

HERBS 101

Herbs are a traditional field of expertise for the old-fashioned witch or village wisewoman. But why do Witches study herbs today, when modern medicine is available to us?

- growing, gathering, and working with herbs is one way to connect with the Earth
- creating some of the medicines we use is one way of taking greater responsibility for our own wellbeing
- many commercial medications are based upon herbs, and establishment medicine is beginning to acknowledge the validity of many old folk cures
- herbs you grow and/or prepare for yourself are cheaper, and usually fresher and better quality than the commercial equivalent

Some cautions:

- herbal remedies should supplement, not replace, regular medical care
- two very different herbs may have the same folk name; always check the Latin name
- two very different plants may look similar in the wild; one may be useful, the other poisonous. Be sure of what you gather.
- medicinal strength varies greatly from one plant to the next.
Recommended dosages are always approximate and you must field-test each batch for the proper dose. Start low, and never use more than double the recommended dose
- medicinal plants are medicines; don't be casual about dosage, and watch for side effects, interactions, and allergies
- preserve the wild supply: never take more than 1/4 of the plant, or (if you must take the root) 1/4 of the plants of one type in an area
- even plants you grow yourself are not immune to nasty chemicals drifting over from your neighbour's yard
- herb books vary in quality, and none is perfect; consult several sources
- don't assume you know everything about an herb because it's common; a single whole nutmeg, or twenty bay leaves, can kill
- as a beginner, stay with simple projects and low-toxicity herbs. Avoid essential oils at first; they are very concentrated and therefore very powerful

Some thoughts for Witches:

- respect the Earth, and the plants you harvest. Ask the plant's permission, thank it, and leave a gift (coins are traditional; fertilizer or water is more useful to the plant). Take only what you can use, and don't waste your harvest through neglect.
- add magical energy to your work: work inside a cast circle, focus on the purpose of the project as you work on it, and/or raise energy to charge it with magical power once it's made
- if the time for harvesting a plant is not dictated by practical concerns, why not harvest it during an appropriate lunar phase?

Plants have different parts:

Leaves: Cut rather than pulling, to reduce harm to the plant. What time of year is best, to harvest this particular plant? Do not gather wet leaves; if they need washing, rinse them with a watering can the day before. Remove dead or discoloured leaves. Fasten stems in bunches with a rubber band, label, and hang to dry. After two to three weeks (or longer if weather is very humid), store in whole-leaf form in sealed, airtight containers.

Wood: Cut into thin slices or chips while still soft. Spread on mesh screens or paper towels to dry; stir or turn daily. May take a month or more to dry, depending on thickness of pieces.

Roots: Wash in cold water, scrub if necessary, but do not soak. Some roots should be peeled, others should not. Dry as for wood.

Bark: In most cases, it is the inner layer of bark that is wanted. Harvest small twigs, peel bark as soon as possible, and dry as for wood. In the case of willow, gather long pieces, and save the peeled wood for basket weaving.

Flowers: Gather as soon as possible after they open. Hang or spread to dry.

Berries: Gather as soon as fully ripe, unless instructed otherwise. Hang or spread to dry. You may wish to slice larger fruits, to speed drying.

General drying and storage instructions: Gather plants in the morning after dew evaporates and before the heat of the day draws out the oils that give them their flavor and aroma. Hang or spread to dry in a place where there is good air circulation, minimal dust, and no direct sunlight. Do not use heat to speed drying. Once herb is fully dry, store in as whole a form as possible, in an airtight container, in a cool, dry, dark place. Glass containers are best because they are most inert chemically. Plastic containers are next best. Wooden or metal containers may react chemically with the herb. Paper bags will absorb valuable oils from the herb, and are not airtight; they are a very poor choice. Label and date every package; include source info if applicable.

Herbal preparations:

There's no single best way of preparing an herb. Many factors are involved: do you want the water-soluble fraction, the oil-soluble fraction, or both? How good does it taste? How quickly will you use it up? Does it need to be portable? Are you in a hurry? (If you have a headache now, you don't want to wait two weeks for a tincture.) Is it for internal or external use? Is your herb supply fresh or dried?

Fresh herbs are considered better for most purposes, if they are available. Dried herbs may be preferred if spoilage during preparation is a problem (e.g. for weak tinctures such as skin toners or hair rinses.) In drying, an herb loses about 2/3 of its volume, but also 2/3 of its potency, so quantities of fresh vs. dried herbs in a recipe are usually the same.

For most herbs, measuring by volume is sufficient. Where more precise dosage is important, get a postage scale and weigh your herbs.

Use chemically inert containers and tools (glass, enamel, or teflon pans rather than metal) and pure ingredients (distilled or filtered water rather than tap or spring water; fresh cooking oil rather than bacon drippings). Store the products in clean containers labelled with the contents and date of manufacture. Keep records of every herbal preparation you make; note any variable that might be significant. What worked and what didn't? Why didn't this batch keep as long in the fridge as the last one did? Did using green beeswax make the ointment look pleasant, or ugly? You can learn something from even the worst flops.

Infusion: Crush but do not powder leafy herbs. Pour a measured quantity of boiling water over a measured quantity of herb. Steep covered for ten to twenty minutes, then strain. Extracts water-soluble fraction from leafy herbs. Keeps in refrigerator for two to six days.

Cold extract / cold infusion: Crush but do not powder leafy herbs. Chop up roots or woody herbs if possible. Pour a measured quantity of cold water over a measured quantity of herb. Stir or shake to mix. Cover. Soak at room temperature for 8 to 10 hours (longer if herb is woody rather than leafy). Shake or stir occasionally. Strain.

Extracts water-soluble fraction. Especially useful when active component is heat-sensitive. Keeps in refrigerator for two or three days.

Decoction: Crush but do not powder leafy herbs. Chop up roots or woody herbs if possible. Add measured quantity of herbs to measured quantity of boiling water; simmer covered for 20 minutes. Strain.

Extracts water-soluble fraction and some of oil-soluble fraction from leafy or woody herbs. Keeps in refrigerator for two to six days.

Capsule: Pack measured quantity of dried powdered herb into appropriate size of commercially available gelatin capsule. Slide other half of capsule into position.

Delivers whole herb without having to taste it. Keeps a year or longer.

Pill: Dissolve a little gum arabic or unflavoured gelatin in enough warm water to make a thick syrup. Add to measured quantity of dried powdered herb a little at a time, until you get a thick claylike texture. Don't make it too runny. Form into small balls; the number of balls should be some multiple of the number of doses in this quantity of herb. Press balls flat with knife blade or fingertip. Spread on mesh screen or wax paper to dry.

Same benefits as capsules; cheaper but more labour-intensive to make.

Tincture: Dried herb: Fill tincturing bottle about 40% full with herb. Add enough ethyl alcohol (50% alcohol preferred; 40% is acceptable) to cover. Cap tightly and shake. As herb absorbs fluid during the first few hours, shake frequently and add more alcohol as necessary to cover herb. Shake twice daily for two weeks to a month. Strain, squeezing pulp to extract as much liquid as possible.

Fresh herb: Fill tincturing bottle with herb. Add enough ethyl alcohol (50% alcohol or stronger) to cover. Cap tightly. Shake twice daily for two weeks to a month. Strain, squeezing pulp to extract as much liquid as possible.

Store in brown glass dropper bottles.

Extracts oil-soluble and water-soluble components. Keeps six months to a year.

If you cannot use alcohol even in these tiny quantities, tinctures of dried herbs can be made with vinegar (extracts oil-soluble and water-soluble fractions) or oil (extracts oil-soluble fraction only). These are less efficient than alcohol, and may need more time. If you want a stronger tincture, add more herb to the finished product and repeat the cycle. You will lose some volume on each cycle, so start with a larger volume of materials.

Tinctures are generally good for one year. Dosage for usage is measured in drops.

Syrup: To make sugar syrup base: Add measured quantity of white sugar to measured quantity of water. Heat, stirring constantly, until sugar dissolves. Remove from heat. Use at once, or store indefinitely until needed.

Honey or maple sugar can also be used as syrup bases.

To syrup base, add measured quantity of herbal infusion, decoction, or tincture. Correct volume by adding water if necessary.

Things to remember when planning quantities: The finished syrup will keep for six months to a year if the sugar content is 50% or higher. Otherwise, it will ferment within a couple of weeks. Start with a syrup that is stronger than 50%, so that there is room to add the medicinal ingredients.

The concentration of medicinal ingredients should be such that a single dose of the syrup is between one teaspoonful and three tablespoonsful.

Ointment: Use any fat or oil as a base. Warm over low heat in a saucepan or skillet. Add grated beeswax as a thickener and preservative. (How much beeswax? That depends on what kind of oil you started with, and how firm you want the ointment. Don't make it too stiff if it is to be rubbed onto burns or cuts.)

For fresh or dried herbs: Once beeswax is melted, stir in measured quantity of herbs. Heat, stirring frequently, until herb softens. Do not bring to a boil. Remove from heat and strain through cheesecloth or sieve, squeezing pulp to extract as much ointment as possible. Stir. Pour into jars before the mixture congeals.

For tinctured herbs: Once beeswax is melted, remove from heat. Stir in tincture. Pour into jars before mixture congeals.

Poultice: Pour a little hot water into bowl of dried herbs to form a thick paste. Or heat fresh herbs in a little water until soft; do not bring to a boil. Let cool until it is not painful to the touch (if the injury is a burn, cool to room temperature or lower), wrap in cloth, and place on affected area.

As an alternative, dip a clean cloth in a strong infusion or decoction of appropriate herbs, wring out just enough that it will not drip, and place on affected area.

The pulp remaining in the cheesecloth or strainer after making an ointment, decoction, or infusion also makes an excellent poultice.

Skin tonic or hair rinse: Add eight parts water to one part apple cider vinegar. Add infusion or tincture of appropriate herbs, or steep dried herbs in mixture for up to two weeks. Don't steep fresh herbs; they'll ferment. Strain out herbs. Bottle liquid.

After shave: To commercial witch hazel, or an isopropyl-water mix, add witch hazel leaf or some other herb containing tannin (to restore the tannin removed by distillation) and whatever other herbs seem appropriate for skin care and scent. Steep for two weeks, then strain and bottle. Or prepare the herbs as a tincture, then add to the commercial witch hazel base and bottle immediately.

Your homework:

Choose ten herbs (not more) to work with and get to know over the next year. (If you find one of the ones you've chosen isn't working out for you, you may rotate it out and add a replacement herb to your list.)

As a beginner, stick with less sensitive and less toxic herbs. Willow bark is a safe choice for a beginner; wormwood is not.

Grow or wild-harvest as many of these herbs as the local climate permits. Make and use various sorts of herbal preparations with them. Keep thorough notes.

During the second year, you may expand your list of working herbs to 20 if you wish. Working with more than 20 at a time is not recommended at any stage, unless you intend to make a serious specialty of herbal work.

Remember always to treat the plants you use with respect, and your work with them as a sacred activity.