

ROSEMARY: A Versatile Perennial in the Garden

by Sally Pace, Master Gardener Program

In the Middle Ages rosemary was considered a love charm. It was used in wedding ceremonies and considered a symbol of “love and loyalty”. Central Valley gardeners can also fall in love with rosemary as a beautiful ornamental plant and culinary herb. Its Latin name, *Rosmarinus officinalis*, means “dew of the sea”.



Young spittlebugs on rosemary surround themselves with a white frothy mass.

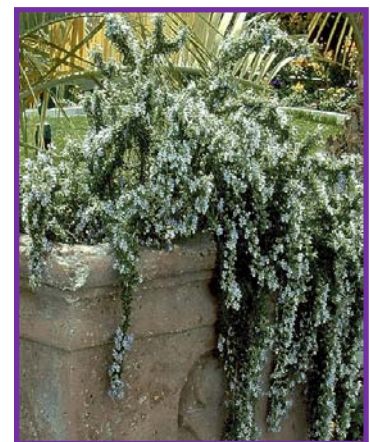
Rosemary is native to the Mediterranean region, which has a climate very similar to the central San Joaquin Valley. This woody perennial is very easy to grow, drought and cold tolerant, and pest resistant. It is an attractive, aromatic evergreen shrub with green to gray green leaves that resemble short pine needles.

There are many different rosemary varieties, ranging from very large to low growing ground covers. Most varieties flower in spring with bloom colors ranging from white, pink, blue or deep purple. ‘Tuscan Blue’ has medium blue flowers and grows 6 feet tall and 4 feet wide. Another tall variety sold locally is ‘Majorca Pink’ with lilac-pink flowers. Creeping rosemary also called ‘Prostratus’ only grows 2 feet tall but spreads 4-8 feet wide. ‘Ken Taylor’ is a hybrid variety growing 4 feet tall and wide with dark blue flowers. It’s important to know the mature size of your variety before you plant it in your garden because rosemary can take over a space very quickly.

Rosemary prefers well drained loam soil but will grow in almost any soil as long as it does not get waterlogged. Fall is a good time to plant it in the garden. I have two very large rosemary plants that are doing very well in heavy clay soil. One was given to me as a small “Christmas Tree” in a one gallon pot and it is now over 4’ tall and covers a 10’ x 12’ area where I had a hard time getting anything else to grow for years.

Rosemary is not recommended for foothill and mountain areas because it is very flammable. Since it is a woody plant, it can also be tough to remove after it is established. The easiest way to confine the size of rosemary is to plant it in a pot on your patio.

This also provides easy access to the kitchen when stepping outside to snip a few stems.



Rosemary draping over the edge of container.



Close up of rosemary flower stalk showing the two-lipped flowers.

If you want to start your own plants you can propagate rosemary by snipping a two inch cutting from the soft, new growth of an established plant. Remove the leaves from the bottom inch and dip that tip into rooting hormone before placing it in a container of damp, sterile seed starting mix. Keep the container in a warm spot with indirect sunlight and mist daily. In about 2-3 weeks, test for root growth by gently tugging on the cuttings. Transplant into small pots and pinch tops to encourage branching. In about three months you can plant it outside.

One pest of rosemary is the “spittlebug.” Adult spittlebugs look like leafhoppers and readily jump or fly when disturbed. The presence of immature spittlebugs is easily recognized by the frothy white mass that surrounds them. This sticky residue looks like strings of “spit” when picked up by wind. Although abundant amounts of insects can cause significant feeding damage on plants, populations are rarely high enough to warrant control other than washing them off the plant with a stream of water. Oftentimes it is weeds that provide habitat for the spittlebug before it moves over to the rosemary.

As a culinary herb, rosemary leaves, both fresh and dried, are used in traditional Mediterranean cuisine like stuffing, roast lamb, pork, poultry, fish and vegetables. It is also used to flavor food while barbecuing because it gives off a mustard-like fragrance when burnt. Use it as a garnish to dress up almost any dish.

Carnosic acid, found in rosemary, is being studied for medical uses ranging from lowering the risk of strokes to Alzheimer’s disease.

Rosemary is a very versatile plant, just brushing up against it when gardening gives off a wonderful fragrance. Try picking a bunch to bring inside to give your home a friendly aroma.