

Thymus

Labiatae

[*Lamiaceae*]

Thymus is derived from either a Greek verb meaning ‘to fumigate’ or a noun (courage) and, as *thymon*, is a classical Greek name used by the Greek philosopher, Theophrastus (c.327-c.287 BC), for thyme or another similar plant..

According to tablets dating back to 2750 BC the Sumerians must have been using thyme for medicinal purposes. Because of its antiseptic and preservative qualities the ancient Egyptians employed the plant for embalming – for which it is still used in various countries today (mainly as an insect repellent). Both the ancient Greeks and the Romans exploited its invigorating qualities that were believed to inspire courage. Thyme was also used as a fumigant and was believed to be able to repel mice. The Greeks burnt thyme as incense and Roman soldiers added the plant to the water when they were bathing. In the culinary and domestic worlds Romans flavoured cheese and liqueurs with thyme, and in their homes they used it for strewing.

The Middle Ages saw European pillows (particularly in England) stuffed with thyme as it was thought that anyone suffering from depression or epilepsy could derive benefit from the plant during sleep. Even the legal system seems to have jumped on the bandwagon as judges’ posies contained fresh thyme to help ward off disease and noxious odours. Until the 16th and 17th Centuries honey (not sugar) was in considerable demand as the prime sweetener and preservative – and thyme was one of the preferred plants grown near the beehives by apiarists.

Judges’ posies are remembered today in the modern British custom that takes place on Maundy Thursday (the day before Good Friday in the Christian calendar). The Maundy money (usually a specially minted silver penny for every year of the monarch’s age) is distributed by the Queen to a similar number of elderly people. She herself is presented with a traditional nosegay that customarily contains daffodils (*Narcissus pseudonarcissus*), primroses (*Primula vulgaris*), rosemary (*Rosmarinus officinalis*), thyme (*Thymus vulgaris*), violets (*Viola odorata*) and hoary stock (*Matthiola incana*).

Thyme has attracted many superstitions and customs. Two or three thousand years ago it was believed to give shelter to the souls of the dead, particularly anyone who had been murdered. This conviction was so strong that not only was it told how the smell of thyme hung in the air after a violent death but the belief itself fostered many practices in different countries in the following centuries. In Britain the family would be visited by death or severe illness if thyme crossed the threshold, and in Wales it was often planted on graves. Also in the British Isles thyme with chamomile (*Chamaemelum nobile*), crab apple (*Malus baccata*), fennel (*Foeniculum vulgare var. dulce*), greater plantain (*Plantago major*), mugwort (*Artemisia vulgaris*), stinging nettle (*Urtica dioica*), watercress (*Nasturtium officinale*) and wood betony (*Stachys officinalis*) was one of the Nine Sacred Herbs for the Anglo-Saxons. They believed these plants could give protection against evil. On a lighter note thyme was also used as a love oracle, and it was an ingredient in a recipe that it was said could enable one to see fairies. With or without this recipe however many people were sure that fairies could be seen dancing on wild thyme on Midsummer Eve (24th June).

The plant has also represented various traits or political persuasions at different times. One authority tells how in ancient Greece the plant stood for grace and elegance and 'to smell of thyme' was an accolade. In Europe (including Britain) in the Middle Ages it denoted bravery and energy and knights' favours often bore an embroidered bee hovering over a sprig of thyme. More recently at the beginning of the 20th Century in southern France stems of wild thyme were sent to summon delegates to a Republican meeting as the plant was chosen as the symbol of staunch support.

Thyme has been placed amongst linen primarily to repel insects. It is also one of the plants that yields thymol. This is a powerful antiseptic that can be used both internally and externally both as an anaesthetic and a deodorant – let alone as a meat preserver.

At the end of the 20th Century authorities note the huge trade in thyme, primarily from wild plants. The statistics are amazing. For example 3-4,000 metric tonnes of thyme (dried or otherwise) are being exported by Turkey annually, and it is estimated that 75 million wild plants are uprooted in Spain each year.

Medicinally, herbalists have recommended thyme (*Thymus vulgaris*) or wild thyme (*Thymus drucei*), alone or as a supporting ingredient, in remedies for whooping-cough, fever, sciatica, leprosy, rheumatism, wind, indigestion, bee stings, worms in children, headaches and nightmares, for easing gout and children's coughs and for removing warts and healing wounds. Today it can be used particularly for respiratory ailments such as coughs, bronchitis and whooping-cough.