



## garden spot

# Thyme has uses time after time



MARTY FIGLEY

Next week is National Herb Week, and to celebrate that fact, the International Herb Association of Mundelein, Ill., has announced that thyme (*Thymus*) has been named the herb of the year.

This annual celebration was established by the INA in 1992 to "inform the public about how herbs affect all of our lives."

Thyme has been used for centuries as an incense in religious ceremonies and to fumigate. The balsamic fragrance of the plant spoke of graceful elegance and was an expression of praise and admiration. It has antiseptic properties, recorded by the Roman poet Virgil (70-19 B.C.).

Young ladies often embroidered a sprig of thyme and a bee on the tunic of

their knights so the knights would return safely to them after battle.

Why the bee? It was probably used because folklore ascribed the bee as a messenger and because the flavor of honey from the thyme nectar gathered by bees is reportedly outstanding. There are numerous other folklore stories about this little plant.

Shakespeare referred to thyme in his writings - "I know a place where the wild thyme blows..." It was also used in Christ's manger where it imparted a sweet, clean fragrance.

### Growing

Thyme is a very easy herb to grow, undemanding and yet rewarding. There are more than 400 varieties of the species and when they are grown close to one another, may crossbreed. That undoubtedly explains why there are so many of them!

The nomenclature of the plants can get quite confusing, but some of them

are so alike, only trained specialists can tell the difference.

Not all will survive in zone 5, but many of them will and they do contribute much to the herb garden. It is a versatile plant that can cascade over a rock or low wall, fill in pockets in the patio, billow around stepping stones and be quite at home in a container.

Thyme originated in the Mediterranean countries and does best when the soil isn't too rich. Overly fertilized, rich, heavy soil and too much water probably kills more thyme plants than does neglect. They like well-draining, porous soil and most varieties prefer full sun. If you keep them pruned, new growth is encouraged.

I grow five kinds of thyme in my garden and love them all. I believe my favorite is Lemon Thyme (*Thymus x citriodorus*), which I find flavors green beans to perfection. It grows around a small sundial in the garden.

Common or English Thyme (*T. vulgaris*) is a staple plant that has a more upright growing habit, doesn't spread as readily as many of the others and is another excellent culinary thyme.

Golden Thyme (I don't know the variety - there are several) adds a golden glow among the stepping stones, and blends prettily with a dark green Creeping Thyme (again there are many). One of the first plants I put in the garden was Woolly Thyme, which grows among the rocks in the little garden under the dogwood tree.

There are so many varieties that you must make your own decision about preferences. You can choose from those with culinary or ornamental purposes.

I have used the creeping varieties to make little wreaths, and especially enjoy the garden when they all bloom in their pink, blue or lavender dresses. The



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**High thyme:** Versatile thyme can be part of the design of a knot garden.

leaves also add a sweet scent to pot-pourris. Bees also visit, especially during bloom time, and are fun to watch.

### Cooking

Thyme is invaluable in the kitchen and is used in many seasoning blends to add its special flavor to appetizers, breads, salads, soups, fish, eggs, vegetables, beverages, meats and even desserts and fruits. It is also suitable to flavor vinegar.

When you begin to experiment with thyme in cooking, its flavor can be a bit pungent, so it's best to use a little bit

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