

# OREGANO

## **Description and History.**

Oregano (botanical name *Origanum vulgare*) is a perennial plant, native from central Asia to Europe (including Britain) where it grows in dry grassy areas and scrub, usually on calcium rich soils. The plant produces clusters of purple-pink flowers in the summer that are extremely attractive to bees and butterflies. It is commonly cultivated in herb gardens as well as being grown commercially.

The leaves and young flowering stems have a very long history of both medicinal and culinary use with historical records dating back at least to the ancient Greeks. It has a high content of the essential oil thymol and is, therefore, an effective antiseptic. The plant has a beneficial effect upon the digestive and respiratory systems and is also used to promote menstruation. Because of this the essential oil should not be used in pregnancy.

Oregano is one of the more important flavouring herbs in Mediterranean cookery, and is often used dried rather than fresh. The leaves are used as flavouring for salad dressings, vegetables and legumes, and are frequently included in strongly flavoured dishes with chillies, garlic, onions etc. Strangely enough, much of the commercially available dried oregano for culinary use does not come from this plant but from a number of different, often unrelated plants. These include *Lippia graveolens*, *Lippia palmeri*, *Thymus capitatus* and *Origanum syriacum*. It is important, therefore, when using the herb medicinally to ensure that the genuine plant is obtained either by harvesting it yourself or obtaining it from a reputable medicinal herb supplier.

Oregano has insect repellent properties and was formerly used as a strewing herb, being placed on the floor in places such as churches so that its scent was released when people walked on it, thus perfuming the air and keeping away biting insects. The essential oil has also been used to kill skin parasites, though some caution is advised since it can cause skin irritations.

## **Medicinal Properties.**

Oregano contains a number of medically active constituents, particularly its essential oil but also tannins, flavonoids, resin and sterols. It is a very variable plant, both in appearance and in chemical composition. Plants growing close to the sea have the highest proportion of essential oil.

More recently the water-soluble extract of oregano has been researched with impressive benefits shown as an antioxidant and anti-histamine. In clinical use this fraction of the herb is undergoing research to discover its functions within the respiratory system where initial studies have shown positive benefits for asthma and emphysema. In its function as an antihistamine it can be very helpful to reduce the effects of hay fever by strengthening mast cells. This decreases the excess histamine release common in this allergy without the side effects commonly associated with typical medical treatments.

Whereas activity within the whole herb and oily extracts tends to focus on the thymol fraction, the main active component of the water-soluble extract of oregano is a compound called rosmarinic acid, which was first identified in rosemary. The advantage of focussing on

the water-soluble components is that one can concentrate the benefits associated with them, without losing all the other important water-soluble phytonutrients that are contained with the plant.

### ***Usage***

Oregano is a very safe herb to use, suitable for all age groups from childhood to old age, though it should be avoided in medicinal quantities when pregnant as it can trigger menstruation.

The herb is commonly used in the treatment of minor digestive complaints such as indigestion, flatulence, colic and stomach upsets, where it exerts a calming and relaxing influence. It is also much used to treat respiratory tract infections such as bronchitis, colds and influenza.

Oregano is often prescribed to treat mild feverish complaints. Because it is very safe for children it can be used to calm the fever in a range of childhood complaints. With its stimulatory action upon the uterus, and gentle sedative and antispasmodic action, it has also been used successfully to ease painful menstruation.

Oregano is often used in the form of the isolated essential oil that is distilled from the flowering plant (though it is also obtained commercially from the unrelated *Thymus capitatus*). A few drops of the essential oil, put on cotton wool and placed in the hollow of an aching tooth frequently relieves the pain of toothache.

### ***Summary***

This one example shows how broad the subject of herbs can be. The choices over whether to use an extract or the whole herb can depend upon the function you are looking for, but as with all natural foods the range of benefits can be very diverse. The whole subject therefore needs considerable research if you want to understand how these plants and their phytonutrients can benefit health.

### ***Source***

An oregano extract known as “Neutralise” along with further information is available from Restorative Health.