

# The Herbal Primer

A Primer for National Schools



Compiled with the assistance of  
Coachford National School

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Proof reading Lucy Quane

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# What is a herb?

A herb is a plant that is valued for its culinary, medicinal or health giving properties.

Herbs can be used in cooking, made into medicines, into products to clean the house, to keep the garden healthy or for skin care. Herbs are also used as natural dyes, to make perfumes and you may be able to think of other uses.

A herb may be an annual plant, a perennial plant, a wild plant, a vegetable, a shrub or a tree. There are many many different types of herbs. Some grow well in Ireland whilst some need warmer growing conditions and grow in the Mediterranean or the tropics.

In Ireland we have many useful local plants but have always imported some exotic herbs and spices such as ginger, cinnamon, black pepper, tea and coffee (yes, those can be used as herbs too).

We have a huge wealth of herb lore in Ireland. This country used to grow many medicinal herbs to export to the UK and people used to come to Ireland to learn about herbs and their uses.

## Some ideas of how to learn more about the plants:

For a particular plants explore the following questions:

- What does it smell like?
- What does it look like? What color are the flowers? Do the leaves or flowers or whole plant remind you of anything? For example, the leaves are heart shaped, the flowers remind me of little faces, the flowers are the color of the sky, the leaves are furry, the flowers look like suns, the texture of the leaf looks like snake skin- whatever your imagination can come up with:)
- What does it taste like - sweet, sour, bitter (explain difference between bitter and sour), pungent/spicy, salty? Lemony, or other tastes it might remind you of.
- What does it feel like- furry, smooth, spiky, soft or other descriptions? Don't try this with plants that sting like nettles!
- Does the plant have a sound? This can be a tricky one, but some have seed pods that rattle or you can hear the sound of the wind blowing through them, see what you can come up with.
- Do you know any poems or songs that refer to the plant?
- Do you know any folklore about the plant?
- Do you know any recipes that the plant is used for?
- Do you know any other uses for the plant?
- Does the plant attract any beneficial insects - bees, butterflies, ladybirds or others?
- Is the plant annual (grows for one year), biennial (grows for 2 years) or perennial (grows for several years)?

## Other ideas

Press some of the flowers or leaves and use them to make a picture Draw a picture of the plant Use the flowers instead of crayons by rubbing them on a piece of paper, the colours they make can be quite surprising.

Make a tea with the plant

Try some of the recipes

Grow the plant in a tub or your garden

Write a story about the plant



# SOME HERBS TO GROW IN THE GARDEN

**ROSEMARY (*Rosmarinus officinalis*)** The first part of the Latin name means sea dew because of the colour of the flowers and the second part of its name indicates it was one of the medicinal herbs used by the apothecaries) It is in the Mint (Lamiaceae) family.

It is a perennial bushy shrub with long narrow leaves which are dark green above and greyish underneath and have a strong aroma. The flowers are shades of blue and purple and are also aromatic, with a sweeter scent.

**How to grow:** Rosemary is originally from the Mediterranean so it prefers a light sandy alkaline soil and a sunny spot sheltered from gusty winds. It hates having its roots too wet or too cold. It was a favourite of the Greeks and Romans and has been grown in gardens for thousands of years. A rosemary bush can live more than 20 years if pruned regularly and may grow as tall as 1.5-3 metres; prune after flowering (January-May) and a couple more times before winter. It is easier to grow from a slip or to buy a plant as the seeds are hard to germinate in the Irish climate. If grown with cabbage, beans and carrots it deters their pests. It does not like growing next to basil.

**Uses for health:** Rosemary contains iron, calcium and vitamin B6. It contains antioxidants, essential acids, and phytonutrients that are good for the immune system and improve blood circulation. It is good for the digestion and can be used to treat tummy upsets. Rosemary is good for your brain and memory. It is good for your eyes too and scientists have found the antioxidants can help prevent cancer.

**Skin care:** Rosemary is used to treat acne and skin infections and also rejuvenates the skin, helping to prevent wrinkles. It is an excellent hair tonic, encouraging the hair to grow strong and healthy and preventing dandruff. For these reasons it is used as an ingredient in lots of skin care products and hair products.

## Recipe ideas:

### Rosemary Shortbread cookies Makes about 36 cookies

340g butter  
135g sugar  
3g chopped fresh rosemary  
345g flour  
2 g salt

Beat the butter and sugar until light and fluffy. Blend in the salt, flour and rosemary. Cover and put in the fridge for 1 hour. Preheat the oven to 190 oC and line a baking sheet with greaseproof paper. Roll the dough out and cut into cookie shapes. Bake for about 8 minutes or until golden brown. Allow the cookies to cool and then eat.

### Rosemary potato wedges

1 kg potatoes  
1 tablespoon olive oil  
Chopped rosemary (1-3 dessertspoons depending on taste), black pepper, salt and some crushed garlic  
Heat the oven to 200 oC. Wash and dry the potatoes, cut into large wedges and place in a baking tray. Sprinkle the other ingredients over and stir thoroughly. Bake until golden brown and cooked through 30-45 minutes.

Rosemary also works well in tomato sauce, on pizza, in soups, gravy, stuffing and stews. It is widely used in French, Greek, Spanish and Italian cooking. It goes well with poultry, red meat and with roasted vegetables and is also added to biscuits, apple pies and fruit crumbles.

Interesting facts and folklore:

- Rosemary attracts bees
- Rosemary is associated with friendship and wisdom
- It is a tonic for the heart





**Oregano/ Wild Marjoram (*Origanum vulgare*)** Origanum comes from a Greek word meaning joy of the mountain and vulgare means it is common. It is in the Mint (Lamiaceae) family .

**How to grow:** Native to Europe and also to Ireland. It is easily grown from seed planted after the last frosts or you can divide an established plant up. Set plants 10-15 cm apart and trim back regularly to encourage the plant to bush out. The leaves and flowers can be harvested regularly throughout the growing season. There are different varieties of the herb with distinctly different taste and appearance. It is closely related to Sweet marjoram (*Origanum marjorana*)

**Uses for health:** Oregano contains iron, manganese, vitamin E, calcium , omega 3 fatty acids and tryptophan as well as an essential oil and other valuable substances, including anti-oxidants. It is used to treat skin conditions including acne and dandruff. It is also used to treat asthma, respiratory infections, tummy upsets and infections, menstrual cramps and urinary infections

**Skincare:** Oregano has been used to treat warts, verrucae, and fungal skin conditions.

## Recipe ideas:

### Oregano and Lime roasted Chicken Breasts

1 tablespoon chopped fresh oregano  
2 teaspoons grated lime rind  
1 teaspoon ground cumin  
2 teaspoons minced garlic  
1/4 teaspoon ground black pepper  
2 teaspoons olive oil  
1/2 teaspoon salt  
4 skinned chicken breasts

Combine the first 6 ingredients and rub over the chicken breasts. Cover and marinate in the fridge for at least 4 hours. Place the chicken in an ovenproof dish and bake at 190°C for about 30-45 minutes until cooked through.

### Oregano pesto

1 litre loosely packed oregano leaves  
A handful of pine nuts or cashew nuts  
3-5 cloves garlic  
Dessertspoon of balsamic or cider vinegar  
Salt to taste

Place ingredients in food processor and start to blend. Drizzle in olive or hemp seed oil until desired consistency is reached.

Oregano is good in tomatoes sauces, especially for pasta and pizza. It works well in salad and salad dressings or with steamed or stewed vegetables. In Mexico the local variety of oregano is added to chilli, stews and meat dishes.

## Interesting facts and folklore:

- The plant is recorded as being used in Assyrian medicine in 3000 BC
- Shepherds used to encourage their sheep to graze on oregano to improve the flavour of the meat
- The Greeks believed it was an antidote to poison
- Oregano became popular as a pizza herb in the USA when soldiers returned with a taste for it after the Second World War.
- In Shakespearean times ladies carried the herb in their tussie mussies (flower posies) to mask unpleasant odours and prevent infection. They also drank a tea of it on St. Luke's day to enable them to see their future husband
- Oregano is widely used in Turkish, Lebanese, Egyptian, Syrian, Portuguese, Italian, Spanish, Phillipino and Latin American cooking. It is popular in Southern Italian cooking whilst in the North they prefer Marjoram

