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How to Grow Creeping Thyme: The Complete Guide



Photo Credit: Kathryn Roach

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Planting, Growing, and Caring for Creeping Thyme

By [Andy Wilcox](#)

Last Updated: July 2, 2024



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Creeping thyme is a beautiful ground cover—perfect for rock gardens—and adds color in between pavers. Imagine the cracks of a garden path stuffed with this fragrant herb. It's also low-maintenance and pollinator-friendly! Learn how to plant, grow, and care for creeping thyme.

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About

If you haven't heard about creeping thyme, you may have been living under a rock—where this plant thrives. Several members of the genus *Thymus* are called creeping thyme, but they are all perennials with a low, spreading form and make excellent groundcovers. The traditional creeping thyme for rock gardens, planting in between pavers, and the like is *Thymus serpyllum*.



Blossoming fragrant *Thymus serpyllum*. Credit: Rejdan

An evergreen Mediterranean native, creeping thyme likes it warm and sunny and doesn't mind gravelly, sandy soil. It seems to prefer it for the excellent drainage. Planted close together, creeping thyme will spread to form a mat that is covered like a blanket with tiny tube-shaped blooms of pink and purple in mid-summer, carrying on to early fall. Like

While creeping thyme can withstand light foot traffic, it isn't turf grass and won't do well under heavier foot traffic. If you are replacing some grass with creeping thyme, choose lightly traveled areas.

These plants are fantastic in rock gardens, between pavers, and sprawling over perennial beds.

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Brushing a creeping thyme carpet releases a pleasing, lemony scent, and the drone of little happy pollinators adds peace and contentment to your yard and garden. If you lived in the Shire, your garden paths would likely be lined with

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PLANTING

Most creeping thyme varieties are hardy in USDA zones 4 to 9 but check the tag to be sure. If you plan on replacing a section of lawn with creeping thyme, you'll need a lot of plants, so check with wholesalers to see if you can buy plugs. When planning, you'll want at least one per square foot, likely more. The closer they're planted, the quicker they'll close the gaps.

Creeping thymes are not picky about soil and thrive in drier locations and less fertile conditions. Like many plants in the *Thymus* genus, they do well on thin soil, xeriscapes, and rocky areas where others struggle. A neutral to slightly alkaline pH is perfect.

When to Plant Creeping Thyme

Transplant creeping thyme in spring, shortly after your last frost date. While it enjoys warm, sunny weather, it will establish quicker in the cooler spring temps.

If you start thyme seeds indoors, do so 8 to 10 weeks before your last frost date.

Creeping thyme can also be directly seeded in the garden once the soil has warmed to about 60 degrees.

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Creeping thyme is generally purchased in small, four-inch pots or smaller plugs from a garden center or nursery.

Transplanting them is easy and fast.

- Water the plugs or pots of creeping thyme several hours before you transplant to reduce plant stress.
- Remove all sod or grasses and weeds from the planting area, and loosen the soil.
- Work in an inch-thick layer of compost to help with drainage and soil structure.
- Gently remove the thyme plants from their containers and set them out where they'll be planted, spacing them 6-12 inches apart. Once you have your layout and spacing, planting will be a snap. You'll also avoid accidentally leaving gaps.
- Use a hand trowel and dig a small hole, as deep as the plug and a bit wider.
- Set the thyme plant or plug in the hole, check the depth, and refill the hole, firming the soil around the roots as

them a good soaking.

- Mulch the area with organic material, such as straw, shredded leaves, pine straw, or compost, to keep weeds down.

If you have a large area to plant, use a wide board as a walkway to spread out your weight and avoid overly compacting the soil.



Herb container from a garden center ready to plant! Credit: Miriam Doerr Martin Frommherz

GROWING

Creeping thyme plants are tough and drought-resistant, but they'll need water while getting established. Once they've rooted in well and begun to grow, take it easy on the watering. Well-established

prolonged dry spell combined with hot, sunny weather. The compost you dug in during planting will help to mitigate that as well.

Fertilizer is not needed except in the most nutrient-poor soils. Thyme is native to the stony, gravelly soils of the Mediterranean and will do fine fending for itself. Pruning is unnecessary, but a general haircut in the spring will encourage new growth and keep creeping thyme from getting woody and sparse.

As your creeping thyme plants mature, you can divide them to expand your groundcover. Just take your trowel, dig up a piece with roots and stems, and replant it in a new location.



Close-up of pink flowers of wild thyme (*Thymus serpyllum*). Credit:

New varieties are hitting the market all the thyme (heh heh) and many are specifically designed for groundcover use. As long as it's hardy in your zone and you don't overwater it, you can't really pick a bad one. Several other species of thyme have been bred for use as creeping groundcovers as well.

- 'Coccineus' (*T. praecox*) is a red creeping thyme that blooms deep, dark pink or magenta. It is very tough and drought-tolerant.
- Wooly thyme (*T. pseudolanuginosus*) has a fuzzy appearance and grayish-green foliage. Although this species is excellent for xeriscaping, it does not flower often. It's hardy in USDA zones 5-8 and tolerates more foot traffic than other creeping thymes.
- You can't go wrong with the original *Thymus serpyllum* or common creeping thyme. Growing only three inches tall, it produces a thick blanket of pink flowers. If you have trouble deciding, this is a good place to start.



PESTS/DISEASES

- Root rot from poor drainage

WIT AND WISDOM

- Creeping thyme, and all thymes really, are deer and rabbit-resistant. Foil those critters with this fragrant ground cover!
- While creeping thyme is edible, it isn't the thyme we typically use in the kitchen, which is *Thymus vulgaris* or

- If the wholesaler's plug packages are in quantities too large for you to use, try splitting it up with your local garden club. Folks are always interested in planting a few of these lovely ground covers.

FLOWERS

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Andy Wilcox



Andy Wilcox is a flower farmer and master gardener with a passion for soil health, small producers, forestry, and horticulture.

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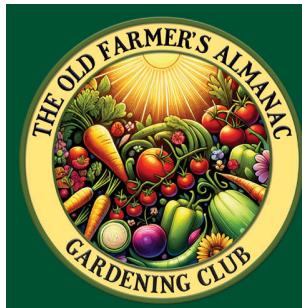
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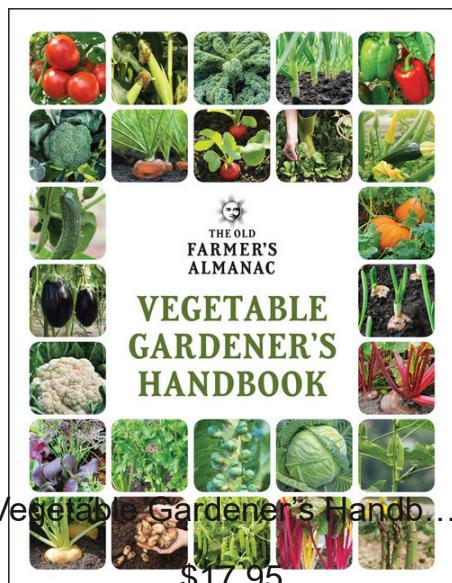
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Frances Gale (not verified) 11 months 2 weeks
ago

I have creeping thyme on a slope between lawn
and a strawberry bed. The creeping thyme is
great for erosion control. Bees love it.

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