatica and dullness of sight." Gerard said it would "...cure sciatica and pains in the head and in healing of leprosy and the falling sickness." The oil of thyme, thymol, was used extensively on the battlefields of World War I because of its antibacterial and antiseptic properties.

Today, thyme is principally used as a culinary herb and is used to flavor stuffing, sauces, soups (especially clam chowder), and sauces. It is also used to scent soaps and sachets and to preserve linens from insect damage.

*Thymus vulgaris* may be started indoors but requires a temperature of 70° F to germinate. The seeds are very small and will best germinate in about two weeks if not covered. Once rooted they may be set in a sunny location outdoors, about 9 inches apart. Thymes are heavy feeders and enjoy gritty, sandy surfaces that keep the leaves dry and the roots cool. *Thymus vulgaris* and most other varieties prefer an alkaline soil, and the area where they are placed needs to be kept free from weeds. Mulching will assist the plants in winter survival.

Harvesting should occur only once during the growing season – before the flower buds begin to open. Cut the plant about 2 inches from the ground and put it on a fine screen to dry. When it is dry rub the leaves from the stems and store them carefully in glass jars.

Other thymes that a beginning gardener may enjoy include lemon thyme (*T. citriodorus*), creeping thyme (*T. serpyllum*) and caraway thyme (*T. herba-barona*).