

## SYRIAN OREGANO



***Origanum syriacum*** (syn *Majorana syriaca*)  
*Origanum maru* is a taxonomic synonym of *Origanum syriacum* incorrectly applied. *O. maru* has large, dark green, oregano-scented leaves and is routinely hardy to Zone 7, unlike *O. syriacum*.

**Family:** Labiatae

**Names:** Bible Hyssop, Lebanese oregano, white oregano, Rigany (Greek); True Za'tar; Ezov (Israel); Kekik (Turkish)

**Description:** Similar to pot marjoram in overall appearance but more robust and with larger leaves and about as variable in leaf color, from pale green to grey. Both thyme-scented and oregano-scented forms are known. A shrubby mint with hairy stems which grows about 2 ½ feet tall and bears dense spikes of small, pure white flowers on its upper branches. Close to the ground and shrubby, it is able to grow, even thrive, in a dry, stony, desert landscape, a phenomenon that gained it an ancient reputation as a symbol of modesty or humility. Its many stems are covered with small, nearly

heart-shaped, downy leaves that give the whole plant a grayish appearance (the hairs help it withstand drought conditions). White flowers appear in dense terminal clusters in midsummer. Flowers start out as tight little green buds. The buds get longer as the flowers open from the bottom up. The buds are usually clustered together on a stem and, if harvested early, have excellent flavor when dried. It is hardy to zone 8. It is in flower from May to July. The flowers are hermaphrodite and are pollinated by bees. Wild *za'atar* is today a protected plant in Israel due to overexploitation, carrying a large fine if picked, and therefore, many commercial brands labeled *za'atar* actually substitute thyme or a mixture of cultivated herbs.

**Cultivation:** Requires a rather dry, warm, well-drained soil, but is not fussy as to soil type, thriving on chalk. Prefers slightly alkaline conditions. It tolerates temperatures down to between 14 and 23°F. Members of this genus are rarely if ever troubled by browsing deer. Sow seed in a greenhouse in early spring at 50 - 55°F and only just cover the seed. Germination usually takes place within 2 weeks. Prick out the seedlings into individual pots when they are large enough to handle and plant them out into their permanent positions in early summer. Division in March or October. Very easy, larger divisions can be planted out direct into their permanent positions. It is better to pot up the smaller divisions and grow them on in light shade in a cold frame until they are well established before planting them out in late spring or early summer. Basal cuttings of young barren shoots in June. Very easy. Harvest the shoots with plenty of underground stem when they are about 8 - 10cm above the ground. Pot them up into individual pots and keep them in light shade in a cold frame or

greenhouse until they are rooting well. Plant them out in the summer.

**History:** Za'atar (an Arabic word pronounced Zah-tar) or hyssop (translation of the Hebrew word ezov) is a Middle Eastern herb closely related to the oreganos, as its several botanical names imply. Za'atar is also the Arabic name for a spice mixture (in which the herb is the main flavoring ingredient) baked into the crust of pita and other breads. The herb's flavor is sharp, a blend of thyme, marjoram, and oregano. Where it is unavailable, other herbs – notably spiked thyme (*Thymbra spicata*) – are substituted in the spice blend. Some scholars feel this is the hyssop of the Old Testament. Thought to have powers of spiritual purification. Because common *Hyssopus officinalis* is not native to the Mediterranean area, much debate has ensued over which plant was referred to as Hyssop in the Bible. It may have even been several different plants used for different and varied purposes. *Origanum syriacum* is thought to be the true Hyssop of the Bible. Oregano was often gathered in bunches and used as a brush or sprinkler for purification rituals. *Eizov* played a role in several Jewish purification rites. It was an element of the enigmatic red heifer rite (*parah adumah*) used to remove the impurity of contact with death. "And the priest shall take cedar wood, and *eizov*, and scarlet wool thread and cast it into the midst of the burning of the heifer (Numbers 19:6)." It also formed an integral part of the ceremonial cleansing of lepers. "The priest shall command to take for him that is to be cleaned two live birds, and cedar wood, and scarlet wool thread, and *eizov*. And for the live bird, he shall take it, and the cedar wood, and the scarlet wool thread, and the *eizov*, and shall dip them and the live bird in the blood of the bird that was killed over the spring water (Leviticus 14:4,5)." The *chatat* water and the water of the leper were then customarily sprinkled with a bunch of *eizov*.

**Medicinal Uses:** Za'atar has a long history as a medicinal and flavoring herb. Its thymol concentration is probably responsible for its

effective applications in treating tooth decay, gum infections, and coughs; hyssop tea is drunk after meals to aid digestion.

**Culinary Uses:** This mixture of sumac, sesame seed and herbs is used frequently in the Middle East and Mediterranean areas. It is often mixed with olive oil and spread on bread; sometimes this is done at the table, other times the mix is spread on the bread rounds which are then baked. Za'atar also serves as a seasoning to sprinkle on vegetables, salads, meatballs or kebabs. Much like sausage seasonings, each country has distinctive style of Za'atar, and each family develops its own special blend. Various mixtures are sometimes marketed as "Za'atar" (or "Zathar"). Thyme and Sumac is a common version. Another is: Thyme, Salt, Sumac and Toasted Sesame. Yet another is: Thyme, Sumac and Summer Savory. A melange of Marjoram, Sesame, Sumac, Salt and Olive Oil is also called Za'atar. "Za'tar" or "Za'atar" are generic names for a whole group of Middle Eastern herbs from the genera *Origanum*, *Calaminta*, *Thymus* and *Satureja*. Za'atar tastes like a cross between Thyme, Marjoram and Oregano. The flavor of Za'atar is characterized by Carvacrol (69.5%) and *p*-Cymene (10.3%), although it does contain some sixteen other flavoring compounds.

The dried flower heads of this oregano are also usable if picked before browning of the flowers occur. Their flavor is very concentrated and is the perfect flourish for a grilled cheese sandwich or a bowl of creamy tomato soup.

### **Recipes:**

#### **Za'atar**

3 parts toasted sesame seeds  
2 parts dried spiked thyme (*Thymbra spicata*)  
1 part dried Syrian oregano  
1/2 - 1 part powdered sumac  
salt, optional

The thyme and marjoram should be as fine as possible. If you can't find sumac, you can either do without or substitute some lemon salt (maybe only a half part, in proportion), since the sumac has a lemony flavor.

### **Za'atar**

1/2 cup dried Syrian Oregano  
1/4 cup imported edible ground sumac  
2 tablespoons roasted Sesame Seeds  
1/4 teaspoon sea salt  
Black Pepper to taste  
Pita Bread  
2/3 Cup Olive oil

In a small bowl add the first five ingredients and stir together to combine. Seal in a glass jar and store out of the light. Makes about 2/3 cup. Preheat oven to 250 degrees. Brush pita with olive oil and sprinkle with Zatar and warm in the oven. Or mix equal parts Zatar and Olive Oil and spread over bread and then warm.

### **Leek with eggs**

Roast chopped ginger (size of 2-4 walnuts) in butter, add chopped leek (3 medium sized, including green), salt, fry for a couple of minutes to obtain some browning of leek. Push fried vegetables to the outside of pot, add 4 eggs in middle, salt, and cover with vegetables. Let eggs stock for about 3-5 minutes. Cover everything with loads of Zaatar, as to taste, and a bit of hot pepper. Serve with Italian or white bread.

### **Roasted Carrot And Feta Salad With Za'atar**

2 1/2 pounds carrots -- peeled and quartered lengthwise  
2 Tbsp olive oil  
1/4 tsp kosher salt  
1/4 tsp black pepper  
3/4 cups crumbled Bulgarian feta cheese  
2 Tsp extra virgin olive oil  
1 Tbsp za'atar -- or more to taste  
1/4 cup chopped fresh parsley or cilantro leaves

Preheat oven to 425 degrees. To roast carrots, place the carrots, olive oil, salt and pepper on a baking sheet, toss well and transfer to the oven. Roast, shaking occasionally until they are just beginning to brown, about 30 minutes. The carrots should be firm and not mushy. When they are cool enough to handle, cut the carrots in angled 1-inch slices. Transfer to a serving bowl. Add the remaining

ingredients and toss well. Serve immediately or cover and refrigerate up to 4

### **Za'atar Bread**

Yield: 12 servings

1 cup water  
1 tsp salt  
1 1/2 tsp canola oil  
1/3 cup rye flour  
2 2/3 cups bread flour  
3 1/2 teaspoons za'atar  
2 teaspoons ground coriander  
2 teaspoons sugar  
1 teaspoon yeast

Place all ingredients in bread machine in order given. Bake on regular cycle with light crust.

NOTES: This is particularly good with cold cuts, and leftover chicken or brisket. The recipe is for a Regal bread machine. Adjust accordingly. From-scratch bakers know how to play with the recipe.

### **Shanglesh**

Serves: approximately 20 balls, maybe 40 servings

4 lbs full-fat yogurt, w/o gelatin (important, not only for kashrut, but for solidifying the "cheese")  
3 or more cloves garlic, minced  
3 or more dried red peppers, chopped (or 1/2 tsp. crushed red peppers) Salt to taste  
1 tsp. ground black pepper  
1-1/2 pints of olive oil  
1/4 cup za'atar

Drain the yogurt overnight in a triple layer of cheesecloth. Every few hours, Kind of "roll" the yogurt around in the cheese cloth. When the yogurt is firm and the consistency of a soft cream cheese, mix in the chopped red peppers, garlic, and season to taste with salt and pepper. Take a tablespoon and roll the cheese mixture into balls. Place za'atar in a tray and roll the balls gently to coat them. Place balls gently into a bowl and cover with olive oil. Let "marinate" overnight. As long as the cheese balls are covered completely, there's no need for refrigeration. To serve, lift cheese balls gently from the now-herbal oil (great for other uses!) and plate. Serve with pita petals

(the pita split, cut in wedges, and then toasted).

### **Za'atar Spiced Eggplant Salad**

Za'atar Spice Blend

1 ½ cups toasted sesame seeds  
1 cup dry spiked thyme Set aside.  
1 ½ cups dry Syrian oregano  
1 ½ cups powdered sumac  
Salt

Combine all ingredients and mix well.

Spice blend may be stored for up to 3 weeks in an airtight container.

4 eggplant  
6 cloves garlic, chopped  
4 tablespoons tahini paste  
4 tablespoons olive oil, divided  
2 lemons, juiced  
2 teaspoons cumin  
2 teaspoons za'atar spice blend  
Salt

Pepper

2 tablespoons fresh parsley, chopped  
4 plum tomatoes, diced medium  
2 medium red onion, dice small  
4 tablespoons pine nuts, toasted  
2 jalapeno peppers, seeded and minced

Place eggplants on a lightly oiled baking pan. Bake in a 325 F. oven approximately 1 to 1 ½ hours until tender. Remove from oven and allow to cool. When cool enough to handle peel and remove some seeds. Place the peeled eggplant in a food processor with the garlic and tahini paste. With the machine on, slowly add the half the oil and lemon juice. Transfer to a large mixing bowl and add the remaining seasonings. Fold in the parsley and diced tomatoes. Set aside. In a medium sauté pan heat the remaining oil and sauté the onions, pine nuts and jalapeno until the onions are and pine nuts are lightly browned. Cool approximately 10 minutes, then fold into the eggplant. Gently mix well; adjust seasonings and serve at room temperature.

### **Fricasse de Ciuperici**

**(Romanian Mushrooms in Tomato Sauce)**

3 to 4 servings

1 pound button, crimini, or other mushrooms  
3 tablespoons olive or vegetable oil  
1 medium onion, chopped  
2 to 3 cloves garlic, minced  
¾ teaspoon paprika  
2 cups (about 1 pound) peeled, seeded, and chopped plum tomatoes  
1 tablespoon chopped fresh Syrian oregano, or 1½ teaspoons dried Syrian oregano  
About 1¼ teaspoons salt  
½ teaspoon sugar  
½ cup dry red wine

About ¼ teaspoon crushed chili flakes, or 1 dried red chili

If using small mushrooms, leave whole. Slice the big ones into large pieces with the stems intact. Heat the oil in a large saucepan over medium heat. Add the onion and garlic and sauté until soft and translucent, 5 to 10 minutes. Add the mushrooms and sauté until slightly tender, about 15 minutes. Stir in the paprika and sauté for 1 minute. Add the tomatoes, oregano, salt, and sugar, bring to a boil, reduce the heat to low, and simmer for 10 minutes. Add the wine and chili and simmer until the mushrooms are tender and the sauce thickens, about 20 minutes. Serve warm as an accompaniment to *mamaliga* (cornmeal mush) or pasta.

### **Lab**

**(Ethiopian Cheese Dip)**

About 2 cups

1 pound fresh goat cheese, sheep's cheese, farmer's cheese, or pot cheese

¼ cup plain yogurt

3 tablespoons chopped fresh parsley or cilantro

1 tablespoon chopped fresh basil, or ½ teaspoon dried basil

1 tablespoon chopped fresh Syrian oregano, or 1 teaspoon dried Syrian oregano

1 to 3 teaspoons grated lemon zest

About 1 teaspoon salt

About ¼ teaspoon ground black pepper

Combine all the ingredients. The mixture should be thick enough to maintain its shape. Serve with injera (Ethiopian pancake bread) or pita bread.

## **Benadora bi Beid (Syrian Tomato and Eggs)**

4 to 5 servings

2 cloves garlic, minced

4 cups (about 28 ounces) peeled, seeded, and chopped tomatoes

1 to 2 teaspoons sugar

6 large eggs, lightly beaten

1½ teaspoons chopped fresh Syrian oregano, or

½ teaspoon dried Syrian oregano

About ½ teaspoon salt

Ground white or black pepper to taste

Heat the oil in a large skillet over medium heat.

Add the garlic and sauté until lightly colored but not burnt. Add the tomatoes and sugar, cover, and simmer until tender, about 15 minutes. Stir in the eggs, oregano, salt, and pepper. Cover and simmer until set, 3 to 5 minutes. If desired, serve over toast.

## **Rambam's Charoset**

1 cup pitted dates, chopped dried figs, raisins, or any combination

2 cups water

¼ cup wine vinegar

Za'atar leaves (not ground) to taste

Pour the water over the fruit and let soak overnight. Bring the fruit and water to a boil, reduce the heat to medium-low, and simmer, stirring frequently, until the mixture forms a paste-like consistency. Remove from the heat and stir in the vinegar and za'atar.

## **References:**

Living with Herbs, Jo Ann Gardner, Countryman Press, 1997; ISBN: 0-88150-359-2

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