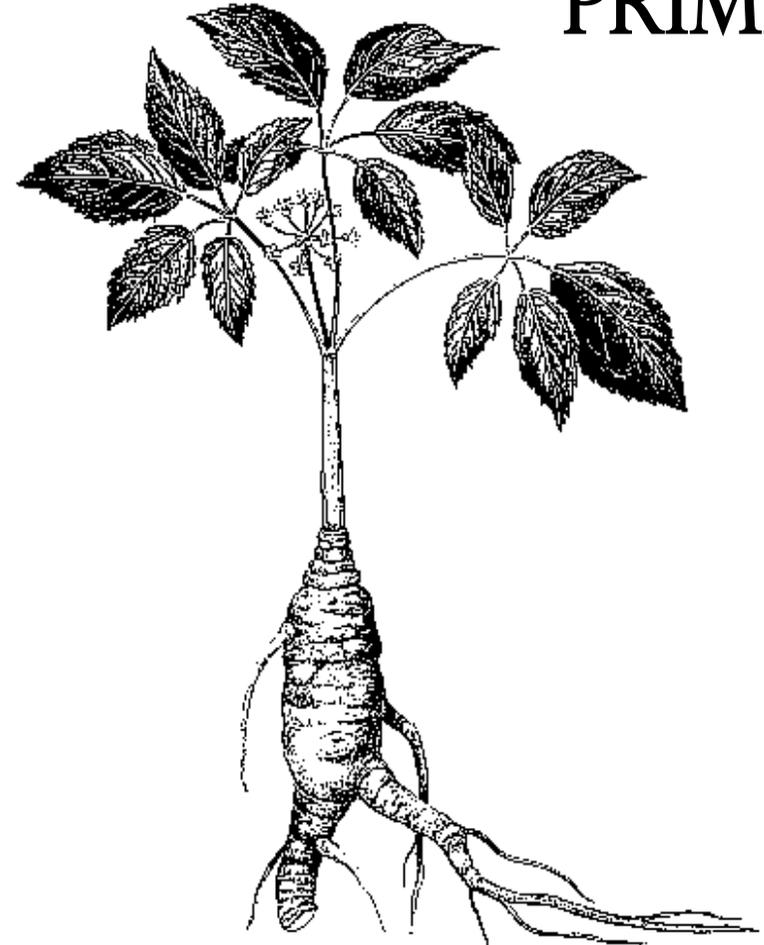


# AN HERBAL MEDICINE-MAKING PRIMER



SIMON THE SIMPLER



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## NOTES, RECIPES



Similarly, suppositories are herb-infused butters which can be inserted into the vagina or anus. They are really soothing to irritated skin and can be made by heat-infusing the desired herbs in cocoa butter, then molding it into little easily-inserted balls as it cools.

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# THIS IS ANARCHO-HERBALISM

*Thoughts On Health and Healing For the Revolution*

Originally by Laurel Luddite

MY MEDICINE CHEST IS A COUNCIL of bioregions, with representatives gathered together as I make my way around the world west of the Rocky Mountains. The Coptis root was picked out of the churned-up scar left by an excavator, at the retreating edge of the Idaho wilderness. The tiny amount of Pipsissewa leaves came from an ancient grove above the Klamath River just feet away from where the District Ranger sat on a stump talking about his plans to cut it all down. I am drying Nettles from the California creek where salmon die in the silt left after a century of industrial logging.

Every jar holds a story (often a ghost story of dying ecosystems and places gone forever). I am honored to have known the plants in their home places and to have studied their uses as medicine. But for people not lucky enough to roam throughout the wilds, purchased herbal preparations such as tinctures may be the link back to this sort of healing.

Like so much in this consumerist society, it is easy to ignore the connections between a bottle on a shelf in some store and a living, growing plant out in the world somewhere. It can be hard to know if the plant grows a mile away or on another continent. There is much to be said for reconnecting, for educating ourselves about the herbs we use and gathering our own medicine when we can. That's how we will be able to build a whole new system of healing, one that can support our movement away from the corporate power structure that the practice of medicine has become.

The development of a new medical system, or the recovery of ancient models, is another link in our safety net as industrialism falls. It keeps

Dry heat is another option. Michael Moore has some great things to say about smoking. Basically, he says that for non-smokers, smoke is an irritant no matter how you look at it (okay, okay... lobelia or jimsonweed smoke can be effective for relaxing the bronchia in certain asthmatic conditions... you got me, but that's not the point). However, for smokers, inhaling certain burning herbs can actually have an antispasmodic or expectorating affect. As an ex-smoker, I really enjoy the occasional herbal smoke. For more information about herbal smokes, check out Michael Moore's books or Howie Brounstein's website for Columbines School of Botanical Studies where he has some excellent things to say about processing and curing herbs for smoking.

## *Sitz Baths, Douches, and Suppositories*

SOMETIMES HERBS NEED TO BE applied directly to the mucous membranes of the anus, vagina or urethra to combat irritation or infection. My favorite method is the sitz bath. Basically, you take a sock or cheese cloth and stuff it full of the herbs you need to apply to the delicate bits in question, draw a hot (but not too hot) bath, and toss it in. It's like sitting in a cup of tea! Actually, this can be quite relaxing. Sometimes I do it with roses, chamomile, or lavender after a long day just for the relaxing smell of the plants.

<i>Sitz Bath for Yeast Infections:</i>
<i>1 Pt Marshmallow</i>
<i>1 Pt Uva Ursi</i>
<i>1 Pt Chamomile</i>

Sitz baths are my favorite because they seem like the mildest and least invasive way of treating these delicate tissues directly. However, sometimes stronger methods are called for. An herbal douche is usually a lukewarm infusion or decoction inserted into the vagina. I've also tried soaking the end of a tampon and inserting it and found that, though uncomfortable at first, it kept the infusion localized for longer and was very affective in treating an itchy yeast infection.

A salt scrub, in its most basic form, is oil and salt mixed together to the desired consistency (I tend to like a slushy, saltier scrub) which you then rub all over your skin when you bathe and rinse off. Different salts will yield different consistencies: table salt is a smaller grain and smoother, sea salt is chunkier and rougher, Epsom salt is rougher still.

There are all sorts of exotic mineral salts from the Dead Sea or imported from god-knows-where. Plain old sea salt is my favorite because its texture isn't too abrasive and it's easy to acquire (especially with food stamps).

Feel free to experiment with types of oil and oil-to-salt ratio as well. Like most things I do, I don't measure, so it's a bit different every time. My favorite oil to use is a mixture of coconut and almond. The first time I made a scrub I tried coconut oil by itself, but you can imagine how difficult it was to work with on chilly days.

You can also add all sorts of fun things to your scrub. Rosemary Gladstar in *Herbs for Natural Beauty* suggests grinding up herbs, nuts, or seeds to add to your scrub, like dried rose petals, ground oats, or almond meal. Keep in mind that this stuff is harder on the drain than just salt and oil. You can also try adding sugar.

### ***Steam and Smoke***

HEAT IS AN AMAZING THING. I'd like to take a moment to mention some of its applications. First of all, the possibilities of heat and moisture...

<p><b><i>Simple Herbal Smoke:</i></b></p> <p><b><i>1pt Skullcap</i></b></p> <p><b><i>1pt Peppermint</i></b></p> <p><b><i>3pt Raspberry</i></b></p>
--

Steaming is great for respiratory issues. It's just like in the movies: when you have a chest cold, simmer some aromatic herbs like eucalyptus and sit over them with a towel draped over your head and the pot, breathing deeply.

us alive and kicking out windows in these last days of the System when so many people have no access to industrial medicine. It will reestablish our connection to the real medicine that is the Earth.

### ***An Alternative to "Alternative Medicine"***

THE SORT OF HERBAL MEDICINE popular these days (presented to us by the media and so-called Green Capitalists as yet another exciting fad) has brought with it very little thought of a new way of healing. The plants, reduced to capsule form or, worse, to their "active ingredients", are just new tools to work with in the same body-machine that industrial medicine sees people as being. They become no different than pharmaceutical drugs or a scalpel blade: something to pry into the body-machine with and use to mess around with the parts. Except, of course, much less effective, because the herbs have been taken out of the system of healing in which they have their strength. A system within which the individual has the power and knowledge and capability to heal themselves directly and without the numbing influence of marketing and money.

When the marketers of herbal products get their hands on a new "miracle cure", it can mean extinction for the plant. This is especially sad when so many living creatures go into useless products or are wasted on conditions that they don't treat. (Has anyone else seen that Echinacea shampoo?) The classic example of this is Goldenseal, *Hydrastis canadensis*, a plant close to extinction in the wild. It has a couple of amazing actions in the human body but has mostly been marketed as a cure for the common cold, which it will do almost nothing to help. By the way, the largest brokers of wild-harvested Goldenseal and many other big-name herbs are multinational pharmaceutical corporations. Given American society's obsession with herbal Viagra, weight loss pills, and stimulants, most of the herbs on the mass market are being sacrificed to these ridiculous causes.

There is an alternative to "alternative medicine". Southwestern herbalist, author, and teacher Michael Moore probably said it best in one of his recent digressions from a lecture: "In this country, the herb business mostly revolves around recently marketed substances with new research, and it comes from them to us. Whereas we're trying to establish as much as possible (in this *lower level*, if you will) the fact that we need to create a practice and a model that's impervious to faddism. We're trying to practice in a way that derives from practice rather than from marketing. Not from above to below but from below around. *Bioregionalism über alles*. Keep it local. No centralization, because centralization kills everything."

### ***Herbo-Primitivism***

WE NEED ANOTHER WAY OF looking at our bodies and the plant medicines. Seeing the two as interconnected and in balance is new to industrial culture, but in reality it is the most ancient healing model on earth. We knew it before we were "people". Animals know how to use plants to medicate themselves; their examples surround us, from dogs eating grass to bears digging Osha root. Probably every human society has had some way of explaining how the body works and how plant medicines work in us.

One thing all herbalists know - dogs and bears included - is that a health problem is best treated before it begins. In more primitive societies where people have the luxury of listening to their own bodies it is easy to spot an imbalance before it turns into an acute disease state. This is where herbs are most effective. They work at this sub-clinical (and therefore invisible to industrial medicine) level of "imbalances" and "deficiency" and "excess". Their major task is in sustaining and maintaining a healthy organism and, in cases of illness, encouraging that organism to heal itself.

The difference between ointments or salves and creams or lotions is the presence of water. Creams and lotions get "creamy" because water and fats/waxes don't combine, but when they are warmed and blended, the fats and oils form teeny-tiny bubbles which the water surrounds and, to the naked eyes, the whole bubbly mixture appears to mix and get lighter in color and fluffy or "creamy". The difficult part of this process is the emulsification, or combining of the oil/wax and water.

***Rose Cream:***  
***Combine Rose petal and Chamomile infusion or hydrosols with Cocoa Butter and Emulsifying Wax to desired texture. Add a few drops Rose essential oil as it cools.***

The key to emulsifying is to do it while both water and waxy/oily parts are warm and to do it little by little. I've read herbalists that recommend pouring the oily parts into the watery parts, and I've read herbalists that recommend the opposite. Personally, I like to add the water to the oil/wax combination. I am, in my deepest, truest self, bad with numbers and recipes, and adding the water bit-by-bit allows me to control how visually creamy the consistency is without measuring.

### ***Scrubs***

ANOTHER EXCELLENT THING YOU can do with your infused oils (or plain oil, for that matter) is make salt scrubs. They are wonderful for aching muscles and skin conditions that involve excess dryness. In Ayurvedic medicine, it's said to improve blood-flow. I like scrubs because I tend to think soap is highly overrated and prefer to clean my skin by sort of sanding it and oiling it. Scrubs moisturize and remove dead skin and dirt (and are the only way I know to get pitch or resin off).

***Morning Scrub:***  
***Combine sea salt and almond oil to desired consistency. Add a few drops of lavender and ylang ylang essential oil.***

No matter which variation you go with, once the oil is infused, strain out the herb from the oil, making sure to squeeze out as much oil as possible, then bottle it and store it in a dark, cool place.

A quick word about oils: Don't worry about investing in expensive oils as your base. Organic olive oil, grapeseed oil, coconut or almond oil all work well and you can find them at the grocery store. For oils that you are using for their scent, like a cedar chest rub or something like that, it's best to pick an oil that isn't too heavily scented. I've read that olive oil sits on the skin longer and is better for skin-related concerns, while grapeseed oil is more penetrating say, for a muscle rub, and almond oil is especially nourishing. There are many other options to play around with (including more traditional animal byproducts like lanolin and fat), but don't feel like your infusion won't work simply because you are doing it with the same olive oil that you cook with.

### ***Salves, Ointments, and Lotions***

A SALVE OR OINTMENT IS JUST AN oil that you add wax to in order to make it partially solid. I tend not to use recipes, but here is the general idea: create a double-boiler by placing a bowl (one that you don't mind getting waxy) inside another container that has a few inches of water at the bottom of it (this can either be a saucepan on the stove or the main chamber of a rice cooker or crock pot). Bring the water to a boil and put whatever medicinally-infused oil you are using in the bowl. Once it's warm, melt in small amounts of beeswax until your salve is the desired texture. To test the texture, dip a spoon in your mixture and put it in the refrigerator for a few minutes until it cools and you can see how well it has hardened.

<p><i><b>Muscle Salve:</b></i></p> <p><i><b>Combine in equal parts the oils of Cottonwood Bud, Arnica, and St. John's Wort with beeswax to desired texture.</b></i></p>
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This old/new healing system is subtle and requires a lot of self-knowledge, or at least self-awareness. It uses intuition as a diagnostic tool. Emotion, spirituality, and environment become medicines. The spirit and environment of the plants we gather affects their healing properties, and our relationship with those plants becomes very important.

### ***Green Herbalogy***

WHEN WE TAKE HERBAL MEDICINE we are taking in part of the plant's environment. Everything it ate and drank and experienced has formed the medicine you're depending on, so you better make sure it gets all the best. When we are healed by plants, we owe it to them to look out for their kind and the places where they live. Traditional plant-gatherers often have a prayer they recite before they take anything from the wild. I usually say something along the lines of "OK, plant. You heal me and I'll look out for you. I got your back. No one's gonna build over you, or log you, or pick too much while I'm around." So this true herbal healing system has at its heart a deep and radical environmentalism and a commitment to the Earth.

The bioregional concept is important to this model of healing. Plants' actions in our bodies are really quite limited by the chemicals they can produce from sunlight and soil. For every big-name herb on the market cut from the rainforest or dug from the mountains, there is most likely a plant with a similar action growing in your watershed. Some of the best medicines to maintain good health grow in vacant lots and neglected gardens around the world.

## ***Anarcho-Herbalism***

A SOCIETY OF PEOPLE WHO ARE responsible for their own health and able to gather or grow their own medicines is a hard society to rule. These days we are dependent on the power structure of industrial health care and medical specialization: the secret society of the doctors, the white-male-dominated medical schools, the corporate decision makers with their toxic pharmaceuticals and heartless greed and labs full of tortured beings. That dependence is one more thing keeping us tied down to the State and unable to rebel with all our hearts or even envision a world without such oppression. With a new system of healing, based on self-knowledge and community herbal wisdom, we will be that much more free.

Offering a real alternative health care system will help to calm some people's fears about returning to an anarcho-primitivist, Earth centered way of life. There is a false security in the men with the big machines, ready to put you back together again (if you have enough money). What is ignored is the fact that industrial society causes most of the dis-eases that people fear. Living free on a healing Earth while surrounded by true community and eating real food will prove to be a better medicine than anything you can buy.

What steps can we make now towards creating this new system of medicine? We all need to learn what we can about our own health. This could mean training in one or more of the surviving models of traditional healing and/or through self-observation. How do you feel when you're just starting to get a cold? What kinds of problems come up repeatedly, especially when you're stressed out? If you are female-bodied, how long is your cycle and what does the blood look like? Understanding how our bodies act in times of health can help us recognize the very early stages of dis-ease when herbs are the most useful.

Another option that I find works well is to set the jar in a warm place like on top of a radiator; it seems to help the infusing process. You can also create a double-boiler in a rice cooker (or something that will maintain a steady, low temperature) and heat the oil that way.

Some people recommend warming the oil in the sun, but I tend toward the idea that, once picked, herbs keep better when they are out of direct sunlight. The aforementioned radiator method works wonders on even hard-to-dissolve resins. If you don't have a radiator, setting your oil-herb maceration in the oven with just the pilot light on works just as well. Whatever you do, make sure the lid is slightly loose so that any moisture in the plants doesn't heat to the point that it breaks your glass jar. Gooney resins are difficult to clean up and a shame to waste.

Some plants yield their goodness to oil more easily than others. To deal with the more difficult plants, Michael Moore recommends covering the plant matter first in a bit of alcohol and letting it sit for a few hours, then adding it all to a blender with oil. He says to mix the whole thing until the blender is hot to the touch, at which point you can strain out the plant matter and call it good. If you are infusing oil with fresh herbs- which I think, in general, is the most effective technique- there are a few ways to preserve the oil so that the plant's water content doesn't spoil it. I've noticed that olive oil is especially resistant to spoilage and, if all of the plant material is thoroughly covered, I never really have a problem with it. Another option is to add a natural preservative to the oil such as vitamin E oil or benzoin powder. Another method- one that I read about in Michael Moore's *Medicinal Plants of the Pacific West*- is to take your fresh plant and, instead of pureeing it with oil initially, use the alcohol method. This is especially effective in extracting saint john's wort and calendula. Alcohol is drying and, according to Moore and in my own experience, if you let this puree sit for a few hours or over night and then mix in the oil, it not only prevents putrefaction but also helps extract the medicinal constituents of the plant.

water. Once the honey is fully dissolved, take your syrup off the heat and bottle it up. Don't worry if it seems too thin or watery, it'll thicken as it cools. If you aren't canning it, be sure to store it in the refrigerator or somewhere cool, or you'll soon have a bottle of mead.

If you steep herbs in honey it makes a honey infusion. Decocting herbs in water and adding honey in at the last minute then refrigerating or canning it makes a syrup. However, if you leave that syrup out in the open, you get mead. Also, if you cook the herbs in honey for too long, something else exciting could happen. You could candy them, as with candied ginger. Roots work especially well. I don't have very much experience candying myself, but Maud Grieve discusses it at least briefly in her book *A Modern Herbal* where she talks about candying Angelica.

### ***Infused Oil***

THERE ARE SEVERAL DIFFERENT WAYS to infuse oils and they all deserve some experimentation because the results will vary based on the herbs you're using as well as external factors. The bottom line is that you are steeping an herb in oil until the oil begins to take on the color and smell of your plant. The only real risk in this process is putrefaction due to moisture that may have been in the plant matter.

One method that I find works well is macerating your herbs in a small amount of oil, either with a mortar and pestle or some sort of blender or food processor. Then, put the maceration in a jar and mix in an amount of oil sufficient to fully immerse the plant material. Understand that if the herb is dried, it may expand with the moisture and you may need to add an inch or so of extra oil to compensate. At this point, you can just leave the jar in a dark place and shake it every once in a while until it's steeped.

People who have some background in healing (in the traditional or industrial systems) can be a great help to those of us who are just learning. Healers who are working to form this new model, whether collectively or through their individual practices, should keep in mind that they are practicing a truly revolutionary medicine which promotes community-sufficiency, decentralization, and an appreciation for the Earth.

In these times of change, everything is being examined and either destroyed, rebuilt, or created from our hearts. Industrialism has affected every aspect of our lives - we are just starting to realize how much has been lost. Medicine is just one part of the machine that we have to take back and re-create in a form that works for the society we will become. Every herb, pill, and procedure should be judged on its sustainability (*true* sustainability, not just green-washed marketing) and accessibility to small groups of people. We can start with ourselves, with our communities and circles, but should never stop expanding outwards until industrial medicine rusts in a forgotten grave, a victim of its own imbalances.

<p><b><i>Ear-Ache Oil:</i></b> <b><i>1pt fresh garlic</i></b> <b><i>4pt Mullein</i></b> <b><i>Cover with olive oil</i></b></p>
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# WILDCRAFTING

## *The Ethics and Methods of Foraging*

ONE OF THE MOST LIBERATING THINGS about herbalism is the ability to walk outside and pick a plant with your own hands and then use it to nourish and heal yourself.

Ethical wildcrafting requires knowledge and respect (and, if it's commercial, a permit). Learning your first few plants is the hardest part. Once you can learn to differentiate a few plants from the multitude, you'll find you can't walk around the block without noticing new plants and familiarizing yourself with your bioregion. A basic region-specific plant guide can be a really useful tool for the beginning forager as well as the experienced herbalist; you never know when you'll run into a new plant friend or want to double-check your knowledge.

It can be easy to get intimidated by the amount of medicinal and botanical information out there. But, don't get discouraged; all you really need to know is a handful of weeds to feed and heal yourself. If you are just beginning, try picking five or six plants to learn to identify and really focus on them so as not to overwhelm yourself. When you take walks, try to identify them visually at various points in their growth cycle. Pick a leaf or flower to carry with you and remind yourself. If it's a mild medicine or food plant, taste it and smell it often, paying attention to how it makes you feel. This will give you a working and intimate knowledge of the plants in your region.

Once you've learned a few plants and are ready to harvest them, there are a few things to consider. First is the bio-availability of that plant in your area. With plants that are rare, endangered or simply not common where you live, it is especially important to make sure that you harvest with caution.

simple to experiment with, and you can read about it online or in the above-mentioned books.

Kombucha is the last type of fermentation I'd like to suggest in your herbal experimentation. It's become a popular commercial beverage, but is actually quite easy to make yourself. It's another way to preserve your favorite water-infusions. All you need is a bottle of your favorite unpasteurized kombucha as a starter, something high in tannins like green tea, and whatever herbs or fresh juices you are craving. Again: many options and variables, a fairly quick process, and easy to research in the aforementioned references.

### *Syrups*

SYRUPS ARE DELICIOUS AND easy to make. They are soothing and sweet, and when made with honey rather than sugar they can be even more medicinal. I could write a discourse on the nutritional and medicinal properties of honey. Suffice it to say, as a medicine, honey is sweet and therefore nutritive, it's warming internally and externally, and soothing to the mucosa of the lungs and bronchia. It's also an excellent way to make medicine palatable.

As with medicinal plants, a good guideline is to work honey at lower temperatures whenever possible. To make a medicinal syrup, make an herbal decoction with the plants you are interested in using. Simmer your tea, allowing half of the water to evaporate so that you are left with a very strong, dark liquid. Keeping it on low heat, mix in honey so that your concoction is one part honey, one part herb-infused

<p><i>Winter Syrup:</i> <i>Concentration of</i> <i>Fresh Elderberries</i> <i>A few slices Ginger</i> <i>A few slices Osha</i> <i>Honey</i> <i>Add a few tablespoons of syrup,</i> <i>an orange slice, and a dash of</i> <i>cayenne to a cup of hot water,</i> <i>for a warming winter brew.</i></p>
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of solvency, not mixing well with resins or volatile or fixed oils. I would also like to point out from the DIY perspective that it is a highly processed substance and there are much simpler and more readily-available options. However, please experiment for yourself.

### ***Fermenting***

SOMETIMES I THINK, “If... No, *when* industrial civilization collapses and I don't have easy access to things like distilled alcohol or processed vegetable glycerin, how will I extract and preserve my medicines?” Aside from simply drying all of my herbs, I think the answer is wild fermentation. Pickling and fermenting have been used for thousands of years. There are endless options and there are some really great books out there to help you explore the possibilities. Two of my favorites are *Wild Fermentation* and *Sacred and Herbal Healing Beers*.

The subject of home brewing and wild fermentation is vast. In my very limited experience, the simplest way to begin home brewing is with mead because all you need is honey, water and a clean environment to store your mixture for a few weeks as it ferments. There are plenty of excellent recipes available online and in the books I've listed above.

Another quicker method is lacto-fermentation, as with sauerkraut, relishes and kimchi. While many of these methods involve steeping medicinal herbs in a solvent to extract their qualities, there are ways to ferment and preserve them whole. Pickling works well with fruits and vegetables, but some cultures use this method to preserve leafy herbs like grape leaves and roots like ginger. Lacto-fermentation can also be used to quickly ferment herbal water infusions in just a few days, producing a very low-alcohol, fizzy brew. All you need for lacto-fermentation is water, sweetener, whey (the liquid part of your organic yogurt), and maybe some salt and other seasonings. As with making mead, this method is easy to research,

A good rule of thumb is to avoid harvesting plants from stands of less than twenty and to harvest no more than ten percent of what you see. It is also important to make sure you help to propagate the plants you are harvesting either by spreading the seeds in the fall or, if you are harvesting roots, re-planting some root-crowns as you go. The United Plants Savers, founded by Rosemary Gladstar, has ongoing information about endangered and threatened plant species that is a great reference for the ethical wildcrafter. The website is [www.unitedplantsavers.org](http://www.unitedplantsavers.org).

Season is also important to consider when harvesting. For instance, harvesting flowers when they are all withered and soaked in the fall will probably be less beneficial to you medicinally than harvesting them in full bloom. I've found that a nice way to think about it is this: harvest plants in the season where their energy is flowing toward the part of the plant you are using. In the spring, energy is flowing up the plant's stalk out of the root and into newly budding leaves, so this is usually a good season for fresh leafy greens. Summertime takes energy from the leaves up into flower buds, and when they begin to wither and turn to seed in the fall, everything is flowing back down the stalk to be stored in the root for the winter. Different plants mature in different seasons, but this is a good generalization.

It's also important to notice some things about the area from which you are harvesting plants for ingestion. Herbs growing on roadsides, in ditches or waterways downstream from industrial sites, or in areas exposed to pesticides and herbicides should probably not be harvested for medicinal purposes.

Above all, the most important thing to remember when wildcrafting is that you are taking something from another living organism and it should be done with the utmost respect. Some people have rituals they carry out while harvesting in order to remind themselves of this fact and to thank the

plants for their gifts. I think it's nice to sit with the plants you are about to harvest for a while before you begin. When harvesting balsam root on one occasion, my friend Sara encouraged me to walk around the plants quietly and get to know them rather than just picking one to pull out of the ground at random.

I know another person who talks with the herbs he is about to harvest, letting them know he's not picking them wastefully, thanking them, and reminding them that one day his flesh will return to the soil, giving them the gifts of his life in turn. This ritual harkens back to the pagan practice of reciting a poem (along a similar theme) to the elder before breaking a twig from her for wand-making.

Humans routinely steal, pillage, and plunder from the earth. The least we can do as mindful foragers is carry out our work with respect and give as much back as we can. I'm told by another herbalist friend that some North American tribes had a practice of leaving offerings of tobacco or other goods behind after harvesting medicines. Personally, I think that mindfulness and the practical habit of going back to stands in the fall to help propagate the plants you've harvested are really simple and important practices that even the most rationally-minded, spiritually-resistant herbalists can do.

Most herb companies use high-proof alcohol like Everclear or pure alcohol which they dilute with water until it's the right ratio. Though there are charts listing the proper alcohol content with which to extract different aspects of different plants, the home medicine-maker doesn't necessarily have to be that meticulous. For the folk herbalist, all you really need is a bottle of 40 or 50-proof vodka. Some herbalists like Matthew Wood tout lower-proof alcohols like Brandy. Otherwise, it's really up to you; there's no one "right" grain alcohol. Because I'm generally broke and my favorite drink to nip is good bourbon or Irish whiskey, I like to buy it for my tinctures, use what I need, then celebrate my hard work with the left-overs. It's a lovely little ritual...

Brewing is an ancient practice. Even in more recent history, in the herbals of Galen and Culpepper, many of the formulas suggested involve less-alcoholic fermentations than the tinctures we buy at the health food store today. Wine was a popular menstrum for warming remedies, beers and ales are sedatives and sometimes bitter, mead and even vinegar were used as well. So, even if you aren't brewing your own alcohol, it can be fun to experiment with lower-content menstra, especially considering the price of good vodka.

### *Glycerites*

I HAVE LIMITED EXPERIENCE WITH glycerin tinctures, but I thought I should list them as an option. Glycerin is a by-product of fixed oils. When purchasing glycerin, look for vegetable glycerin derived from coconut oil as opposed to synthetic or animal-derived products.

<i>Sedative Glycerite:</i>
<i>Fresh Valerian Root</i>
<i>Vegetable Glycerin</i>

Some people prefer glycerin because it has no alcohol content but mixes readily with both water and alcohol. It is a preservative and anti-bacterial and is especially effective at extracting tannins. However, James Green in his *Home Medicine-Maker's Handbook* points out that it has very limited range

AN HERBAL MEDICINE-MAKING PRIMER – 15

## *Tinctures*

GRAIN ALCOHOL TINCTURES are a simple and efficient way to make an herbal extraction. Herb companies use weight ratios, expensive tincture presses and percolators to make their tinctures, but the folk method is very easy to do at home and works just as well. It goes like this: once you've harvested the desired herbs, put them in a jar, cover them with hard alcohol, set it in a dark corner, and give it a shake every once in awhile. After 2-6 weeks, strain the alcohol off the herb, squeezing every last drop out of the plant matter, and bottle it up.

The above method is the simplest I know for making tinctures, but there are other things you can try that I have little personal experience with but that other herbalists recommend. One method is tincturing with dried plants that are ground to a powder before they are immersed in alcohol. Another variation is tincturing by percolation, which James Green and Michel Moore both seem to prefer. There seems to be plenty of room for experimental variation.

Because different constituents of plants are soluble in different menstra, it's important to find a solvent that is effective for the constituents that you're working with. The benefit of pure alcohol as a solvent is that it extracts balsams, camphors, resins, essential oils, alkaloids, and acrid and bitter constituents. Homeopaths swear by pure alcohol. Alcohol also preserves your extracts and prevents decomposition, unlike plain water. However, alcohol tinctures can be part water and part alcohol (for instance, 100 proof vodka is 50% alcohol and 50% water) and, logically, something that extracts well in alcohol *or* water will probably do well in a combination of alcohol *and* water.

### *Relaxing Nervine:*

*1pt Lemon Balm*

*1pt Skullcap*

*2pt St John's*

*Wort (fresh)*

*1pt Motherwort*

*Cover with good whiskey*

# MEDICINE-MAKING

*A Discussion of Menstra and Recipes*

## *Drying and Processing*

ONCE YOU'VE GROWN, HARVESTED, FORAGED or acquired your fresh herbs, it's time to think about how you are going to process them. To dry the aerial parts of plants, the leaves and flowers still attached to the stalks, gather a handful and bind them together at the base (the part of the stalk that would've been closest to the ground when the plant was growing) and hang the bundle upside-down. If you are plucking leaves or flowers off of growing stalks, as with single calendula blossoms or nettle leaves, you can lay them out on a grilling rack or screen to dry. Grilling racks work well because they allow air to flow under the drying herbs, preventing mold. This method also works well for roots, berries and barks, as well as thicker, juicier plants. For roots and barks, brush the dirt and moss off of them, break them into smaller portions, lay them out on your rack or screen in a shady corner (direct sunlight tends to break plants down faster), and let them be. If you are worried about mold, the important things to remember are air flow and shade; the faster your plants can dry in these conditions the higher the quality of your final product.

One last word on processing: once your herbs are dry, it's time for my favorite part... Garbling! Garbling is the process of picking through your dried plants, breaking them into smaller pieces and removing unwanted twigs or seeds or whatever little bits you don't want in the final product. All you need to do after this is store the plants in an air-tight container in a dark place.

## *Menstra*

THERE ARE MANY DIFFERENT WAYS to store herbs for later use, many different methods of preservation and extraction. Drying herbs for storage

is an excellent way to keep them for later. However, plants are liquid-based organisms full of juice and water and oils, and drying them often breaks these delicate bits and pieces down, especially over time. Depending on the part of the plant you are using and the purpose you have intended for it, different solvents or *menstra* can preserve and impart different qualities.

In my mind, there are three basic menstra used in herbal medicine: water, alcohol, and oil (I include fats and waxes with oils). The simplest and most commonly-used menstrum is water, preparing herbs in the form of teas. Commercially, alcohol extractions (tinctures) are very popular, as are oil infusions and salves, but there are many other ways to store herbs depending on your needs, so be creative and experiment!

*N.B. Preserving and processing herbs is useful for many reasons, but I think the very best way to put them in your body is by eating them fresh. Yum!*

### **Infusions**

IF YOU'VE EVER MADE A CUP of tea, you've made an infusion. An infusion is a water extraction made by pouring hot water over plant matter and letting it steep. Because herbs are largely water-based organisms, some herbalists such as Christopher Hobbs argue that, aside from simply picking the herb fresh and eating it, water extractions such as infusions are the ideal solvent to transport the goodness of an herb from plant to body.

Infusions are ideal for the leafy and flowering parts of plants because many of their constituents are water-soluble, like gums, sugars, proteins, alkaloids, astringent tannins and minerals. Woodier parts of plants can also be infused and should be left to steep much longer (up to eight hours according to herbalist Susan Weed). Cold infusions are also an option, made by steeping the herbs in non-heated water for a few hours or overnight.

### **Decoctions**

A DECOCTION IS A WATER extraction just like an infusion, but with a major difference in preparation. With an infusion, hot water is poured over the plant matter and steeped, while a decoction is prepared by placing the herb in water and simmering it for a period of time, usually until you see the color of the water change significantly. Some herbalists think of a decoction as a concentrated water infusion in the sense that the decoction isn't done until at least half of the water has evaporated off, leaving a very strong concentrate. This method works well for roots, barks and berries because they are generally sturdier and more difficult to permeate than the delicate aerals, whose volatile constituents evaporate off in extended exposure to heat.

#### **Warming Decoction for Chest Colds:**

**1 pt Ginger  
1 pt Cinnamon  
1 pt Licorice**

An important thing to note is that you should never boil herbs intended for medicine. This is a concept that I'm sure is debatable, but it has been my experience and understanding that many of the active constituents of herbs begin to break down when they are boiled, just as they do when herbs are dried improperly or withered and old. The key concept to understand is that you want the plant to be as close to its original green, growing, living self as possible when it enters your body, so the less you shock it and deconstruct it in the process of medicine-making, the better. Therefore, keeping a decoction at a simmer is logically a better method than boiling plant matter and, even if it takes a bit longer to create a dark, rich-looking decoction this way, I think you'll find that the medicinal and nutritional results are generally better.

#### **Nutritive Tea:**

**1 pt Nettle  
1 pt Alfalfa  
1 pt Oat Straw**