

PLANT PROFILE: Mother of Herbs - *Plectranthus amboinicus* ('Variegatus'). Also known as Five Seasons Herb, Five in One Herb, Five Spice Herb, Queen of Herbs, All-herb, All Purpose Herb, Country Borage, Indian Borage, Spanish Thyme, Spanish Sage, Broad Leafed Thyme and Chinese Three in One.

The flavour of this edible herb has a strong hint of oregano and marjoram, with a lesser note of thyme, savory and sage. Thus the name! The flavour is quite strong, so a little goes a long way. Instead of using several of these herbs in a dish, you can just use one or two leaves and taste a similar result!

Mother of Herbs' closest relative is *Plectranthus caninus* or Dogbane, another incredibly useful ornamental herb for your garden. Mother of Herbs grows and spreads quickly if planted in the ground and cascades downwards if grown in pots. It can be left on its own but will quickly spread out filling an area and sprawling over neighbouring plants! For this reason, it is ideal to plant around taller shrubs and trees, although you may need to give Mother of Herbs a haircut if it becomes unruly. The variegated leaf variety has pretty creamy white edges and is not as vigorous as the plain green variety. This is because the variegated species do not photosynthesize as efficiently. It makes a very attractive underplanting around feature trees and I often use it as a space filler to prevent weeds, attract bees with its lovely flowers and generally 'caretake' garden beds I am not using over summer.

Like Dogbane, Mother of All Herbs is suited to many uses in the garden including:

- Drought hardy ground cover.
- 'Chop and drop' mulch with long-lasting fragrant leaves and stems.
- The strongly scented leaves may help deter pest insects.
- Compost ingredient.
- Weed suppressant living mulch.
- Beneficial insect attractant (when white and pale pink flowers appear en masse, these insects feed on the nectar and pollen).
- Underplanting fruit trees and food forest gardens as a companion plant (helps shade roots without competing for nutrients as it is a succulent and has very shallow roots). Attracts bees to improve pollination.
- As an attractive, fast-growing border or space filler and feature plant.
- As a temporary low-maintenance ground cover over summer to prevent weeds growing in unused garden beds. (Keeps microbes alive without robbing soil of nutrients – a kind of 'care taker' plant).
- Attractive flowering herb in pots, rockeries and hanging baskets.



Growing Conditions

This hardy low-maintenance herb grows well in both full sun and partial shade. If there is too much shade the plant will take on a 'leggy' appearance and become paler in colour. It's very drought tolerant, much like a succulent, so doesn't require watering often if at all, other than rain or dew after it's established. If it becomes leggy, just chop it back with a hard haircut and use as mulch. Or dry the surplus leaves for your pantry.

A warm protected position is ideal but it will tolerate many soil types and conditions. Mother of Herbs is not very well suited to open spaces where cold and frost will be present. Moist soil is recommended, which will help the plant maintain moisture levels in the thick leaves. It is easy to grow and best left alone. It will self-control weeds.

Growth Habit

Mother of Herbs is a perennial herb from the mint family, which grows on average to 50 cm high or higher when the flower stalks appear. The leaves are ovate shaped and fleshy, with hairy stems. The flowers appear on long spikes and stand tall above the foliage making a striking feature in any garden bed or pot.

The flowers are highly attractive to honeybees and other beneficial insects seeking nectar and pollen.

Plant Uses

The leaves have antiseptic properties so can be chewed to relieve a sore throat or coughs. The leaves contain vitamins A, B and C and are a source of calcium, magnesium, potassium and iron. For those that suffer with insomnia, this herb is reputed to be very effective if taken at bedtime. Make a tea by chopping several leaves and steeping in hot water to induce sleep. Tea made with Mother of Herbs may also help relieve indigestion, stomach cramps, as a liver tonic, for pain relief, bronchitis, asthma, coughs and viral conditions.

In the kitchen, this herb can be used to flavour many dishes. Finely chop leaves and use with meats, tomatoes, cucumber salads, root vegetables, soups, casseroles and stews, gravies, dips and spreads, mayonnaise, marinades, curries, cheese, eggs and stir-fries. It can flavour rissoles, stuffing, meatballs, spaghetti bolognese sauce, chicken and savoury crackers or breads.

I also use it for my dogs if they have an upset stomach or indigestion, by adding some chopped up into their food bowls. This is a handy herb when dogs eat something dubious and are looking unhappy with themselves.

This herb is also a useful pest repellent solution (due to the strong smell!) and is perfect for the outdoor table in a pot. Pick a leaf or two, then crush to release the essential oils and rub on your exposed arms or legs to deter biting insects like mozzies and midges. Same for your fur friends - just rub on their tummies or wherever they are getting bitten. If you do get bitten, the crushed leaf also helps relieve the sting or bite.

Propagation

To propagate Mother of Herbs, poke a stem cutting into potting mix or moist well-drained soil (not wet) and it will root! It is very easy to grow from cuttings in just moist soil or potting mix. Do not over-water or the cutting will rot.

