



INTRODUCTION TO HERBS

What are Herbs?

To put it simply, herbs are plants. Medicinal herbs refer to plants that are used for specific health-related purposes. All different plant parts may be used. They can be used in a wide variety of forms. When you leave here today I expect that you will feel comfortable starting to integrate healing plants into your own and your clients' lives. In order to use these healing plants safely it is important to know some essential information.

The Spectrum of Plants

Herbs can be classified in a large variety of ways. I find the following scheme to be extremely useful. I look at all plants as falling somewhere on a spectrum, starting with nourishing food-like herbs.

Nourishing herbs are foods. Foods are plants that are nourishing, can be ingested freely by the vast majority of people, and with the exception of extreme food allergies, can't be considered harmful. You can take in as much as you want and do so for extended periods of time. Nourishing herbs provide vitamins, minerals, proteins, starches and sugars. They act by feeding and strengthening the entire body. They support natural health and overall healing. Alfalfa and Nettles are 2 such plants.

Tonic plants are those that have slow cumulative actions. They gently support the body and help rebalance systems. They are generally used to strengthen specific systems. Raspberry Leaf is a specific tonic for strengthening the female reproductive system.

Mild actions are plants that have mild to moderate effects. They are stronger than tonics. They are usually used for shorter time periods. They can act as mild stimulants, sedatives, cleansers, and supporters. They taste stronger. Echinacea is a good example. They are generally safe, but a small amount of care must be exercised.

Strong action plants are those that are more similar to drugs in their effects. These actions cause strong responses in specific systems. Other systems may be stressed as a result. These plants act as antibiotics, strong laxatives or cathartics, etc. They are taken for a short time, usually in small amounts. They should generally be used with great care. Goldenseal and lobelia are examples of plants with strong actions.

Potentially toxic or poisonous herbs are those that are used in extreme acute situations, only by experienced practitioners. They are often associated with serious side effects and have the potential to be fatal. Poke Root, pennyroyal, tansy are examples.

Here's an example of where some common herbs would fall on the spectrum:



The Spectrum of Plants

Nourishing/ Foods	Tonic	Mild Action	Strong Action	Potentially Toxic or Poisons
Alfalfa	Raspberry Leaf	Echinacea	Blue Cohosh	Poke Root
Fennel	Nettle	Valerian	Angelica	Rue
Spearmint	Red Clover	Motherwort	Shepherd's Purse	

When beginning to use herbs you can feel safe if you start by using plants that are on the nourishing and tonic end of the spectrum. As you become more comfortable and experienced, you can more comfortably use herbs with strong actions. Only experienced and well-trained herbalist ought to be using the strongest and potentially toxic plants.

Latin Nomenclature & Common Names

Knowing where a plants lies on the spectrum is important, but will only help you if you know exactly what plant you actually have. Correct identification is essential. Plants have common names; many plants have a large number of such names. These names can be very helpful in remembering the use of the plant or identifying characteristics. Knitbone or Boneset gives you a great clue that that plant can promote bone repair. Knitbone is one of the common names of Comfrey, or *Symphytum officinale*, which is indeed a useful plant for promoting tissue repair. But Boneset more commonly refers to *Eupatorium perfoliatum*. The Latin binomial names are specific. If you have any doubt about what a plant is check the Latin name. These names, despite being hard to remember can often give additional clues to the form or function of the plant. Consider Motherwort, *Leonurus cardiaca*. Lion-Heart. Its

name immediately interests us. Wort, by the way means leaf. So this wonder plant, Mother Leaf, is a boon to new Mothers. It's brings on a gentle centered calm feeling, reduces the pain of afterbirth cramps and general tension. It tones the uterus. It is also a heart tonic and reduces the risk of post-partum shock.



Classification by Functions and Actions

How a plant acts is another useful piece of information that defines herbs. Some categories are familiar to you, such as antimicrobials or sedatives. Others may be new such as carminatives and vulnerary. Carminatives relieve intestinal gas and spasms. Vulneraries promote growth of normal cells.

Obtaining Herbs: Identification; Gathering; Processing; Storing

You can grow or gather your own herbs and process them by drying them, making tinctures, oils or other products. Or you can purchase herbs from reputable sources.

First I'd like to talk about gathering wild plants. It's a really fun thing to do and it gives you a great excuse to go tramping about in the wilds. Obviously, correct identification of the plants is essential. There are many wonderful field guides. I listed a few of my favorites in your handouts. Or go on a guided herb walk with someone who knows plants.



Generally speaking you want to pick the plants after the dew is dried and before they get wilted in the heat of the day. Gather plants that appear vigorous. Stay away from polluted areas, places where animals poop, and away from roadsides. Be a conscientious wildcrafter and never gather unless there are plenty of specimens and don't take them all. Leave enough to re-seed itself, so you can return next year and find an even more abundant patch. If you believe in such things, ask permission of the plants and tell them you want to make medicine from them. If there is a really large specimen, that is the grandmother plant, don't pick, just ask permission and say thank-you (It never hurts to be polite). In general you want to gather the plants when their energy is at its seasonal peak. Leaves are often harvested



in the spring; flowers whenever they are in bloom; seeds when they appear; and roots in the fall. Bring your harvest home. If you wish to dry them, then hang them in a dark dry place. When they're dried, place them in dark jars. Don't forget to label them with their name, the date. You may want to note where you found them so you can return next year. If you're making a tincture or oil, do so immediately, if possible.

Growing herbs in your garden or even in a window box is a great way to get to really know a plant throughout its lifecycle. Many herbs are easy to grow. Get some seeds, and go for it.

Purchasing Herbs

There are wonderful herbs and herbal products available, but there's also a lot of garbage out there. I recommend that you buy things from companies that are run by herbalists. These are often small companies and they are usually very helpful. I've listed the ones I prefer in the handouts. Most of the herbalists are in clinical practice and many also teach classes and workshops. They use conscientiously wildcrafted or organically grown herbs. You won't be getting the wrong plant or poor quality products. They'll usually be happy to help you if you have particular needs.

When purchasing herbs use your senses to determine the quality. The herbs should still retain vivid color, a strong clear scent, and visible plant parts. If you know what the plant looked like when it was growing that will help you to see if it's the right plant and if it's been carefully processed. Larger plant pieces are often best. If it looks like a bag of gray sawdust and smells that way also, forget it, its garbage.



HERBAL PREPARATIONS



Forms: There are a multitude of forms and preparations that can be made from plants. There are excellent sections in Susun Weed's *Herbal for the Childbearing Year* and Rosemary Gladstar's *Herbal Healing for Women* on this subject.

Fresh: Many herbs can be eaten raw in salads, cooked like any other vegetable or used as a poultice in the fresh state. Dandelion and lamb's quarters can be eaten fresh or cooked. Comfrey and plantain make excellent fresh poultices. If you decide to make your own herbal preparations you usually start with the fresh plant. Naturally, fresh plants contain the largest amounts of active vital components.

Dried: Dried herbs often maintain their potency for months or even years, if properly stored. They can be purchased or you can dry your own. Hang fresh plants in a dry dim spot. Store in dark airtight containers. Protect from light, heat, air and bugs.

Herbal Extracts are made by placing an herb in a liquid, called a menstrum that draws out the constituents of the plant.

A water menstrum provides vitamins, minerals, proteins and other nutrients in a form that is easy to digest and absorb. They spoil easily so you can only prepare a supply for a day or 2 and you should refrigerate what you don't use that day. If you use water as your menstrum, you will make a tea, an infusion or a decoction. The difference is in the amount of herb and the extraction process. Many herbalists disagree over techniques and terminology. There's a lot of room for latitude here and these guidelines are fairly general. Do what works for you. Here's what I do.

Tea: Use approximately 2-6 tablespoons of dried herb or twice as much fresh plant to 1 quart of water. Boil water and pour it over the plant material. Use non-reactive cookware. Steep, covered for 5-20 minutes. Add honey, lemon or whatever you like. Pour into your favorite mug and enjoy a cupful, saving the rest to drink later. Refrigerate leftover to drink cold or gently reheat. This method works best with delicate plant parts, such as leaves, seeds and flowers. Plants with volatile oils are best as teas. It is a wonderful way to use nutritive, nourishing herbs such as Nettle, Oatstraw, Alfalfa and of course, Raspberry Leaf. Drink frequently!

Infusion: A stronger concentration of herbs and longer brewing time are used to make these strongly medicinal infusions. Use approximately one ounce of herb (a large handful of leaves) to 1 quart of boiling water. Steep seeds for 30 minutes; flowers for 2 hours; leaves for 4 hours; barks and roots for 8 hours. Refrigerate leftovers. Drink ½ - 2 cups/day.

Decoction: Usually used for tough plant parts such as roots and barks. 1 oz of herb is slowly simmered in 1 quart of water for 15-30 minutes. Or take a strained infusion and simmer that until it is reduced by ½ to ¼. Drink ½ to 2 cups/day.

Water-based preparations can also be used in baths, sitz baths and as rinses and soaks. Vaginal douches are made from them. They can also be used as poultices and packs.



Other herbal preparations use different liquid medium or menstrums.

Tincture: Alcohol is the menstrum. Tinctures maintain their potency for years, they are usually effective in small doses, are portable, convenient and easy to take. Alcohol extracts alkaloids and resins. Dosage varies from a few drops to several droppers-full. For acute situations tinctures can be placed directly under the tongue (Don't touch the dropper to the mouth or you'll contaminate it). Usually tinctures are placed in a small amount of water, juice or tea. I prefer berry-flavored juice. If you wish to avoid the alcohol, place in slightly hot liquid (just over 100 degrees will do) and allow it to sit, uncovered for 5-10 minutes and the alcohol will dissipate.

Glycerites & Vinegars: Either glycerin or vinegar can be used as menstrums. They are not as common as they are not as effective as alcohol at extracting the medicinal qualities. Vinegars are delicious as culinary delights. Glycerites may be used when absolutely no alcohol can be tolerated.



Infused Oil: The plant material (usually fresh) is placed in vegetable oil and allowed to sit for 6 weeks or so, then decanted. Usually used topically. Very nontoxic. Long shelf life, if protected from heat and oxidation. Anti-oxidants, such as vitamin E will help oils keep from getting rancid. Can easily be made at home.

Essential Oil: Utilizing the powerful healing properties of the sense of smell, as well as being active direct healing agents. Distilled, ultra-concentrated plant essences. Have very strong potent odors. Very long shelf life. High potential for toxicity if ingested. Keep out of reach of children. Tiny amounts are used in the following ways: externally in carrier oils; as steam inhalations; in baths; in room air; in steam; as aerosols; or over a heat source. Can't be made at home.

Salve, Ointment, Cream: Infused oils are thickened with a variety of substances to produce these products. The simplest is to thicken with a small amount of melted beeswax. Used topically.

Homeopathics: A unique branch of herbal healing with its own set of rules. Based on plant energetics. Plant material is ultra-diluted and vibrated in a special process that results in no discernible molecules of plant material but somehow extracts the plants' energetic healing potential. A highly complex body of information is available on the subject. The basic prescribing rule is that you give a homeopathic dose to cure the same symptoms that a large dose of the actual plant material would cause. For example, homeopathic ipecac is used to treat vomiting because ipecac syrup can induce that same symptom. Because the homeopathics are so diluted they can be used safely, are very non-toxic, portable, convenient and have a long shelf life if protected from contamination, heat and light. Can't be made at home. Safe for pregnant woman, nursing moms and babes and everyone else. Strong substances and contact with hands or anything else will antidote the remedy so: don't take anything by mouth 15 minutes before or after the dose, don't handle the pills, and avoid coffee, mints, and other strong substances during treatment. Give small doses, with the frequency determined by the level of acuity, more acute equaling more frequent doses. Stop the remedy when the condition responds. Don't confuse homeopathic remedies for herbal ones as many homeopathics are made from substances that are potentially toxic!

Pills and Capsules: Dried herbs can be encapsulated or mixed with substances to form pills. The advantages are that they are easy to take, without the flavor issue; they are portable; familiar to people. They usually don't have a long shelf life and may have lost their potency during processing. It's hard to judge the quality. Still, it's convenient and may be the best way to take really bad tasting herbs like goldenseal.

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