



How to Grow Thyme

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Culinary and creeping thyme for UK gardens



How to Grow Thyme in the UK

Thyme is the herb I recommend to people who think they cannot grow herbs. It genuinely thrives on neglect. The worst thing you can do to thyme is treat it kindly, because the kindness usually involves rich soil and regular watering, both of which it hates. My oldest thyme plant has been going for over a decade in a gritty corner of the garden that I water perhaps twice a year, and it produces more than I could ever use.

There is a bit of confusion around thyme though, because the word covers two quite different things. There is culinary thyme, the bushy aromatic kind you cook with, and creeping thyme, the low spreading kind people grow as ground cover and between paving.

This guide covers both, because they need slightly different handling, and the 500-odd people searching each month for when to plant creeping thyme are usually after something quite different to the cook wanting a pot of thyme by the kitchen door.

Culinary Thyme vs Creeping Thyme: Which Do You Want?



Upright culinary thyme on the left for cooking, low spreading creeping thyme on the right for ground cover.

This is worth sorting out before you buy anything, because picking the wrong type is the most common thyme mistake I see.

Culinary thyme (*Thymus vulgaris*)

Common thyme, garden thyme, English thyme. This is the upright bushy one you want for cooking. Small grey-green aromatic leaves, woody stems, grows into a low mound about 20 to 30cm tall. The classic kitchen herb for stews, roasts, stocks, and anything slow-cooked. If you want thyme to eat, this is the one.

Creeping thyme (*Thymus serpyllum*)

Wild thyme, mother of thyme, creeping thyme. This is the low spreading one grown as ground cover, between stepping stones, over walls, and in gravel gardens. It hugs the ground at just a few centimetres tall and spreads outward into a fragrant mat that releases scent when you walk on it. It does flower beautifully and the bees adore it, which is why the RHS rates it as one of the best low-growing plants for pollinators. It is technically edible but the flavour is milder and the tiny leaves are fiddly, so most people grow it for looks rather than the kitchen.

Lemon thyme (*Thymus citriodorus*)

Worth a mention because it is genuinely lovely. A culinary thyme with a distinct citrus note, brilliant with fish and chicken. Grows like ordinary culinary thyme, and named varieties are widely stocked by UK suppliers like Sarah Raven. If you only have room for two thymes, I would grow common thyme and lemon thyme and skip the rest.

The growing requirements for all three are nearly identical, so the rest of this guide applies to whichever you choose. Where creeping thyme needs slightly different handling, I will say so. How to grow herbs in the UK covers the wider herb picture if you want to build a proper collection.

What Thyme Needs to Thrive

Thyme is a Mediterranean plant, like rosemary, and it wants the same fundamental things. Get these right and thyme is one of the most reliable plants in any UK garden. Get them wrong and it slowly sulks and rots.

Full sun. As much as you can give it. Thyme grown in shade gets leggy, sparse, and loses its flavour. A south-facing spot is ideal. Free-draining soil. This is non-negotiable. Thyme hates wet feet even more than most herbs. Heavy clay or anywhere that holds water will kill it over winter.

Poor soil. Genuinely. Thyme grown in rich soil produces soft sappy growth with weak flavour and poor winter hardiness. Lean, stony, gritty ground gives you the best plants.

Very little water. Once established, thyme rarely needs watering in the UK. Overwatering is the most common way people kill it.

If your garden is heavy clay like much of Oxfordshire, you will need to either improve the drainage dramatically at the planting spot or grow thyme in pots. How to tell if your garden soil is clay, loam or sand covers the simple checks, and how to improve drainage in clay soil walks through the work. The same wet-feet problem that kills rosemary and lavender kills thyme, so if you have read how to grow rosemary in the UK, the approach here is identical.

Growing Thyme Outdoors in the UK

Position

Full sun, free-draining, and ideally somewhere it can bake a bit. A spot at the front of a sunny border, the edge of a path, a gravel garden, or a raised bed all suit thyme perfectly. It is small enough to tuck into the front of almost any sunny bed. Avoid damp shady corners entirely, thyme will not last a year there.

Soil preparation

If you have decent free-draining soil already, just plant straight in with no fuss. If you have clay or heavy soil, dig in plenty of horticultural grit at the planting spot, plant slightly proud of the surrounding soil so water drains away, and finish with a gravel mulch around the plant rather than bark or compost. The aim is to keep the crown of the plant dry. How to improve garden soil in the UK covers the wider approach.

Spacing

Culinary thyme plants want about 30cm between them. Creeping thyme for ground cover can go closer, around 20 to 25cm apart, because the point is for the plants to knit together into a continuous mat. For ground cover, expect each plant to spread 30 to 45cm wide once established.

When to Plant Creeping Thyme in the UK



Creeping thyme planted between paving spreads into a fragrant mat that releases scent underfoot.

Creeping thyme is most often planted as ground cover, between paving slabs, or in gravel, and the timing matters for getting it established before it has to cope with extremes.

The best time to plant creeping thyme in the UK is late spring, from late April through to early June, once the soil has warmed and the frosts have passed. This gives the plants a full summer to root in and spread before winter. You can also plant in early autumn (September), but spring planting is more reliable because the plants establish properly before facing their first wet British winter.

If you are planting creeping thyme between stepping stones or paving, prepare the gaps with a free-draining gritty mix rather than ordinary soil. Creeping thyme planted in damp compacted soil between slabs tends to rot. A 50/50 mix of compost and horticultural grit in the planting gaps makes all the difference. Water lightly until established, then leave it to do its thing.

For creeping thyme grown from seed, sow in spring (March to May) under cover, or direct outdoors from late April once the soil has warmed. Seed-grown creeping thyme is slow to establish but cheaper if you need a lot of plants for a large area. How to grow vegetables from seed in the UK covers the wider sowing technique.

Growing Thyme in Pots



A 20cm terracotta pot with a gritty mix is the easiest way to grow thyme on heavy soil.

Thyme is excellent in containers and for many UK gardens it is the easiest way to grow it, especially if your soil is heavy. A pot lets you control the drainage completely and move the plant to the sunniest spot you have.

Pot and compost

A 20 to 25cm pot is plenty for culinary thyme, which stays compact. Use a free-draining mix, two thirds peat-free multipurpose compost to one third horticultural grit or perlite. Terracotta is better than plastic because it breathes and dries out, which thyme prefers. Peat-free compost in the UK and best compost for vegetables both cover what to buy, and growing vegetables in pots in the UK covers the wider container basics.

Creeping thyme works beautifully spilling over the edge of a pot, a wall-top trough, or a hanging container, where its trailing habit can show off. Use the same gritty mix.

Watering pot thyme

Sparingly. Let the top of the compost dry out fully between waterings. Even in summer, thyme in a pot needs less water than almost any other herb. In winter, barely any. The biggest risk to potted thyme is sitting in a wet saucer over winter, so never leave one underneath the pot. How often to water plants in the UK covers the principle.

Growing Thyme Indoors

Thyme can grow on a windowsill but it is not the easiest herb to keep happy indoors. It wants more direct sun than most windowsills provide, and indoor conditions tend to be too humid and too warm for a plant that likes things dry and bright. If you do grow it inside, use the sunniest window you have, water very sparingly, and turn the pot regularly so it grows evenly.

Honestly though, thyme is fully hardy in the UK and does much better outdoors all year round. A pot of thyme by the back door gives you fresh sprigs through winter without any of the difficulty of trying to keep it alive on a windowsill. I would always choose an outdoor pot over an indoor one for thyme.

Growing Thyme from Seed

Thyme can be grown from seed but it tests your patience. The seed is tiny, germination is slow and erratic, and the seedlings take a long time to reach a usable size. For one or two culinary plants, a £4 starter plant from a garden centre is far quicker and easier. Seed only really makes sense if you want a lot of plants, for example for a creeping thyme lawn or a long border edge, where buying dozens of plants would be expensive.

If you do sow seed, scatter it thinly on the surface of moist seed compost in spring, barely cover it (thyme needs light to germinate), and keep on a warm windowsill. Germination takes 2 to 4 weeks and can be patchy. Prick out and pot on once the seedlings are big enough to handle, then grow on before planting out in early summer.

Propagating Thyme: Division and Cuttings



Short semi-ripe cuttings taken in early summer root within a few weeks in gritty compost.

Once you have one thyme plant, getting more is easy and free. Two methods work well.

Division

In spring, lift an established clump and gently pull or cut it into two or three sections, each with roots and top growth. Replant immediately into gritty soil or fresh compost. This works particularly well with creeping thyme, which naturally roots along its spreading stems and divides easily into many new plants. One mat of creeping thyme can give you a dozen new plants in a single spring.

Cuttings

Take semi-ripe cuttings in early summer. Snip 5 to 8cm lengths of this year's growth, strip the lower leaves, push into gritty compost, water once and keep somewhere bright. They root within a few weeks. This is the same method as rosemary cuttings and just as reliable. A handful of cuttings each summer keeps you in fresh young thyme plants, since culinary thyme tends to get woody and tired after three or four years and is worth replacing.

Harvesting and Pruning Thyme



Snip sprigs from the soft new growth as needed, and trim the whole plant lightly after flowering

Harvest thyme whenever you need it, all year round. The leaves are evergreen in most of the UK and the flavour holds up through winter. Snip sprigs with scissors as required. Regular light harvesting keeps the plant bushy.

The one important job is a trim after flowering, usually in late summer. Once the flowers fade, clip the whole plant over lightly with scissors or shears, removing the spent flower stems and a little of the soft growth. This stops the plant getting woody and leggy and encourages fresh growth from the base. Do not cut back hard into old bare wood, because thyme, like rosemary, does not reliably regrow from old wood. Light regular trimming is the key to keeping a thyme plant productive for years.

Thyme dries very well. Cut sprigs, tie in small bundles, hang in a dry airy place for a week or two, then strip the leaves into a jar. Dried thyme keeps its flavour for a year and is one of the few herbs that is genuinely almost as good dried as fresh.

Getting Thyme Through Winter

Thyme is fully hardy across the UK and survives any normal winter outdoors without protection. As with rosemary, the thing that kills it is not cold but wet. A thyme plant in free-draining soil or a gritty pot will come through winter fine. A thyme plant sitting in cold wet clay will likely rot.

For pots, the winter routine is simple: move them somewhere sheltered, stand them on pot feet so they drain freely, and never let them sit in standing water. No fleece or wrapping needed. Frost damage on plants in the UK covers winter protection for the genuinely tender plants, but thyme is not one of them.

Common Thyme Problems

Plant goes woody and bare in the middle. Natural ageing, sped up by lack of trimming. Trim lightly each year after flowering.

Replace plants every 3 to 4 years from cuttings.

Rotting or dying back in winter. Waterlogged soil. Improve drainage with grit, raise the plant, or move to a pot with a gritty mix.

Leggy sparse growth. Too much shade or too rich a soil. Move to full sun and stop feeding.

Loss of flavour. Usually too much water or feeding, producing soft growth. Treat it meaner and the flavour returns.

Creeping thyme dying in patches. Usually damp or compacted soil underneath. Improve drainage in the affected area and replant with divisions.

Common Questions About Growing Thyme

How do you grow thyme in the UK?

Grow thyme in full sun in free-draining, poor soil, and water it sparingly. It is a Mediterranean herb that thrives on neglect and hates wet feet. On heavy clay, improve drainage with grit or grow in a gritty pot. Trim lightly after flowering to stop it getting woody, and it will crop for years.

When should I plant creeping thyme in the UK?

Late spring, from late April to early June, is the best time to plant creeping thyme in the UK, once the soil has warmed and frosts have passed. This gives plants a full summer to establish before winter. Early autumn (September) also works but spring planting is more reliable. Plant in a free-draining gritty mix, especially between paving.

What is the difference between culinary thyme and creeping thyme?

Culinary thyme (*Thymus vulgaris*) is an upright bushy plant grown for cooking, reaching 20 to 30cm tall. Creeping thyme (*Thymus serpyllum*) is a low spreading plant grown as ground cover, between paving, and in gravel, reaching only a few centimetres tall. Both are fragrant, but culinary thyme has the stronger flavour for the kitchen.

Can you grow thyme in pots?

Yes, thyme grows excellently in pots and it is often the easiest way to grow it in the UK, especially on heavy soil. Use a 20 to 25cm terracotta pot with a free-draining mix of two thirds peat-free compost to one third grit. Place in full sun, water sparingly, and never let the pot stand in water.

How often should I water thyme?

Very rarely. Established thyme in the ground needs almost no watering in the UK except during prolonged drought. Potted thyme needs occasional watering in summer when the compost is dry, and almost none in winter. Overwatering is the most common cause of thyme dying.

Is thyme hardy in the UK?

Yes, thyme is fully hardy across the UK and survives normal winters outdoors without protection. What kills it is not cold but waterlogged soil. As long as it has free-draining conditions, thyme comes through winter reliably and crops all year round, with the evergreen leaves usable even in the coldest months.

Why is my thyme woody and bare in the middle?

This is natural ageing, accelerated by a lack of regular trimming. Clip thyme lightly each year after flowering to keep it bushy and prevent it getting leggy. Avoid cutting back into old bare wood, as thyme does not reliably regrow from it. Most culinary thyme plants are worth replacing from cuttings every 3 to 4 years.

A Sensible Place to Start

If you have never grown thyme, here is the plan. Buy one common thyme plant for cooking, and a lemon thyme if you want a second. Pot each into a 20cm terracotta pot with two thirds peat-free compost and one third grit. Stand them in the sunniest spot you have. Water once now, then only when the compost is completely dry. Trim lightly after they flower. That is genuinely the entire job.

For creeping thyme as ground cover, buy a few plants in late spring, plant them 20 to 25cm apart in gritty free-draining soil or between paving, water until established, then leave them to knit together into a fragrant mat. Within two summers you have a carpet of thyme that flowers for the bees and smells wonderful underfoot

How to Contact the Editor

If you have comments or you know I have given wrong advice then please contact me by email at

info@yeovil-allotments-association.co.uk

If you have something to contribute or have a say on allotment life, then please use my email to send your contributions.

I am going to process the magazine issue once a month, so if there are comments you would like to make they can be answered in future editions.

I would like to add that most of the articles are taken off the web and some well known gardening and allotments magazines have been read in the making of our magazine content.

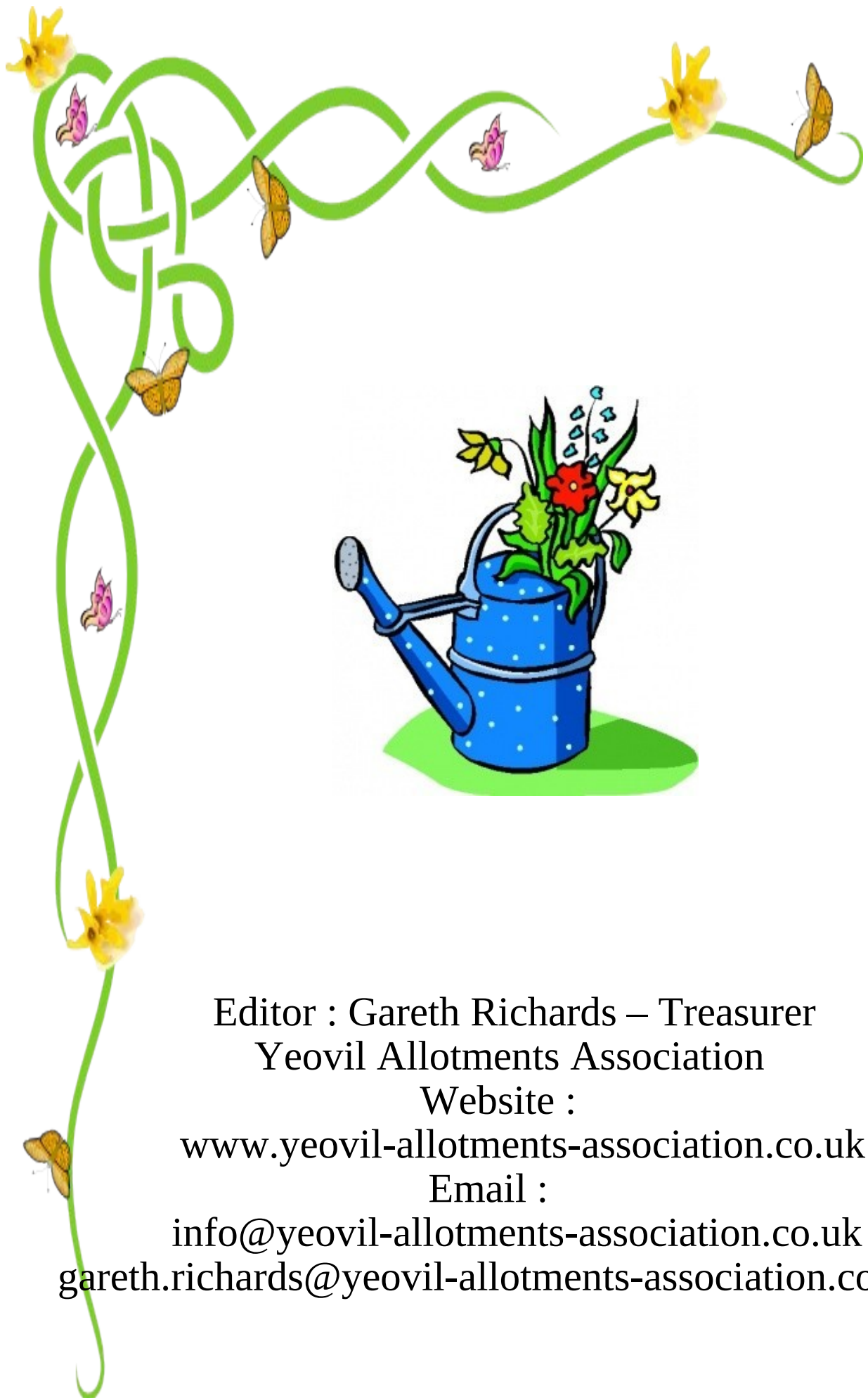
We also have our own website at :

www.yeovil-allotments-association.co.uk

where you can find this magazine as well as a catalogue

Happy Allotmenting and best wishes,

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