



CAPE COD COOPERATIVE EXTENSION

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Oregano

Overview/Description : Oregano is widely known as a culinary spice and is probably most often used in its dried form. Plants in the genus *Origanum* can be perennial ground covers, tender perennials or even small perennial shrubs. The stems can get very woody, with oval, sometimes fuzzy, dark green leaves in opposite pairs. The flower stalks are spiky and may be white, pink or purple.

Latin: *Origanum* **Common:** Oregano

Zone: 5-10, depending on variety. *Origanum heracleoticum*, 'Greek Oregano' is hardy in Zones 5-9.

Exposure: Full sun

Mature Size: Up to 30" tall. Usually grows between 8"-12".

Bloom Period/Days to Harvest: Begin harvesting when plants have reached 4-5 inches in height.

Design Suggestions: Although it is grown predominately as a culinary herb, oregano makes a nice edging plant and ground cover, requiring little maintenance. The smaller varieties also do well in rock and alpine gardens.

Varieties: There are many named oreganos, but the common names tend to vary by region:

- 'Greek Oregano', the variety usually used in Mediterranean cooking, is *O. heracleoticum*. This is the type we associate with oregano flavor.
- *O. vulgare* is known as 'Common Oregano', 'Wild Marjoram' and 'Pot Marjoram'. Marjoram is a type of oregano with a less pungent, sweeter taste, often used in French and English cooking.

Cultural Requirements & Maintenance: Plants can be started from seeds, divisions or cuttings. Since different species of oregano will cross pollinate, you may not get what you expect from seed. Oregano seeds require some light to germinate, so cover only slightly with soil. Start seeds indoors and transplant when temperatures remain above 45° F. Oregano plants are widely available in nurseries and through specialty catalogs.

Oregano is one of those 'Mediterranean' herbs that likes well-drained soil, on the lean side, and full sun. Rich soil tends to dilute the pungency of the flavor. The flowers should be pinched to keep the plants bushy and prevent them bolting to seed. Climate, soil and moisture can cause variation in oregano's flavor. The genus is native to the Mediterranean area, but *O. vulgare* has naturalized in many areas, including the eastern United States.

Problems: Few pests bother oregano. Keep an eye out for spider mites and aphids.

Harvesting: Once the plant has reached 4"-5", sprigs can be taken. Harvesting before the plant blooms will yield the most flavorful leaves. Levels of essential oils diminish as the flowers begin to develop.

Uses: It's the leaves that are used for flavoring foods. They retain their flavor better in hot dishes if added toward the end of cooking. Heating too long results in bitterness. Dried oregano has a stronger taste than fresh.

