

It's About Thyme

If your experience with thyme has been limited to the dried herb in your spice cupboard then it's "thyme" to become acquainted with this fine perennial. There are two main groups of thyme – common thyme (*Thymus vulgaris*) and creeping thyme (*T. serpyllum*). These low, aromatic perennials belong to the mint family, with common thyme having a somewhat shrubbier and more upright habit than creeping thyme. Both have small, semi-evergreen, almost oval, pointed leaves. The dainty two-lipped, tubular flowers grow in short spikes that smother the plants in a fragrant blanket of pink, mauve, purple, or white in early to late summer.

Common thyme, also called garden thyme and English thyme, grows to about 15 cm (6 inches) tall, forming compact, bushy plants. While all thymes may be used for cooking, some are more flavourful than others, and common thyme is a preferred culinary type. Cultivars include the silver-leafed *Argenteus*, and *Silver Posie*, which has white-edged leaves. Because its ground-hugging, evergreen leaves are usually covered by snow during the winter, creeping thyme tends to be more winter hardy. Creeping thyme comes with a long list of common names, including mother-of-thyme, mountain thyme, wild thyme, hillwort, and shepherd's thyme. There are also many exotically flavoured thymes, including lime, caraway, orange balsam, orange spice, lavender, coconut, mint, and nutmeg. These thymes tend to be less hardy, but are well worth a try in a sheltered sunny area with winter protection.

Thyme is ideal for edging flowerbeds, and for underplanting taller inhabitants of a border. Ambitious gardeners can try clipping shrubby thymes into a little hedge that weaves in and out of a knot garden design. Creeping thyme is also useful in a terraced garden, providing a tapestry of color that cascades over walls. Plant it in crevices between stepping stones and pavers, where it will quickly develop into a continuous ribbon of green crowned with a profusion of lilac, pink, or white blossoms.

Plant a fragrant blooming carpet of thyme around roses and old-fashioned perennials such as phlox, daylilies, peach-leafed bellflower, or lavender. In a rock garden, thyme pairs well with white maiden pinks, sedum, and creeping veronicas.

If there's no room in your garden, all varieties of thyme will grow happily in summer containers. Basil, rosemary, chives, parsley, and decorative varieties of sage are all fine container companions that are useful in the kitchen and also provide pleasing foliage colour and texture. Remember to transplant your container-planted thyme into the garden in the fall. While thyme can be moved indoors for the winter, it tends to drop its leaves in this dry, artificially heated environment.

Thyme requires full sun to encourage optimum flowering. It revels in relatively poor, but well-drained soil. Good drainage is essential; thyme will not thrive in boggy soil and may become susceptible to fungus and other stem and root diseases. Thyme increases slowly by means of delicate runners and can be tricky to transplant. Move plants no later than mid-summer, to enable them to re-establish their roots before the first hard freeze.

Eventually, clumps of thyme will die out at the centre. When this occurs, divide them, then replant the outer living portions and discard the dead, woody, inner portion. Thyme will develop roots along stems that come into contact with the soil and these rooted stem sections are easy to separate from the parent plant and replant elsewhere. Thyme can also be propagated from cuttings or grown from seed.