Oregano, Winter Marjoram, Wild Marjoram, Pot Marjoram

***Origanum* spp. are members of the Lamiaceae (mint) family. Besides oregano, this genus also includes marjoram (*Origanum majorana*).**

Oreganos are aromatic, herbaceous perennials with erect, hairy stems that grow 1 to 3 feet tall. The oval green leaves are somewhat pointed and up to 2 inches long. Small tubular purple or white flowers appear from July through September. Each fruit contains four seedlike nutlets.

Of all varieties, Greek oregano (*O. vulgare* subsp. *hirtum* and *O. vulgare* Viride) produces the best culinary flavor. *Origanum vulgare* is grown for medicinal use; its pink flowers are used in floral arrangements. Other oreganos used in cooking are not *Origanum,* but are more heat tolerant in the garden. Mexican or Puerto Rican oregano (*Lippia graveolens*), a perennial, is a member of the verbena family grown in the south and southwest. *Poliomintha longiflora,* a native of Monterrey, Mexico, takes full sun or partial shade and tolerates freezing.

Oregano vulgare var. *aureum,* Creeping Golden Marjoram, is a fast-spreading plant that is useful in pathways and rock gardens. Trailing oregano grows well in hanging baskets or on rock walls.

Market Information

Use. Oregano has medicinal, culinary, cosmetic, craft, and companion planting uses. This herb has a strong, biting aroma and a sharp, piquant flavor. It is most commonly used as a fresh or dried culinary herb in Mediterranean and Latin American cuisines.

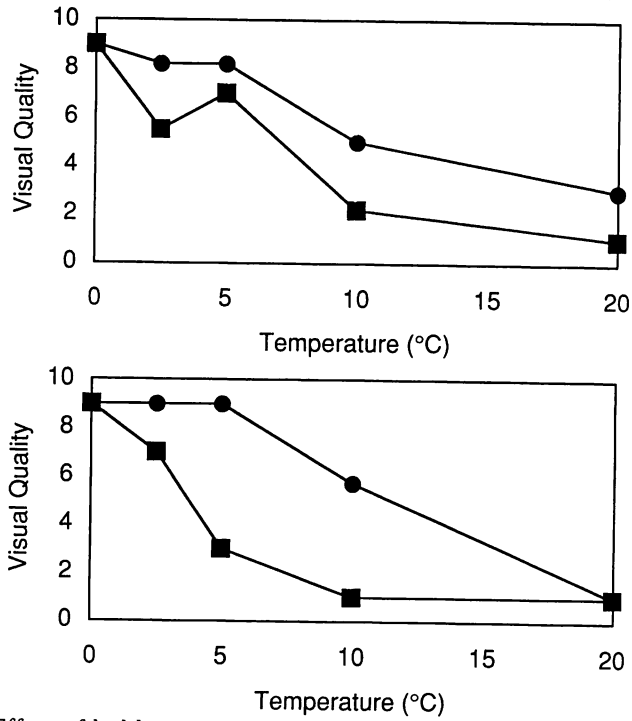
Culture

Climatic requirements. Oregano is hardy in plant climate zones 4 through 10, with temperatures ranging from 41° to 82°F. It thrives in full sun in well-drained, average-quality soil with a pH of 4.5 to 8.7.

Propagation and care. Propagate oregano from cuttings or by root division from plants. For culinary use, *Origanum heracleoticum* is more flavorful than *O. vulgare.* Take root divisions or cuttings in the spring. Space plants 12 to 15 inches apart in rows 18 inches wide after danger of frost has passed.

Flavor varies greatly when oregano is grown from seed. If you use seed, plant a lot so you will be able to select plants with the desired flavor. Seeds germinate in 4 days at 70°F in the light; at cooler temperatures, they may take up to 14 days. If seeded outdoors in soil warmer than 45°F, cover seeds with cheesecloth to keep them from washing away.

Healthy Greek oregano plants. (Photo: Hunter Johnson)



Effect of holding temperature on the quality of fresh Mexican oregano (top) *and Greek oregano* (above) *after 1 (•) and 2 (■) weeks' storage in perforated polyethylene bags. Visual quality was assessed on a 5-point scale (1, 3, 5, 7, 9, where 1 = low quality and 9 = high quality). From Joyce, Reid, and Katz 1986.*

Oregano is a vigorous grower and requires little attention. Plants mature in 45 days. Mulch the plants to keep foliage clean. Cutting a few sprigs of leaves when the plant is 6 inches high will encourage bushiness. Fertilize yearly with a balanced plant food. Little irrigation is needed after the plants are established. Divide plants every few years to prevent woodiness and declining productivity.

Pests and disease. Oregano is susceptible to root rot and to fungal diseases. It can be damaged by spider mite, aphid, and leaf miner infestations.

Harvest and postharvest practices. Use only the highest-quality plant material for the fresh market. Some of the detailed postharvest handling information provided for basil also applies to oregano.

To harvest oregano, trim all branches, leaving only the lowest set of leaves. The plant will leaf out again and send up new shoots within 2 weeks, providing another harvest. Foliage tastes sweeter when clipped before flowers begin to develop. Essential oils are greatest just before the plant blooms. To dry, hang the stems upside-down in a dark, dry place. Once dried, discard the stems and store the leaves in airtight, light-tight containers.

The successful marketing of fresh herbs requires careful postharvest handling. Temperature is the most important factor. The optimum postharvest temperature, 32°F, will allow a shelf life of 3 to 4 weeks; 41°F will allow a minimum shelf life of 2 to 3 weeks. Appropriate cooling methods for most herbs include cold rooms, forced-air cooling, and vacuum-cooling. Morning harvest minimizes the need for cooling.

Prevention of excess moisture loss is important. Most herbs respond well to high humidity: relative humidity in the packing area, cold rooms, and transport vehicles should be maintained above 95 percent where practical. You can also pack the fresh herbs in bags designed to minimize water loss. Maintain constant temperatures and reduce condensation inside the bags to prevent excess moisture and to avoid fungal or bacterial growth. Bags can be ventilated with perforations or fabricated from a polymer that is permeable to water vapor. Young herb tissue is susceptible to ethylene damage. This can be minimized by maintaining recommended temperatures.

If water is used during handling, chlorinated water can reduce the microbial load. To prevent physical injury to leaves, pack them in rigid clear plastic containers or pillow packs.

Sources

Seeds and plants

Abundant Life Seed Foundation, P.O. Box 772, Port Townsend, WA 98368

W. Atlee Burpee & Co., 300 Park Avenue, Warminster, PA 18974

Bountiful Gardens, 18001 Shaser Ranch Road, Willits, CA 95490

Gurney's Seed & Nursery Co., Yankton, SD 57079

Henry Field's Seed & Nursery Co., Shenandoah, IA 51602

Johnny's Selected Seeds, 299 Foss Hill Rd., Albion, ME 04910

Le Jardin du Gourmet, P.O. Box 75, St. Johnsbury Center, VT 05863

Nichols Garden Nursery, 1190 North Pacific Hwy., Albany, OR 97321

Park Seed Co., Cokesbury Road, Greenwood, SC 29647-0001

Shepherd's Garden Seeds, 30 Irene Street, Torrington, CT 06790

Territorial Seed Co., P.O. Box 157, Cottage Grove, OR 97424

More information

Cantwell, M., and M. Reid. 1986. Postharvest handling of fresh culinary herbs. *Perishables Handling* No. 60:2–4. Vegetable Crops Dept., University of California, Davis, CA.

Joyce, Daryl, Michael Reid, and Philip Katz. 1986. Postharvest handling of fresh culinary herbs. *Perishables Handling* No. 58:1–4. Vegetable Crops Dept., University of California, Davis, CA.

Kowalchik, Claire, et al., eds. 1987. *Rodale's illustrated encyclopedia of herbs.* Rodale Press, Emmaus, PA.

Newcomb, Duane, and Karen Newcomb. 1989. *The complete vegetable gardener's sourcebook.* Prentice Hall Press, West Nyack, NY.

Organic Gardening Magazine Staff. 1978. *Organic gardening magazine's encyclopedia of organic gardening.* Rodale Press, Emmaus, PA.

Simon, James, Alena Chadwick, and Lyle Craker. 1984. *Herbs: An indexed bibliography 1971–1980.* Archon Books, Hamden, CT.

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