



**By Liz Forsyth**

Thyme is one of the easiest herbs to grow; it prefers lean conditions, with plenty of sun, as you would expect from a native of the Mediterranean region. With over a hundred known varieties and classifications of thyme (such as upright, creeping, shrub-like, English or French thyme, garden or wild), the ways you can incorporate it into your garden are only as limited as your imagination. Often used as a ground cover, it's also great as an edger; trailing varieties bring aroma and texture to container gardens. This hardy evergreen is a perennial in USDA zones 5 to 9+.

Because there are so many varieties of ground cover thymes, they can be a blessing *and* a curse. If you plant a large ground cover thyme in a space that will not allow for its future growth, it will disappoint, covering up ornamental stepping stones, spreading stems onto paving that will not support its growth. So, know which thyme will thrive in the desired garden spot.

The thyme spreads by growing from one set of leaves to the next; therefore, a thyme with a longer, thicker stem will grow more quickly than one whose leaves are close together. If the ground where the stem segment touches is moist, the plant will root and spread. Shallow-rooted, mulching when first planted helps in retaining moisture and getting the plants off to a good start. They can take partial shade or full sun, and almost all are hardy to Zone 5. As they have different bloom times, combining the mid-spring bloomer **Caraway Thyme** with the mid-summer **Coconut Thyme** will spread your bloom time out to about 8 weeks. We think, however, that you will find that the leaves will provide the most interest. In fact, **Caraway Thyme** has the added interest of red stems; it is the only culinary thyme listed here, and can be used as a substitute for real caraway in any recipe. Especially flavorful in bread or cooked with meat, its species name of *herba barona* refers to medieval times when herbs were frequently used to spice up meat that was a wee bit past its expiration

date.

The **Creeping Pink**, **Lemon Frost** and **Reiter's Thymes** join the **Caraway** and **Coconut Thymes** in being too large for planting between stepping stones, but perfect as fill-ins under tall plants or roses. They still grow flat, but will mound against a nearby wall.

The four thymes we recommend for planting between flagstones are the **Elfin**, the **Pink Chintz**, the **Mint** and the **White Moss Thyme**. Each tend to be small, with greenish grey leaves. Low growers, they sport a height of one to two inches, are hardy in our area, with flower blooms that range from white to various shades of pink. All four are evergreen, full sun lovers that are water-conserving and perfect for ground cover and ornamental gardens. **Pink Chintz** and **Mint Thyme** tend to spread more than the **Elfin**. A great way to plant these varieties is by purchasing plug trays, which contain 120 small plants, each an inch long and  $\frac{3}{4}$  inch in width. Pop them in, and mulch to keep them moist. In a year's time, you will be amazed at how they have spread and dripped over your garden slopes and stones.

If you are looking for a fast spreader that is unusual in that its leaves are not thick and succulent-like, but rather long, narrow and grey-green, giving it a lacy appearance, why not try the **Heretis Thyme**. Reaching ten to twelve inches in diameter at maturity, it produces an incredible display of lilac flowers in early spring. Another fast-growing, fairly flat ground cover is the **Hall's Woolly Thyme**. Green with a silvery cast, do not confuse it with the slow-growing, very silver **Woolly Thyme**.

**Lavender Thyme** is a familiar thyme that has a wonderful aroma redolent of lavender; its leaves are the color of bright fresh celery. This one makes a great container plant. If you want more of a mounding plant, go with **Doone Valley Thyme**; it is variegated green and gold in the spring and fall, and green in summer, with a refreshing lemon scent. However, do not cook with this one.

We've left perhaps the most interesting for last. The **Silver Needle Thyme** is a soft, lovely, cascading plant best used over a short wall or edging. The oddly named **Loveyanus Thyme** has soft, rather large silvery green pointed leaves with a flowing habit that will beautifully fill up the empty spaces in your garden. An early spring bloomer, we recommend also using this one as an under-planting for roses. Its flowers are golf ball-sized lavender blooms.

This brings us to the **Pink Lemonade Thyme**, which is a non-variegated, lemon-scented ground cover with dark green leaves that are small enough to use in-between stepping stones yet which grows fast enough to cover large spaces. It will bless you with profuse pink flowers later in the season than other thymes, and seems to thrive both in shade and in sun.

Whether a symbol of great spirit and courage, a curative for asthma and wounds, sewn into pillows as a treatment for depression, a haven for fairies in miniature gardens, a ground cover to delight all who behold it, or as an aromatic addition to your dinner, thyme is another garden gem that is easy to grow, and when combined with other herbs, a visual enhancement

for everyone to enjoy.