

## Herbal Formulas: From Simple to Sublime

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My previous articles focused on identifying medicinal plants, harvesting them and then processing them into usable forms. Now it's time to take things to the next level and create formulas that are custom-made for the ailment you are trying to address. Simples (recipes containing a single medicinal plant) can be very powerful but there is a synergy in plants where the whole is more than the sum of its parts. Various places in the Bible refer to several plants or spices together:

Exodus 30:22 Moreover, the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, 23 "Take also for yourself the finest of spices: of flowing myrrh five hundred shekels, and of fragrant cinnamon half as much, two hundred and fifty, and of fragrant cane two hundred and fifty, 24 and of cassia five hundred, according to the shekel of the sanctuary, and of olive oil a hin. 25 You shall make of these a holy anointing oil, a perfume mixture, the work of a perfumer; it shall be a holy anointing oil.

Psalms 45:6 Your throne, O God, is forever and ever;  
A scepter of uprightness is the scepter of Your kingdom.  
7 You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness;  
Therefore God, Your God, has anointed You  
With the oil of joy above Your fellows.  
8 All Your garments are fragrant with myrrh and aloes and cassia;  
Out of ivory palaces stringed instruments have made You glad.

John 19:38 After these things Joseph of Arimathea, being a disciple of Jesus, but a secret one for fear of the Jews, asked Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus; and Pilate granted permission. So he came and took away His body. 39 Nicodemus, who had first come to Him by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about a hundred pounds weight.

Herbalists have used formulas throughout history to achieve their results, both medicinal and cosmetic. But there is a method to their madness and its worth learning how to achieve the success you are looking for.

### **Energetics:**

To create a formula, you need to know a few things about the plants you are looking at using. One thing we have not discussed is the concept of energetic properties of plants. We have looked at whether a plant is astringent or mucilaginous (moistening) but have not assigned a name and description to these properties. Let's go back and look at some of the plants we already learned discussed. I won't repeat the uses, please see

“Plants as Medicine” for more information.

**Burdock** (*Arctium lappa*): A cooling and drying plant, burdock’s action as a diuretic and slight laxative confirm these properties (Alfs, 2003, p. 40).

**Calendula** (*Calendula officinalis*): Calendula is also cooling and drying, useful for wounds and to move lymph and treat chronic conditions (Alfs, 2003, p. 42).

**Dandelion** (*Taraxacum officinale*): Like many plants, dandelion is cooling and drying as well, another diuretic, helping remove fluids and mastitis (Alfs, 2003, p. 52).

**Echinacea** (*Echinacea* spp.): Echinacea is cooling and drying, useful for feverish and septic conditions and mastitis (Alfs, 2003, p. 53).

**German or Roman Chamomile** (*Matricaria recutita/Antemis nobilis*): This is considered a cooling and drying herb, which makes sense from what we know of its use in fevers and colds and to dry inflamed mucus membranes (Alfs, 2003, p. 45).

**Hawthorn** (*Crataegus* spp.): Hawthorn is a drying herb (Alfs, 2003, p. 64).

**Lavender** (*Lavendula* spp.): Another drying herb, lavender’s use on stings and burns confirms this property (Alfs, 2003, p. 71).

**Marshmallow** (*Althaea officinalis*): The moistening properties of marshmallow are useful for soothing inflammation in the body, the urinary system in particular (Alfs, 2003, p. 75).

**Peppermint/Mint** (*Mentha* spp.): Mints have a unique property, generally considered warming and drying, menthol is often thought of as cooling. It is also relaxing to the nervous system but also stimulating to the circulation. What’s the deal? It depends quite a lot on the preparation. The oil (where menthol is more concentrated) tends to be cooling while the tea tends to be more warming and relaxing (Alfs, 2003, p. 84).

**Plantain** (*Plantago major* or *P. lanceolata*): Plantain is considered cooling and drying, explaining its use on insect stings and burns. It is also a decongestant, among many other properties (Alfs, 2003, p. 86).

**Sage** (*Salvia officinalis*) has dual properties. A hot cup of sage tea promotes sweating while a cooled cup of sage tea reduces secretions (like sweat or milk secretion). Sage is also drying (Alfs, 2003, p. 94).

**Thyme** (*Thymus vulgaris*): A warming and drying plant, thyme helps dry up secretions and remove fluid from the lungs (Alfs, 2003, p. 104).

Now that we know a bit more about these plants, how does that help us? Well, formulas are like recipes and you know how each person tends to put their own thumb print on any recipe. There are guidelines for creating formulas but in the end, your

formula will likely be unique.

### **Constitutional Description:**

One other thing that can help before we start is considering whether the individual you intend to treat has a moistening condition or a drying one, a warm or cold constitution. What does all that mean? For animals and for acute situations, it does not matter but I'll explain a bit anyway. In acute conditions, like a fever or cold or an injury, we decide which herbs to use based on the condition we see and much less on the person's unique constitution. We want to cool a fever, dry up a drippy nose or cool an inflamed wound.

For chronic conditions, a person's constitution becomes important. Now we need to look at exactly what is meant by "constitution". A generation ago or more, people often referred to someone as being of a phlegmatic type or being sanguine or melancholic. These terms have fallen out of use in just a short generation because I remember clearly hearing my dad refer to constitutional types, bad blood, bad night air and having thick or thin blood, depending on the time of year. We don't talk like that now and many consider it quaint. It may be quaint but it provided an understandable way to quantify a quality or property about a person that we have completely overlooked. In ancient healing systems, the body was divided into categories:

Dry, hot, moist, cold.

These four categories are linked, someone could have a hot and dry constitution or body type or a cold and moist one. Perhaps someone would be cold and dry instead. These descriptions would be biotypes or constitutions, describing the biology of the person from outward appearance, pulse and other non-invasive diagnostic methods. Each pair of descriptions was given a name and other characteristics that were commonly associated with these pairings were considered. Herbalist Matthew Alfs goes into detail in his "300 Herbs: Their Indications & Contraindications" starting on page 6. It's worth looking more closely at these descriptions if you are serious about using plants for addressing health imbalances and treating conditions. Other herbalists who explain this include Matthew Wood, Michael Tierra and others.

While initially confusing, I'm going to say you do know more than you realize about this. For instance, I notice people who have red faces, prominent veins and tend to be heavy-set. Some healing systems would refer to this as a sanguine constitution or humour. You can probably name at least one person who appears to have these characteristics. Keep in mind that these are not bad or good, they are descriptions only. Some people are thin and appear to always be cold, their skin can appear grayish and they tend to be rather negative or depressing in their view. This would be considered black bile or melancholic.

So you can have a warm, moist constitution (sanguine), a warm and dry constitution (choleric), a moist and cold constitution (phlegmatic) or a dry and cold constitution (melancholic) (Alfs, 2003, p. 8). Notice that these descriptions sound a lot like the ones

we just looked at under energetics of herbs. How fortunate! For formulas, we want to consider how to bring balance back to the person or animal and we want to do it so that we support the natural constitution while correcting any extreme conditions of the body.

Note that different healing systems use different terms for the same concepts. Greek humoral system referred to someone's humour, meaning their biotype or constitution but this is all the same, just changes in language. By the same token, different healing systems have different concepts but the same underlying focus on returning the body to its natural balance. Thin blood or thick blood are terms more often seen in Appalachia and southward but they coincide with the concept of blood cleansing herbs and changes in diet to conform to the changing seasons. A heavier meat and fat diet over winter with fewer fresh vegetables (or none at all back when people had no way to get fresh vegetables shipped in from California) meant that by spring, people really craved fresh greens and needed the vitamins contained in the new spring growth. Their blood was considered thick from a winter diet and they needed to eat more foods that "thinned" the blood. Not a literal thinning but one that energized the person and helped remove toxins built up from such a heavy diet. The reverse would occur in fall, people would start to eat a meat-rich diet as they processed their butchered animals for winter and preserved summer harvest as they could. It makes a lot of sense and I think we all feel it. In hot humid weather, we have less appetite and tend to want lighter foods, fresh vegetables and less fat. In cold weather, we need more energy and energy that lasts. Meat and fat become staples. In cultures where the climate is cold much of the year, the diet can be very high in meat and fat. Think about native Alaskans who utilize whale fat and meat much of the year. Contrast this with tropical island fare where fresh citrus, coconut and fish are the main foods all year. Completely different eating for different climates. This is yet another facet of the energetics of plants and foods and how our ancestors described the phenomenon they saw inherent in their own lives.

### **Formulating:**

We want to consider energetics of herbs and constitutions because any formula that is to be given for a long period of time can subtly change the constitution of the individual. If you were to give a choleric person a formula of cooling herbs for a chronic condition, you would be working against the natural constitution that is warm and dry. You want to consider adding at least one warming herb to keep the formula more balanced.

How do we decide what herbs and how many to include? I like to choose only two herbs or so as the main herbs in the formula and then add supporting herbs that do not address the main condition but help support the body in other ways. I call the main herbs primary herbs and the supporting herbs secondary herbs. For secondary herbs, I like to use something that is stimulating, to help the circulation and move herbal constituents throughout the body. I also like to add in something moistening if the formula is drying or drying if the formula is moistening. Any time I use an herb that is diuretic, I add in something mucilaginous to help protect sensitive mucus membranes that line the urinary tract. Diuretics can flush out urinary stones that can damage the tubules in the kidneys and ureters and can also release toxins stored in the body through the kidneys that can damage the membranes as well.

For acute situations where the person or animal will only be taking the herbs for a short time (perhaps a few days), it is not as important to note constitutions and energetics of herbs.

### **Let's Consider an Example:**

We have a phlegmatic person who tends to take on fluid and be chilly under normal conditions. This person has caught a fever and is exhausted. There's a moist cough that is not productive (no mucus is removed from the bronchial tubes when the person coughs but you hear fluid rattling). Fever (heat) is an unnatural condition and tends to be drying. This appears to be acute, not chronic in nature. I'm going to mentally circle fever (heat), moist cough and non-productive. From our list of herbs, we see that **Echinacea** is cooling and drying and useful for fevers. **Plantain** is cooling and drying and useful as a decongestant. **Thyme** is warming and drying, useful as a decongestant as well. From these three herbs, we see that two of the three are cooling and they are all drying. Two of them are useful for moist coughs. These three would fit well in a formula that is essentially cooling and drying with just enough warming property to keep from changing the constitution of the person, if that is of concern. One thing I would like to see if this formula was for long term use would be addition of a moistening herb. That would keep the whole formula from being too drying over time. The addition of the warming thyme has an added benefit of being slightly stimulating, useful in a formula for helping the medicinal properties move throughout the body by increasing circulation. Other herbs to consider as stimulating include cayenne (*Capsicum frutescens*), rosemary (*Rosmarinus officinalis*) or cinnamon (*Cinnamomum zeylonica*, *C. verum* and other *C. spp.*)

### **Another Example:**

We haven't considered an animal yet. Let's use mastitis as our example and see if we can't come up with a formula to help reduce symptoms, address the infection and support the animal. Of course, mastitis benefits from external applications and I like salves here because you can smear them on and not have to hold a poultice on an impatient animal in pain. So we'll be doing two things here, formulating an internal herbal treatment and making a salve for applying externally.

The udder is hot and inflamed and the animal is in pain and reluctant to allow its young to nurse. Do milk the animal as often as possible or allow the young to nurse as this does help remove bacteria from the udder and aid in healing.

Many people will tell you to take the animal's temperature and this can be helpful but I've found that like a mother feeling her child's forehead, I can generally pick out a feverish animal by feeling the head and ears. Feverish conditions feel dry and hot to me. If I can't tell, I compare to a healthy animal and see if there's an obvious difference. If in doubt, try the thermometer. My real complaint about thermometers is they're in the first aid kit in the house and I'm in the barn chasing around a reluctant volunteer. My hand is handier (sorry) and is reliable within a few degrees anyway.

Looking again at our list of herbs:

**Calendula** is cooling and drying, useful for lymph congestion. This herb can be used internally and externally. Applications as part of a salve or poultice will help cool and heal but the exceptional vulnerary (skin healing) properties mean if you are treating gangrenous mastitis, this is contraindicated. You want the infection to drain outward.

**Echinacea** is a specific for mastitis and is also cooling and drying.

**Dandelion** is also cooling and drying and useful for removing excess fluid.

**Sage** is drying and particularly useful for drying up secretions, like milk.

**Peppermint** is warming as part of a formula, we'll use the essential oil's cooling effect in the salve for external application. It's also relaxing and helpful for stimulating the circulation and as an antibacterial.

Calendula and echinacea are the two main herbs for the formula that should help reduce fever and start the healing. Dandelion and sage are secondary herbs although dandelion can also be considered primary here for its use in moving fluids within the udder. Peppermint adds in a stimulating effect and helps relax and reduce inflammation as well.

Externally, a salve that contains calendula, dandelion and yarrow can be soothing and reduce pain and inflammation. A few drops of peppermint essential oil to the salve will also add cooling effect. For dandelion, I'm such a fan of the whole plant. I will dig up the plant, leaves, flowers and root and clean this off to use. Dandelion is also an interesting plant, the root is more bitter in spring but higher in inulin (a low-glycemic starch) in the fall. For preserving, I prefer the spring root or whole plant but if I need it fresh, I will dig any time.

For an animal that wasn't in serious condition, I would probably make the herbs up as dried formula and do a ratio. In this case, I might do a tea and force the animal to drink it because mastitis is serious and the animal must have treatment. Of course common sense applies here. If the animal does not improve or is already in bad condition, you will want to consult with a veterinarian. Herbs are a great way to start treatment when you find the animal and cannot get help otherwise.

To make a ratio, I decide that my main herbs (calendula and echinacea) need to be about three parts each of a formula that has ten parts total. I'll then consider dandelion as two parts, sage as one part and peppermint as one part. This should total up to ten (I like round numbers).

3 parts Calendula  
3 parts Echinacea  
2 parts Dandelion

1 part Sage  
1 part Peppermint

You could also break this up any number of other ways and still be perfectly correct. Perhaps you'd say calendula is three parts, echinacea, dandelion and sage are two parts each and peppermint is one part. Still totals ten. You can do half parts if that works for your formula. But what is a part, you ask? Easy, a part is a teaspoon or a handful or an ounce or whatever you are using to measure. That's the beauty of the folk method.

### **Dosage:**

Now we get to dosing the individual. If you buy a bottle of herbal extract (tincture), you'll see instructions that include something like "twenty-five drops taken twice a day." These dosages assume you are a one hundred fifty pound male human. From there, we can calculate based on weight what a dose might be for a smaller person but I feel like the math here gets a little fuzzy. The assumption is that a smaller person (say a woman weighing one hundred twenty pounds) is the same as a man that weighs that weight and we'd just do a little math to see how many drops would be given to the smaller person. But a woman is not a smaller man and a child is not a smaller woman. Is a dog a tiny child and a sheep about the same as a man? I really think the answer is no to all of the above.

I assume that women may need less than it seems like they would by weight and children even less than that. Much of what I do starts out small and goes up. I assume that someone may respond quickly and thoroughly to herbs and I recommend less than many others do. If there is not enough response to the smaller amount, you can always use more but taking more than you need can be overwhelming and unnecessary.

For animals, I figure carnivores and herbivores differently. Dogs and cats need less but they need it more often because their digestive system is short and food and herbs move through quickly.

A small dog (ten pounds or under) can have 1/4 teaspoon or less of powdered herb (small pinch) or a few drops of tea. Perhaps a drop of tincture placed on their food is a dose. Medium dogs (ten pounds to twenty or so) might get a pinch to a half teaspoon of dried herbs, 1/8 cup of tea or three to five drops of tincture. And so forth. I would give the dose at least twice a day but possibly three times a day or more if the dog is very ill. If you cannot get the dog to take food, use a sheep drenching gun to give tea or herbs orally or a syringe without the needle. I give cats even less than the amount for small dogs as they seem to respond well to herbs.

For livestock, I do things differently. Sheep, goats, cattle and horses process foods slowly. They do better with larger initial doses but given less often. Several handfuls of powdered herbs, a cup of tea or twenty to thirty drops of tincture can be given to an adult sheep twice a day. Do be careful with alcoholic preparations and ruminants. Sheep and goats are sensitive to alcohol, it's not that they can't have it, it's that a little

goes a long way. Three cc (or three milliliters) of brandy is enough to “relax” a yearling ram so make sure your formula doesn’t add up to a lot of alcohol.

It is tempting to assume that a horse needs ten times that amount since it weighs ten times what a sheep does but I’ve found that doesn’t correlate. Horses respond well to herbs and can be given a bowl of dried herbs to eat, mixed with a grain treat if needed. They can also be drenched with a cup of tea (oral I mean, don’t pour it on unless you are treating lice). Getting horses to eat dried herbs is really wonderful and much easier than trying to give them oral doses. One nice thing about tinctures and horses is you can sometimes spike an apple with an herbal tincture and get the horse to take it that way, unless you have a very fussy horse with an attitude (and I have one so I sympathize if you do). This works well for most reluctant horses.

Livestock will often be very cooperative and choose to eat the herbs they need but don’t assume they will. I’ve had people tell me that animals will choose to eat what they need. I think this can be true but it can also be completely false. I don’t force food on sick animals but I will force herbs if the animal is obviously ill and needs treatment. Particularly for carnivores, a short fast is a natural way for their body to put energy into healing rather than digesting food. My personal opinion is that people benefit greatly from a fast during a severe illness, especially if there is fever but of course this depends entirely on the individual and their body.

Tinctures can be given to dogs and livestock, I always like to dilute them a bit with water or tea. That seems to make the sharp alcoholic taste go down better. Horses can sometimes turn out to be lusher but I still dilute the alcoholic tinctures (and keep them away from the hard stuff.)

It cannot be overstated that it’s worth consulting with a veterinarian or practitioner if needed. Don’t risk the life or health of an individual if you are unsure. Many veterinarians are more open to herbs as useful adjunct therapies and can give you helpful advice about whether your animal is in grave danger or can be safely treated at home.

Since herbs do have an effect (lowering fever, reducing inflammation), if you do contact a veterinarian, make sure to mention you did give something to modify symptoms so the vet knows that the animal is already improved and does not underestimate the severity of the condition.

One last point about treatment involves prevention. Most conditions, unless they are true emergencies resulting from injury, occur primarily because of a weak immune system or imbalance in the body somewhere. It is so much easier, in people and animals, to prevent disease where possible. In my book, “An Ounce of Prevention: Raising and Feeding Animals Naturally” I give extensive information on prevention of disease through proper nutrition in all species of animals. An ounce of prevention is very much worth that pound of cure!

## **References:**



Alfs, M. (2003). *300 Herbs: Their Indications & Contraindications*. MN: Old Theology Book House.