



TOP LEFT Jacky samples a delicious starter in Thyme of Southrop's kitchen herb garden in Gloucestershire, designed by Bunny Guinness. RIGHT Thyme leaves and flowers in sugar imbue it with their special fragrance and flavour, adding something extra special to your baking. BELOW LEFT *Thymus* 'Pink Ripple'.



Herbs

Herbs such as thyme and sage impart great scents and flavours, and should take centre stage in the garden and the kitchen

PHOTOGRAPHS MICHELLE GARRETT WORDS JACKY HOBBS

Herbs add excitement to cooking and are exceptionally versatile. You can use flowers, stems, foliage and even the roots in sweet and savoury dishes. Whether fresh, dried or frozen, herbs impart interesting flavours that enrich every dish. Encouragingly, a handful goes a long way in the kitchen, and the plants often require comparatively little growing space. If you are short on ground, try potting up windowsill herbs such as thyme, marjoram and basil; edge pathways with creeping thyme; or place topiary bays by the front door. If you have room, however, you can revel in the scents and tastes, and create a wonderful, dedicated herb garden modelled on centuries of tradition.

I grow primarily for taste and convenience, relying on invaluable perennials such as sage and thyme. They can struggle through winter, but if I have forgotten to freeze, dry or shop for essential flavouring, there may be an offering in the garden still.

With more than 400 varieties of thyme from which to choose, there's something in this genus to suit all tastes, and it is an easy herb to grow from seed. Sow in trays from February, keeping them indoors until spring, when individual seedlings can be pricked out and potted on. Harden off and plant outdoors in beds, borders and pots in early summer. For speed, you could buy a parent plant and take cuttings to increase your stocks. Try excitingly flavoured specimens such as lemon thyme, *Thymus citriodorus*; or decorative varieties *T.* 'Silver Queen' or *T.* 'Silver Posie'. ▶



THE EDIBLE GARDEN

COOK YOUR OWN

Recipe Thyme-sugared shortbread biscuits

Caryn Hibbert, creator of Thyme at Southrop Food School, and her chef Daryll Taylor show people the true diversity of culinary herbs, letting students experience them sweet and savoury: as the main ingredient in elderflower and sage fritters (see over); and as a more subtle accessory, in a thyme-sugared shortbread biscuit, served with a blackcurrant-leaf granita. They even teach how to drink herbs, making mint tea and fizz laced with elderflower cordial.

For the biscuits

- 100g butter
- 50g sugar
- 50g cornflour
- 100g plain flour
- thyme-seasoned sugar
- Beat the butter and the sugar until soft and pale; add the flours to form a stiff paste.
- Roll this into a sausage shape, wrap in cling film and refrigerate for 20 mins.
- Cut into 1cm-thick rounds, place on a baking sheet, and sprinkle with thyme-seasoned sugar.
- Bake for 20 mins in a pre-heated oven (180°C) until a pale gold colour. Cool on a wire tray before serving.

For the granita (not pictured)

- 20 washed blackcurrant leaves
- 1 litre water
- Pared rind of a lemon
- 200g caster sugar
- Bring the sugar, water and lemon zest slowly to the boil, stirring to dissolve sugar. Remove from heat.
- Add leaves and let infuse. When cool, squeeze leaves into syrup to extract flavour, then discard.
- Pour the syrup into a tray and freeze. After 1.5 hours, remove, and fork over the mixture to form granules. Return to the freezer for a further hour before mixing again and serving in pre-chilled glasses.

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Expert advice

LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT BUNNY GUINNESS, WHO CREATED THE HERB GARDEN FOR THYME AT SOUTHPROP, SAYS:

● **Select a sunny, free-draining site.** If you don't have one available, have a go anyway. I've had success with herbs on the north side of a 4m-high stone wall. You could also just do lots in pots.

● **2m x 1m is a good size of plot.** You can tend and pick without treading on and compacting soil.

● **Green oak beams** are a relatively inexpensive and sturdy way to hold in the soil. For softer curvier lines, use willow edging and back with black plastic.

● **Fill beds with good soil** and supplement with inexpensive compost; I use spent mushroom compost to supplement my own, but beware of using straw manures as they tend to bring in weeds.

● **Mix herbs in with vegetables** and edible flowers. For interest, train nasturtiums up wigwam canes; substitute their seeds for capers; and use flowers in salads.

● **Maximise space** and improve a design by adding shape and height with topiary rosemarys, lavender balls and standard bays in bottomless pots (they need less watering this way).

● **If you want volume,** sow seed; though both sage and thyme are easy to root from cuttings.

● **Sow creeping thyme** in gravel paths or paving cracks and other varieties of thyme in beds.



ABOVE Heavenly scents.

RIGHT Once picked, keep leaves in water until required.

FAR RIGHT To make fritters, place sage leaves on a sheet of cling film. Set with anchovy, top with another leaf and press together.

BELOW LEFT The herb garden at Thyme at Southrop Food School.

OPPOSITE Elderflower and sage fritters served with elderflower mayonnaise and lemon wedges.



'Select a sunny, free-draining site. If you don't have one available, have a go anyway and do lots of herbs in pots' Bunny Guinness

Herb courses around the country

● **Jekka's Herb Farm**, Shellards Lane, Bristol BS35 3SY. Open days and courses including 'How to raise herbs from seed in spring' and 'How to combine herbs in pots and window boxes'. Tel: +44 (0)1454 424900, or visit www.jekkasherbfarm.com

● **Sulgrave Manor Garden**, Sulgrave, Banbury, Oxon OX17 2SD. The Herb Society's HQ. Open weekends, April to Oct; with additional summer openings. For more details, tel: +44 (0)1295 768899, or visit www.herbsociety.org.uk

● **Thyme at Southrop**, Southrop Manor, Southrop, Gloucestershire GL7 3NX. Cookery courses include 'From Seed to Plate', 'Sow and Grow' and 'Foraging'. For more details, tel: +44 (0)1367 850174, or visit www.thymeatsouthrop.co.uk

● **West Dean Gardens**, Nr Chichester, West Sussex PO18 0QZ. Courses include 'A Taste of the Mediterranean', and 'A Gourmet's Garden'. For more details, tel: +44 (0)1243 818210, or visit www.westdean.org.uk

While it's great to experiment, don't forget your mainstay, *T. vulgaris*, common thyme. An all-rounder in the kitchen, use its leaves directly in soups and casseroles, or infuse oils by placing a bunch of thyme in a sterile bottle and topping up with a relatively flavourless sunflower oil or basic olive oil. Leave to steep for a couple of weeks. You can even add sprigs of thyme with flowers to sugar for a great store-cupboard basic for baking.

Common sage, *Salvia officinalis*, is another must, both for its flavour and its evergreen foliage. I buy established plants and take softwood cuttings in spring, which will be ready for a first gentle harvest in July. Pinch out a non-flowering shoot that has three or four pairs of leaves, and use a clean knife to cut under one of these pair of leaves (or under a leaf axil). Remove the lower leaves and insert the cutting into a pot of gritty compost. Cover with a plastic bag and place out of direct sunlight, keeping the compost moist until cuttings have rooted. When they are about 15cm, pinch out the tips to encourage a bushy habit. You can start from seed, but it is slower to get going in comparison with thyme: sow indoors in March or outdoors in April to harvest the following June.

Variations in leaf colour add interest to the garden and your plate, but there is little change in flavour. Try purple-leaved sage, *Salvia officinalis* 'Purpurascens'; multi-coloured *S. officinalis* 'Tricolor'; or variegated *S. officinalis* 'Kew Gold'. For size, you could grow the gigantic leaves of broad-leaved sage, or *S. officinalis* 'Berggarten'.



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Recipe Elderflower & sage fritters

Serves 4-6 people

For the fritters

- 8-10 elderflower heads
- 16 large sage leaves
- 8 anchovies marinated in the juice of one lemon

For the batter

- 225g plain flour
- 100ml virgin olive oil
- 300ml soda water
- 4 egg whites
- salt and pepper

● Sieve flour into a bowl, add seasoning and olive oil, and beat with a wooden spoon. Slowly incorporate the soda water, and leave for 30 mins.

● Sandwich each anchovy between two sage leaves. Pick over the elderflower flowerheads to get rid of any insects.

● Heat oil to 180°C, until almost smoking.

● Whisk egg whites until stiff, and fold into the rested batter.

● Dip flowers and sage 'sandwiches' in batter and deep fry in batches, draining off excess oil on kitchen paper.

● Season with salt and serve with elderflower mayonnaise and lemon wedges.

For the elderflower mayonnaise

- 3 egg yolks
- 1 heaped teaspoon Dijon mustard
- 30/40ml elderflower vinegar (To make, steep two elderflower heads in a bottle of white wine vinegar for a week)
- 150ml olive oil
- 150ml vegetable oil
- Lemon juice to taste
- Salt and pepper

● Put egg yolks, mustard, seasoning and vinegar into a food processor and run slowly, pouring in the oils to emulsify.

● Add lemon juice and season to taste.

