



Photos: Sandra Clair

# Thyme

## Nature's respiratory hero

**Sandra Clair** enthuses about the medicinal properties of a common herb

Gathering blossoming thyme on a hot, sunny summer day is one of the highlights in my herbal harvesting calendar. Most of the year thyme, *Thymus vulgaris* (a member of the Labiatae – or mint – family), presents itself as an unremarkable heather-like carpet of small (25 cm high) evergreen shrubs. But in spring and early summer the valleys around Alexandra and Bannockburn (an ecosystem also conducive to the production of world-famous pinot noir wines) come alive with a shimmering purple colour and the air is bathed with the most invigorating scent from the essential oils of thyme flowers, enchanting humans and insects alike.

Having harvested thyme both in Europe and in New Zealand I am positive that Central Otago thyme is world class quality. Perhaps this is because the harsh mountain climate and the high UV light here prompt the plant to produce extra high levels of protective secondary plant metabolites, which are the medicinally active part of the plant.

This thyme has 'oomph' and is a must for the medicinal first aid kit. It is as if the

intensity of the Central Otago sun is stored in the plant's essential oils and when chilliness and weakness threaten to overcome the body it releases its strengthening, warming and healing properties to restore health. It is a most beneficial herb in pediatric care for all those pale and tired-looking children who fail to thrive. At Christmas, a traditionally prepared thyme syrup with bubbly water makes an uplifting non-alcoholic treat for the whole family.

### How thyme came to New Zealand

Thyme is native to the Mediterranean and was introduced to New Zealand by early European settlers. The discovery of gold in Otago in the mid 1800s saw thousands of miners pushing into the interior to seek their fortunes. Daunting mountain barriers could not deter adventurers but the merciless winters and endless hours of fossicking in icy rivers struck many of them down with colds, flus and pulmonary diseases. So the European miners brought with them a trusted protector against such ill fate. The climate of Central Otago resembled the Mediterranean home of thyme and the plant took off with remarkable determination in the dry, rocky hills, withstanding even the harshest of winds, freezing winters and scorching summers.

### What the name tells us

The name *Thymus* stems from the Greek word *thymos* meaning 'strength' and 'to give courage', indicating the plant's invigorating and strengthening properties. To discover why the ancient Greek physicians chose such a name for this stropy little plant, chew on a few fresh thyme blossoms on a hot sunny day. Almost immediately your mouth will start to tingle and numb from the action of the concentrated essential oils, similar to echinacea and angelica root, only much stronger. You might also observe how your chest opens up and breathing gets easier, your tiredness lifts and your heart starts to beat with renewed strength. It occurred to me while I was puffing up a steep hill nibbling on some thyme that this would be a brilliant herb for sports people to improve pulmonary function and oxygen transport during competitions.

### Healing properties of thyme

There is an old German saying: 'The next cold comes with certainty but not to the person who takes thyme with regularity'. Thyme is a lung remedy consumed since antiquity and is used extensively to this day to prevent and treat respiratory tract infections. In the Western *Materia Medica* it is an essential herb for these ailments.



**Page opposite:**

Freshly harvested thyme

**Far left:**

Harvesting thyme in the hills of Central Otago

**Left:** *Thymus*

*vulgaris*

Thyme produces powerful antiseptic essential oils which are classified as naturally antibiotic and antifungal. Just how potent these oils are is demonstrated by the fact that the old Egyptians used thyme for embalming.

Since ancient times physicians praised its virtue in chasing away ‘evil influences’ (perhaps bacteria and viruses?) and in the early twentieth century, when synthetic antibiotics became fashionable, thyme was nicknamed ‘the antibiotic of the poor’, offering an effective alternative to pharmaceuticals. Thyme tea and ethanolic extracts have even shown to be effective in the inhibition of the notoriously difficult *Helicobacter pylori* infection in a clinical trial.<sup>1</sup>

Because of its broncho-spasmolytic properties, thyme is traditionally used in cough medicines, including for whooping cough, and is a standard remedy for bronchitis, asthma, sore throat, catarrh or inflammation of the upper respiratory tract; applications that are covered in modern herbal medicine by a positive Commission E monograph.<sup>2</sup>

Thyme’s expectorant action increases the production of fluid mucous and helps to expel phlegm, even in previously unproductive coughs. This indication is supported by clinical trials. It can be enjoyed as a daily tonic, as a herbal infusion or syrup preparation, to safeguard against cold and influenza infections. It is also an effective protection for people suffering from asthma or emphysema as any respiratory infection will aggravate these conditions.

Thyme’s protective and anti-inflammatory properties make it a useful remedy for preventative health care in all seasons and for people exposed to viruses at school, in the workplace or when travelling. Other traditional indications

are the treatment of inflammations in the urinary tract, gastrointestinal disorders including dyspepsia, colic flatulence and diarrhoea (especially in children) to support better digestion, in anemia and nervous exhaustion.

**Preparations of thyme**

Traditionally thyme was prepared as a syrup together with lemons or as a tea infusion sweetened with honey (keep cup covered to retain the essential oil). The sugar content of these remedies acts as a swift carrier of the herb’s medicinal benefits. While diabetics should be aware of the sugar content of these preparations, this is minimal compared with modern sweets and acceptable when taken in moderation. Fresh-plant tinctures (oral drops) are also a popular administration as the essential oils are not affected by any drying process and remain very active. Thyme is often combined with other immune and respiratory protecting herbs.

When used as a bath preparation thyme can stop a cold in its tracks and soothes muscle and joint pains (steep a handful of fresh or dry thyme for 20 minutes, filter and add to your bath water). People suffering from rheumatism, gout and aches also enjoy the pain-relieving and warming properties of thyme. Other topical applications include the treatment of fungal or bacterial skin disorders and a mouthwash to reduce oral bacteria. Thyme is also popular as a steam inhalation for respiratory infections.

**Correct time of harvest**

As with all herbs the time of harvest is crucial to obtain the maximum therapeutic active constituents of thyme. Plants high in essential oils, such as thyme, are best

harvested when the plant is blossoming during the warm months of the year, on dry sunny days once the sun has warmed the plants and enticed them to produce high levels of oils. For thyme in New Zealand this is from late October to December.

Thyme is then either processed fresh as a tincture or syrup, or quickly and carefully dried for herbal tea to preserve the maximum amount of active constituents. The European Pharmacopoeia allows the use of the whole leaf and flowers of *Thymus vulgaris* as well as *Thymus zygis* (Spanish thyme).

Thyme can still be harvested for health baths (e.g. foot baths or full body baths) and culinary use after it has flowered. Culinary thyme bought in supermarkets is usually harvested without blossoms. This quality is adequate for cooking but is medicinally inferior and its therapeutic impact is unreliable. It is therefore essential to use thyme of medicinal quality (as described above) to achieve the desired therapeutic results. 🍀

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**References**

1. Tabak, M et al., ‘In vitro inhibition of *Helicobacter pylori* by extracts of thyme’, *Journal of Applied Bacteriology*, 1996, 80 (6): 667-672.
2. German Commission E Monographs are published by the German health department. They are considered the ‘gold standard’ for evaluating the safety of herbs and are based upon rigorous, unbiased scientific investigation.

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