

Using Local Foods

This leaflet is part of a series intended as a marketing aid for farmers' market vendors.

Topics were suggested by a vendor as a means of informing and educating customers about items that could be locally grown. Herbs, spices, and condiments are the foundation of many healthful cuisines around the world. This series covers oregano, basil, hot peppers, seed spices, and cilantro—all of which are produced in the U.S. and sold at farmers' markets.

Each short, illustrated leaflet can be printed in color or black-and-white. Basic information about each food includes its history and suggested uses. Cookbooks or the Internet should be consulted for specific recipes. For more information about the Local Foods Series and local food systems, contact the National Sustainable Agriculture Information Service at **1-800-346-9140** or **www.attra.ncat.org**.



Photo: Janet Bachmann, NCAT

ATTRA Local Foods Series No. 4 – Oregano

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ATTRA Local Foods Series No. 4

Oregano



Photo: Stephanie Berghaeuser

Would the real oregano please stand up?

The perennial Mediterranean herb genus *Oreganum* contains many closely related plants, and three of these are frequently used in cooking. This can lead to some confusion about exactly which herb is “oregano,” and how the different types of oregano can best be used. Let's take a look at the three cooking herbs with similar Latin names. The herb known as true sweet marjoram comes from the species *Oreganum majorana*, while the species *Oreganum vulgare* provides us with the

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herbs known as wild marjoram, common oregano, and Mexican oregano. Meanwhile, the species known as *Oreganum vulgare hirtum* produces the herbs known as winter marjoram or winter sweet marjoram.

“Greek oregano,” the oregano most familiar to us in cooking, comes from a particular type of the hirtum species, with bright green leaves and white flowers. (Flowers of some other types are purple.)

A perennial favorite

You’re probably familiar with the flavor of Greek oregano from pizza and pasta sauces. It’s an herb that is used either fresh or dried. In dried form, oregano is frequently used in meat or fish marinades and may be sprinkled over olives, cheeses, or salads. In Greek cooking, dried oregano is found in many dishes featuring ground lamb, potatoes, tomatoes, zucchini, and feta cheese. Fresh oregano is commonly found in seafood dishes.

Gathered from the wild, commercially available Mediterranean oreganos vary in quality and flavor. When you’re using fresh oregano from the farmers’ market instead of commercial dried oregano, you may have to experiment with your favorite recipes to find the right amount to use. If you want to substitute fresh oregano for dried, a general rule of thumb is to use three times as much of the fresh leaves as you would of the dried herb.

Meanwhile, “Mexican oregano” is a common ingredient in spice pastes, salsas and sauces, and rice dishes in Mexican cooking. It’s also found in many types of soups, such as pozole and bean, seafood, pork, or beef soups.

Try this at home

Oregano plants are ordinarily raised from cuttings, although Greek oregano can re-seed itself, as long as it hasn’t been cross-pollinated by another nearby plant in the *Oreganum* genus. If Greek oregano enjoys the right soil type, sun exposure, and drainage, it is hardy to Zone 6, meaning that it can overwinter in the southern U.S. and on the West Coast. By contrast, true sweet marjoram and many related species are hardy in the U.S. only in southern California. Even if it doesn’t survive the winter outdoors, a pot of oregano can provide flavorful leaves for cooking throughout the summer. Or, rather than growing your own, you may choose to purchase fresh or dried oregano at your local farmers’ market.



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