

An Herb Society of America Fact Sheet

Oregano & Marjoram

Culinary Types

Origanum vulgare subsp. *hirtum* (Greek oregano)
Origanum vulgare subsp. *gracile* (Russian oregano)
Origanum vulgare subsp. *glandulosum* (Algerian oregano)
Origanum majorana (sweet marjoram)
Origanum dictamnus (dittany of crete, hop marjoram)
Origanum xmajoricum (Italian oregano/hardy sweet marjoram)
Origanum onites (Turkish oregano/rigani)
Origanum syriacum (Syrian oregano/za'atar)

Description and Chemistry

Herbaceous perennials or subshrubs, origanums are native to the Mediterranean and Eurasia and grow in mountainous areas with rocky, calcareous soil. Some species grow in mounds that are only 2-3 inches high, while others grow erect up to 39 inches tall. Flower stems may be erect or trailing and flowers may be purple, pink or white, depending on the species. Plants in the genus have atypical leaves called bracts, which surround the calyx and corolla. Leaves may be various shapes including round, heart-shaped and oval and stems may be woody or non-woody.



Origanum xmajoricum
Photo by Susan Belsinger

The genus *Origanum* consists of over 44 species, 6 subspecies, 3 botanical varieties and 18 naturally occurring hybrids, and includes several types of oregano as well as sweet marjoram (*O. majorana*) and dittany of Crete (*O. dictamnus*). Plants known and used as oregano don't necessarily belong to the genus *Origanum*, however. Carvacrol, a creosote-scented phenol, is the signature chemical responsible for the sharp, pungent flavor of the culinary oreganos and can be found in plants from other genera, including *Lippia graveolens* (Mexican oregano), *Lippia micromera* (Jamaican oregano), *Plectranthus amboinicus* (Cuban oregano), and *Poliomintha bustamanta* (Mexican oregano). Conversely, just because a plant is an *Origanum* doesn't mean it tastes like oregano. Some *Origanum* species and subspecies, such as *Origanum vulgare* subsp. *vulgare*, have little or no carvacrol and are not used in cooking. According to HSA member and herb expert Dr. Arthur O. Tucker, "it's best to think of oregano as a flavor rather than a genus or species."

The other chemical associated with the origanums is sabinene hydrate, which is largely responsible for *O. majorana's* sweet flavor and also occurs in *Origanum xmajoricum*, a hybrid of *O. vulgare* subsp. *virens* and *O. majorana*.

Culture

O. majorana can be grown from seed, but propagation methods like cuttings, division and layering which clone the source plant's chemistry and flavor are more effective for the other more variable *Origanum* species and cultivars. Origanums are notorious for mislabeling by commercial nurseries and retail outlets, so if purchasing a starter plant, it's a good idea to smell it before you buy it.

Origanums are hardy from Zone 5 to Zone 9, depending on the species/subspecies. Many are tender perennials and are grown as annuals in North America or grown in pots and overwintered

indoors. They can survive in a variety of soils and climates but flourish in dry, rocky conditions that mimic their native habitat. Most origanums will thrive with minimal fertilizer if planted in soil amended with gravel, shells, sand and compost, and proper soil amendments are especially critical for container-grown plants.

Origanums can be grown in full sun or partial shade but will have improved scent and flower color with at least ½ day of sun. They prefer well-drained soil, and proper drainage is more of a concern than watering. High humidity can be problematic for many origanums, especially hairy-leaved species like *O. dictamnus*.

O. vulgare subsp. *hirtum* and *O. xmajoricum* are recommended for beginners due to their flavor and hardiness. *O. vulgare* subsp. *hirtum* is hardy to Zone 5 and has the traditional spicy, pungent oregano flavor, and *O. xmajoricum* is hardy from Zones 6 to 9 and has a flavor that combines the sweetness of marjoram and the spice of oregano.

Uses

Oregano and marjoram are essential ingredients in Greek, Italian and French cuisine. Although several *Origanum* species and subspecies (as well as plants from other genera) are sold and used as oregano, *O. vulgare* subsp. *hirtum* has the classic pungent, hot and spicy oregano flavor. Fresh and dried leaves of oregano can be added to soups, casseroles, sauces, stew, stuffing, eggs, olives, teas, tomato-based dishes, chili and pizza. Flowers have a flavor similar to the leaves and can be a flavorful and decorative addition to vegetables, salads and other foods. Sweet marjoram has a mild, sweet flavor that compliments mushrooms, carrots, cauliflower, spinach, squash, peas and asparagus, and leaves, flowers and tender stems can be added to stews, poultry, stuffing, syrups, dressings, cheese mixtures, seafood, omelets, pizza, salad, sausages, ice cream, custards, pies and fruit desserts. *Origanum xmajoricum* can be used in most recipes that call for marjoram. Other origanums with culinary use include *O. dictamnus*, *O. vulgare* subsp. *gracile*, *O. vulgare* subsp. *glandulosum*, *O. onites* and *O. syriacum* (Syrian oregano/za'atar, syn. *O. maru*). Syrian oregano is a primary ingredient in za'atar, a Middle Eastern condiment combining oregano, sesame seeds, sumac berries and salt.

Both oregano and marjoram have been used in folk medicine to treat colds, coughs, gastrointestinal problems and a variety of other conditions, and several plants in the genus reportedly have antibacterial, antifungal and antimicrobial properties due to the phenol carvacrol.

The oils of both *O. majorana* and *O. vulgare* are used commercially to scent soaps, lotions and colognes. Both plants have also been used to make dyes. The colorful purple flowers of *O. vulgare* subsp. *vulgare* are ideal for everlasting, wreaths and swags, and the leaves and flowers of sweet marjoram, *O. vulgare* and *O. onites* can be included in potpourris. See [Oregano and Marjoram: An Herb Society of America Guide to the genus *Origanum*](#) for additional information on uses.

This fact sheet was adapted from [Oregano and Marjoram: An Herb Society of America Guide to the genus *Origanum*](#). Kirtland, OH: The Herb Society of America, 2005. See the full guide for literature citations and references as well as in-depth information on *Origanum* chemistry, nutrition, history, folklore, indoor, outdoor and container cultivation, pests/diseases, pruning, harvesting, preserving, uses, recipes, species and cultivars.

Disclaimer: The Herb Society of America is a non-profit, educational organization dedicated to promoting the knowledge, use and delight of herbs through educational programs, research, and sharing the experience of members with the community. Since we are not medical practitioners, it is the policy of The Herb Society of America not to advise, recommend, or prescribe herbs for medicinal use. Information is provided as an educational service, and The Herb Society of America cannot be held liable for its content. Please consult a health care provider before pursuing any herbal treatments.