

Oregano & Marjoram

Jeff Cox, Organic Cook's Bible

JEFF COX was an editor of Organic Gardening throughout the 1970s, when that magazine led the fledgling organic movement from a fringe idea to a mainstream lifestyle choice with a following of millions. He's written seventeen books and countless magazine articles about organic produce, gardening, and wine, and serves as a national judge for the James Beard Foundation's annual awards. He has hosted public television's Your Organic Garden and Grow It! on HGTV.

ORIGANUM, VARIOUS SPECIES

THE DIFFERENCE between these two members of the genus *Origanum* is instantly recognizable when you taste them side by side.

Oregano (*Origanum vulgare*) is more bitter, with a strong, sharp quality.

Sweet marjoram (*Origanum majorana*) shares a similar aroma with oregano, but on the palate has a sweet pungency, with a spicy note. In appearance, oregano has a more open habit, with slender but tough, almost woody, stems. Sweet marjoram has twisty, almost knotted-looking leaves on more herbaceous stems. Oregano is a hardy perennial that grows in cold winter areas, while sweet marjoram is tender, but it is easily grown as an annual in cold winter states.

Having several plants of oregano and sweet marjoram is an absolute must in any complete herb garden. If you have a sunny windowsill, sweet marjoram will overwinter nicely there in a generous pot.

How to dry Oregano and Marjoram

Pick up bunches of the herbs at (Laguna Farm) or farmers' markets in midsummer when the essential oils are strongest, and hang them in a warm, dry spot out of direct sunlight. The thin, woody branches and stems will dry. Rub the leaves, which will crumble off the stems, and store the dried leaves in an airtight container. They'll keep for up to a year, at which point you can repeat the process. Both oregano and sweet marjoram are more intensely aromatic dried than fresh.

TYPES

You may find started plants of Greek oregano (*Origanum heracleoticum*) sold at nurseries or in racks of herbs in spring. The leaves have a dark gray-green appearance, and the flavor is stronger,

with a resinous note, than other oreganos.

Another oregano that I've grown for years is the delightful Dittany of Crete (*Origanum dictamnus*), but not for culinary use. When planted in a hanging basket, its long stems and gray-green, woolly leaves arch gracefully up and over the edges of the basket, and the flower heads, resembling those of hops, hang pendant and show little lavender pink petals between the bracts. It's as charming a plant as there is.

Another visual beauty, with arching stems and pendant flowers, that does double duty as a culinary herb, is Pot Marjoram (*Origanum onites*). It grows wild in Greece and on Crete, where it is called rigani, and is used liberally on grilled meat and baked fish, tomatoes, eggplant, and summer squashes.

SEASONALITY

Oregano and marjoram's highest quality is achieved in July.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

When buying them fresh, make sure the leaves are perky and fresh and the stems aren't browned and shriveling.

USES

Oregano is a natural with fava beans, eggplant, tomatoes, and most all tomato-saucy Italian dishes—such as pastas with marinara sauce, pizzas, calzones, Italian hoagies, sausage sandwiches—and with Greek dishes such as souvlaki. Unlike many herbs, its flavor persists during cooking so you can add it at the beginning.

Sweet marjoram is good for flavoring vegetables such as carrots, summer squashes, and potatoes. Its sweet spiciness adds a brisk note to salads. It's good in omelets. Use it on light meats such as chicken, pork, and veal. Like oregano, it marries well with tomatoes, beans, and eggplant. But cooking reduces its flavor, so add it at the end.

Marjoram Potato Patties

Sweet marjoram was the plant of Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of love, so you might be able to kindle a flame by serving these yummy potato cakes to a special someone.

SERVINGS

Makes 8 patties

INGREDIENTS

2 pounds red or russet potatoes
3 egg yolks
2 tablespoons minced fresh sweet marjoram
2 tablespoons butter

1 tablespoon half-and-half
Pinch of freshly ground nutmeg
Salt and freshly ground black pepper
All-purpose flour
1 whole egg, beaten

1. Bring a large pot of water to a boil. Peel and halve the potatoes, then boil them until almost tender, about 15 minutes. Preheat oven to 400°F.
2. Drain the potatoes, pat dry with paper towels, and place them on a baking sheet in the oven for a few minutes to dry off excess moisture. Remove from the oven and use a ricer or potato masher to mash the potatoes into a bowl. Beat in the egg yolks, marjoram, butter, half-and-half, nutmeg, and salt and pepper to taste. Mix together well. Flour a board and turn the potato mixture onto it. Separate the mass into 8 equal pieces, and shape each into a round patty about 1 inch thick.
3. Grease 1 or 2 baking sheets as needed. Use a spatula to lift the patties onto the baking sheets. Brush the tops of the patties with the beaten egg. Bake about 20 minutes, until well browned.

Oregano Chimichurri Sauce

In Argentina, they brush this tangy, spicy sauce over the top of their grilled meats, which they consume in great quantity along with their good red wines. This recipe is from the winery Bodega Catena Zapata of Agrelo, Argentina, maker of excellent malbecs and other varietals grown on the slopes of the Andes.

SERVINGS

Makes about 1 1/2 cups

INGREDIENTS

4 cloves garlic
2 teaspoons dried oregano or 1 tablespoon fresh
1 coarsely chopped shallot
1 jalapeño pepper, stemmed and seeded
1/4 cup Champagne vinegar
Salt and freshly ground black pepper
1 cup minced Italian flat-leaf parsley, loosely packed
1 cup extra-virgin olive oil

Place the garlic, oregano, shallot, jalapeño, vinegar, salt, and pepper in a blender or food processor and whiz to a smooth paste. Transfer to a bowl and stir in the parsley and oil. Store the excess in the freezer, and spoon out and let warm to room temperature as needed.