

## Oregano, The Pizza Herb

Whenever we would bring fresh-cut oregano to the farmers' market, merely crushing a leaf would bring an instant smile to a child's face and a gleam of delighted recognition for "the pizza herb". Such is the captivating power of fragrance, both in memory and in taste. Oregano is a marvelous plant for the kitchen garden, lending its pungent, tarry flavor to grilled summer vegetables, marinara sauces, roasted meats, and yes, pizza.

But gardeners seeking that signature oregano aroma can be very disappointed by choosing the wrong plants at the nursery. Many garden centers offer oregano varieties that have little or no scent, and display invasive tendencies in the garden as well. When I was a teenager, my best friend's mother gave us a slip of such an oregano, and for years we cursed it as it overran all the annual flowers planted beside it in our side border. My mother would dry the leaves for cooking, but we were always frustrated by its lack of scent.

When Phil and I went to shop for plants for our first herb garden, I crushed the leaf of an oregano plant and finally had that "Aha!" moment; here was the pizza herb I had been craving. The lesson I learned that day is one that I share often with our garden visitors; many herbs, but particularly oregano, should be chosen not by appearance or a nice label, but by rubbing a leaf and inhaling its scent. If there's no aroma then, there won't be any flavor once it gets in the skillet.

A little knowledge of oregano nomenclature can be useful as well. Attentive nursery owners label all plants with their proper and universal Latin names, so that whether one is shopping for a plant in Staunton or Tibet, the Latin name is always the same. All oregano species are grouped into the genus *Origanum*, and belong in the Lamiaceae or mint family, along with many other familiar culinary herbs such as mints, (genus *Mentha*) rosemaries, (genus *Rosmarinus*) and sages (genus *Salvia*), among others. The plant that my friend's well-meaning mother shared with us was an oregano species with the name of *Origanum vulgare*, or wild oregano (sometimes also listed as wild marjoram just to confuse us; sweet marjoram is another oregano species, outlined below). *Origanum vulgare* has a rampant growth habit and no culinary value. It does have one positive attribute, however; its showy pink flowers are very attractive to bees and butterflies, and dry well for arrangements and wreaths.

We grow three oregano species with outstanding culinary value; each has its own charm and singular flavor. Greek oregano, or *Origanum vulgare subsp. hirtum*, displays the classic sharp, hot and heady bouquet beloved by fans of all foods Mediterranean. The plant itself is very hardy through even the coldest winters here and does have a spreading habit, though is not nearly as invasive as its flavorless cousin, wild oregano. Its white flowers are indispensable in herb wreaths, and provide a tell-tale clue to its identity—after a pinch and a sniff, of course!

My "Aha!" moment came when I rubbed a leaf of hardy sweet marjoram, or *Origanum x majoricum*. Hardy sweet marjoram, also found as "Italian oregano", is a hybrid of sweet marjoram (*Origanum majorana*) and wild oregano (*Origanum vulgare*), with a tidy growth habit, apple green leaves and lovely sprays of white flowers. Its perfume is a happy marriage of spicy oregano as a background note, with the sweet, clean smell of marjoram in the foreground. Alas, though it has the name "hardy", it is a tender perennial here, kept alive through our winters in the warmth and shelter of a brick retaining wall and a deep mulch.

Finally sweet marjoram, or *Origanum majorana*, has a permanent home here for its gray-green, felty leaves, charming knot-like flower buds, and enchanting fragrance. This is an annual oregano species that can be started from seed indoors in early spring and transplanted outdoors after danger of frost is past.

Note: I consulted "The Big Book of Herbs" by Arthur O. Tucker, Ph.D. and Thomas DeBaggio (Interweave Press, 2000) for the Latin nomenclature above.