

## Plants as Medicine

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Psalms 104:14 He causeth the grass to grow for the cattle, and herb for the service of man: that he may bring forth food out of the earth;

“Let food be thy medicine and medicine be thy food.” - Hippocrates

Eleven percent of the 252 drugs listed by the WHO (World Health Organization) are from flowering plant origin (Veeresham, 2012). Between 35,000 and 70,000 plants have been screened for possible medicinal use (Veeresham, 2012). Science is very much aware of the power of healing in plants, even if science tends to want to isolate and synthesize rather than accept that the whole plant is the medicine. Our most common drugs are synthesized from chemicals found in very common plants, aspirin from the salicin in the willow, *Salix alba*, for instance. Salicylic acid is found in many plants besides the willow and is found, in lesser or greater amounts, in all willow species (hence the genus name *Salix* for willow).

It does not require a degree to know how to use simple herbal remedies to heal yourself and your animals but you do need to know some basic plant identification and forms herbs can be made into. Using plants for healing is as much an art as a science and our ancestors recognized this. Dried herbs, herbal simples, teas, salves and tinctures have been used for thousands of years and we can still benefit from these healing techniques. I'm going to break this topic up because it will be a long one but I hope at the end of this series, you will have the confidence to start using the plants around you for healing for yourself and your animals, whether you live on a farm or only have a lot in town.

I'm going to list some of my favorite and more common wild plants and medicinal herbs. There are thousands of useful plants around you and you will no doubt find that your list of favorites may start with my suggestions but branch off to include what is native and introduced near you. I also tend to omit plants that I cannot easily grow here in northern Minnesota, including the Capsicums. This is not to say these plants are not fantastic medicinal plants because they are, but I like to use what I have, another reason your list of favorites will differ from mine.

I personally feel that we become adapted to the climate where we reside and so, too, do our animals. The plants around us are also adapted to this environment and I believe this makes them suited for healing those around them. This is one reason I lean toward Western Herbalism. Western Herbalism is not less precise or less impressive than Traditional Chinese, Master Herbalism or Ayurvedic but it focuses on the plant species that grow in North America and have had a tradition of healing in Europe and North

America rather than exotic plants that must be imported. Importing herbs and plants means that not only are you risking populations in other countries and adding to the environmental impact with shipping containers but every time a shipment crosses a border, it gets fumigated. Even organic products are subject to being treated with toxic chemicals. The plants are adapted to a climate and conditions that are often foreign to what you are experiencing. There's no good reason not to use the plants around you, many of which are in abundance and considered weed species. These save you money and reduce environmental impact.

The next two articles in the series will include information on harvesting, processing and using plants for healing. In the meantime, enjoy learning about the natural world at your feet, in your fencerows and pastures.

I have not listed precautions, although, as with anything, there can be some. If you or the animal you are treating are pregnant or if you or the animal are taking other medications, please consult with a practitioner. If any adverse reactions occur after use, call 911 or consult with a practitioner.

## **Materia Medica and Possible Preparation Methods:**

### **Boneset** (*Eupatorium perfoliatum*):

Found: Moist to wet areas in east and midwestern N. Amer.

Part Used: Flowering tops

Used as: Tea, tincture

Actions: Reduces fevers, useful in pneumonia and influenza with deep pains in joints and muscles. For setting and healing broken bones (taken internally), boneset aids healing. Also useful when there has been damage to connective tissues, in cases of osteoporosis and multiple sclerosis (Wood, 2009, p.161).

This is a bitter herb that can aid digestion as well. Tinctures are easier to use than bitter tea unless you enjoy bitter drinks (which are very healthful!)

### **Burdock** (*Arctium lappa*):

Found: Everywhere, common weedy species

Parts used: Leaves, seeds, root

Used as: Tea, tincture, salve, possibly fresh root as food

Actions: Leaves are used externally for irritated skin. Roots used internally as a "blood cleanser" to eliminate toxins from the body, liver and kidneys. Burdock root has been added to cancer formulas as a tea or tincture and is part of the famous Essiac and Hoxsey Cancer formulas. Externally, the leaves are poulticed for injured muscles, joints and skin. Seeds taken internally are a diuretic as a tea or tincture (Alfs, 2003, p. 40; Fischer-Rizzi, 1996, p. 33).

Burdock is a biennial, roots should be harvested in fall of first year growth or spring of second year. Most farmers will thank you for offering to remove any burdock plants.

This is fortunate for you but sad that farmers do not realize the bounty at their feet. Do make sure the plants have not been sprayed with chemicals before harvesting. Livestock will eat this plant during some stages of growth and the leaves are also a lovely dye for fiber or fabric. Used with copper as a mordant, some lovely greens emerge.

**Calendula** (*Calendula officinalis*):

Not to be used on punctures, causes skin to regenerate so quickly it will cover over a puncture and create an abscess.

Found: A common annual garden flower

Parts used: Flowers

Used as: Tea, tincture, salve, fresh in salads

Actions: Externally, fresh, as tea or salve on sores, calendula is antiseptic, anti-inflammatory, antimicrobial and antiviral. Internally it is used for lymph congestion, ulcers and chronic infections (Alfs, 2003, p. 42; LaGow, 2004, p. 546; Fischer-Rizzi, 1996, pp. 42-43). Can be used as a tea to rinse infected eyes.

As with burdock, this is a good natural dye, yielding a yellow similar to goldenrod (*Solidago* spp.)

**Dandelion** (*Taraxacum officinale*):

Found: Everywhere, a common weedy species. Harvest only where it has not been sprayed with herbicide!

Parts used: Root, leaf

Used as: Tea, tincture, fresh

Actions: High in vitamins and minerals, the leaf is used for rebuilding and as a diuretic. Great addition to salads or cooked as a potherb. The root has an affinity for the liver and digestive system and is used as a detoxifier to remove build-up in chronic conditions like arthritis. Also used in cancer remedies and formulas for other tumors and masses, including mastitis (Alfs, 2003, p. 52; Fischer-Rizzi, 1996, p. 96).

The leaves are another bitter herb that are strongly diuretic. They rival any prescription diuretic medication.

**Echinacea** (*Echinacea purpurea* and *E. spp.*):

Found: Prairies and meadows and planted in gardens around N. Amer.

Parts used: Root, whole flowering plant

Used as: Tea, tincture

Actions: Echinacea is alterative (blood-cleanser), immunostimulant, antimicrobial and anti-inflammatory. When applied topically, it acts as a local anesthetic and vulnerary (wound-healing). It is carminative and antifungal. Useful for upper respiratory infections. The whole plant or alcoholic preparation is more effective than capsules (Wynn & Fougere, 2007, p. 537-538). Used in septic conditions such as snake bite,

internally and externally (Alfs, 2003, p. 975).

Echinacea has a reputation as an immune-boosting herb, which it does; however, boneset is a better choice for people with type O blood. Echinacea really shines in cases of blood poisoning and sepsis.

**German chamomile (*Matricaria recutita*)/Roman chamomile (*Anthemis nobilis*)/  
Pineappleweed (*Matricaria discoidea*):**

Found: German and Roman chamomile are garden plants. German chamomile is an annual, Roman chamomile is perennial. Pineappleweed is a ubiquitous weed on disturbed ground.

Parts used: Flowers

Used as: Tea, tincture, compress topically

Actions: Although these are three separate species, they are related and similar in action. They can be used internally for spasms, pain, inflammation, fever, colds and coughs and externally for skin and mucus membrane inflammations (LaGow, 2004, p. 356). As tea, they all make good eye rinses for irritation and infection. Chamomile has a reputation as being a safe and gentle relaxing herb for children and I've used it for pets returning home after surgeries. It calms and promotes sleep, which is perfect for recuperating from operations.

**Hawthorn (*Crataegus* spp.):**

Found: An shrubby small flowering tree of woods edges throughout N. Amer.

Parts used: Fruits in fall, flowers and leaves in spring

Used as: Tea, tincture

Actions: As a nervine, hawthorn is used in ADD/ADHD, nervous disorders, palpitations, high blood pressure (contraindicated with certain heart and blood pressure meds), allergies and has proven antiviral and antioxidant effects (Alfs, 2003, p. 64; LaGow, 2004, p. 279).

The fruits can also be used to make jelly. When harvesting the fruits, be aware that they can be infested with a small weevil larvae. This is unsightly when you try to try the fruits as the larva will emerge and leave a hole. Look for fruits without larva or freeze the fruits before processing to kill any eggs.

Hawthorn is said to help regenerate heart muscle. I include it in formulas for elderly clients and elderly pets. The fruits are very nutritious.

**Jewelweed (*Impatiens biflora* and *I. capensis*):**

Found: Moist ground near water or shady areas. A lovely annual plant that attracts hummingbirds and bees. Children and adults are fascinated by the seed pods that spring open and throw their seeds at a touch.

Parts used: Flowers and leaves

Used as: External compress from fresh flowers, oil or salve; can be used internally with

many cautions

Actions: External on rashes (like poison-ivy), bites and stings (Patton, 2004, pp. 110, 231). Jewelweed has antihistamine action on the skin and is fabulous applied as a poultice on stings and poison-ivy.

**Lavender** (*Lavandula* spp):

Found: Garden plant in N. Amer. Can be winter hardy in more mild climates, annual in northern areas.

Parts used: Buds and blossoms

Used as: Tea, tincture, fresh on salads and desserts, essential oil alone or as an addition to salves

Actions: Lavender is a nervine useful for anxiety and depression. Externally it is healing on burns and insect stings and has anti-inflammatory and antimicrobial properties. The essential oil is used for all of the previous, particularly for burns (Alfs, 2003, p. 71; LaGow, 2004, p. 286; Price & Price, 2007, p. 429).

**Mint** (*Mentha x piperita* and other *Mentha* spp)

Found: Wild mint is common in moist ground and around water, peppermint and spearmint are often grown in gardens or around old buildings. Catnip (*Nepeta cataria*), a related herb, has escaped over much of N. Amer. and is found around many old barns.

Parts used: Leaves

Used as: Tea, tincture, fresh, essential oil

Actions: Mints are great for colds, indigestion and inflammatory bowel problems. They act as circulatory stimulants and are astringent. Mint, especially peppermint, is useful for anxiety. All are antibacterial (Alfs, 2003, p. 84; LaGow, 2004, p. 628).

The essential oil of peppermint is used similarly and has been studied for irritable bowel syndrome. Catnip has a reputation as a children's herb but can be useful for nervous conditions and digestive upset in adults as well.

Do not use peppermint (or the essential oil) with its high menthol content in young children under four, the menthol can lead to respiratory collapse. Use catnip instead (Alfs, 2003, p. 84).

**Pine/spruce/fir** (*Pinus* spp., *Picea* spp., and *Abies* spp.):

Found: Many of the pine, spruce and fir trees are planted around homesteads. They are native over much of N. Amer.

Parts used: Needles, resin (sap)

Used as: Tea, oil or salve

Actions: The needles have expectorant action as a tea and are used for colds and coughs. Needles are high in vitamin C. Thanks to information from the Native Americans, needles were used by settlers to the New World just off ships who were suffering from scurvy. The needles have also been used as urinary tract disinfectants

and for parasites.

Sap can also be used applied to skin infections, wounds and splinters (where it draws the foreign object out) (Moore, 2003, p. 196). Externally, applications were used for tumors, sprains and swellings. Old herbals that list turpentine are referring to a distillate of the oil (Levy, 1991, pp. 123-124).

The sap is something I use constantly. I soak the sap in olive oil for a couple of weeks or more and use this oil for muscle and joint pains, inflammations and as a first aid application for sores, wounds and cuts of all kinds. It is very effective. I find it to be as useful as arnica (*Arnica montana*), a mountain flower species used for bruises and injuries.

Most species of evergreen are also good browse for sheep and goats.

**Plantain** (*Plantago major* and *P. lanceolata*):

Found: Uniquitous weedy plant that grows anywhere the ground is disturbed.

Parts used: Leaves

Used as: Fresh, tea, tincture, salve

Actions: Plantain contains mucilage, allantoin (a chemical that contributes to cell proliferation in wound healing), tannins (that can help dry up secretions, including bleeding) and acts as a drawing agent. It also has anti-inflammatory, anti-itching (antihistamine) properties and acts as an antimicrobial (Alfs, 2003, p. 86; Wood, 2008, p. 385-386).

This is one plant I would not want to be without. Thankfully its weedy nature ensure it is common and widespread throughout Europe and North America. Fresh young leaves can be eaten as well.

**Slippery elm** (*Ulmus rubra*) or **marshmallow** (*Althaea officinalis*):

Found: Slippery elm is becoming more rare although it used to be a common eastern woodland species of tree. For this reason, only harvest inner bark from branches, do not cut down trees! Marshmallow is easy to grow and you can also substitute *Malva* species, like mallow, or even the garden hollyhock (*Alcea rosea*).

Parts used: Slippery elm inner bark powder, marshmallow root or leaves

Used as: Powder, tea, occasionally tincture. Marshmallow may best be used as cold infusion. Tinctures of marshmallow should be used separate from a formula, additional herbs that are high in tannins can precipitate out the mucilage in marshmallow, leaving an unappetizing sludge in the bottle of the bottle.

Actions: Mucilaginous demulcents like slippery elm or marshmallow are used to soothe irritated, inflamed mucus membranes. Also externally they are used as part of applications to wounds (Alfs, 2003, p. 98).

**Thyme** (*Thymus vulgaris*):

Found: Gardens

Parts used: Leaves

Used as: Fresh leaves, tea, tincture, essential oil and herb for salads and dishes

Actions: Thyme is antiseptic, antiviral, antibacterial and antifungal, internally and externally. It is a great addition to formulas for coughs and colds. The essential oil comes in several chemotypes but is used similarly (Alfs, 2003, p. 104, Price & Price, 2007, pp. 471-474).

**White cedar** (*Thuja occidentalis*):

Found: Also called Arborvitae, northern white cedar grows in swamps and bogs of the northern areas of N. Amer. but it is planted many other places as an ornamental.

Parts used: Leaves

Used as: Salve, tea, essential oil

Actions: Used externally for bacterial infections of the skin, it is also antiviral, antifungal and antiseptic. The salve can be used on wounds, fungal infections, chapped skin and burns (LaGow, 2004, p. 822).

This is a great salve for almost any application. It also repels insects so can be useful for injuries to livestock during fly season (or anytime).

**Yarrow** (*Achillea millefolium*):

Found: Prairies, meadows and gardens. It is native but also planted and occasionally springs up in lots and old fields. Avoid using the ornamentals for medicinal uses, they are not as high in beneficial volatile oils.

Parts used: Root, flowering tops, leaves

Used as: Fresh, tea, tincture, poultice

Actions: Yarrow reduces pain, inflammation and fever. Externally and internally it is used to stop bleeding. Used for wounds and injuries externally, it can be an addition to salve. It is also antimicrobial and used internally to aid digestion, for bleeding, fever, colds and flu (Alfs, 2003, p. 115; LaGow, 2004, p. 899).

Roots should be harvested before the plant starts to send up a stalk in spring. Leaves are harvested before the flowering stalk appears. I find it easiest to cut the flower stalks and hang them upside down to dry. There are other Carrot family (Apiaceae- used to be Umbellifera) family plants with similar appearance but once you have smelled yarrow, you will not mistake it again.

**Yellow dock** (*Rumex crispus*):

Found: Another weedy introduction from Europe, yellow dock is also called curly dock and is found in old fields, disturbed ground and pastures. You'll notice the seed stalks from last year first. Look for the rosette of the biennial, this year's new plant. You want to harvest the root in spring of second year or fall of first year. Leaves are edible but the main rib is tough and stringy, remove that before cooking. Seeds are also edible but tedious to remove the chaff.

Parts used: Root, leaves as food

Used as: Decoction (tea), tincture

Actions: "Blood cleansing", yellow dock is used internally for external acne, psoriasis, glandular tumors, indigestion and poor digestion. It is a liver herb that helps remove toxins from the liver and moves bile and gall stones. Externally, it is applied to boils, ringworm, etc. (Alfs, 2003, p. 115).

Later articles will provide information on how to harvest, prepare and use these and other herbs for everyday healing at home and on the farm.

All information given is for educational purposes only. Contraindications and cautions are not listed for each herb. If you have a serious health condition, please contact a qualified practitioner for advice.

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