

Herbal Medicine from
Your
Garden or Windowsill

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Home Remedies
and How to
Make Them

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Natural Remedies

There's been a big upsurge of interest in herbal remedies in the last decade.

Herbal medicine was once the province of hippies and other types who were either ignored or ridiculed by mainstream society. Today the well publicized disasters in the orthodox medical scene (from Thalidomide right through to the horrendous results of recent drugs testing) have forced a second, more thoughtful look.

Natural herbal remedies have been used for many, many years — too far back for anyone to know for sure when the first wise woman prescribed mint tea for stomach ache or chamomile for a throbbing head. These little snippets of knowledge were once passed down from mother to daughter, just part of the craft of running a home.

As the years passed, and men took the role of healer for themselves, the traditional natural home remedies were derided as old wives' tales. Luckily, from records and publications such as Culpeper's Herbal, and through careful preservation and research since, the lore of natural medicine has not been lost.

Multi-purpose herbs

It's a strange thing, but even though many of them are pretty unassuming as plants, herbs just keep cropping up all over the place.

I'm not talking about dandelions pushing up your paving stones — what I mean is that if you're looking for solutions to problems, ideas for decorating or just a change of menu — herbs are there.

Here are some of the things herbs are used for:

- deterring pests, from moths, ants, fleas and cooties to mice, rats and moles;
- making beauty products to fight wrinkles and get rid of spots and freckles;
- treatments for hair loss;
- products for conditioning and lightening hair;
- dying fabric and leather;
- killing lice and fleas;
- as everlasting flowers in arrangements;
- to produce essential oils for aromatherapy;
- in pot pourri for fragrance, color or both;
- helping organic gardeners by:
 - attracting beneficial creatures,
 - deterring pests,
 - acting as companion plants,
 - fertilizing the garden, and
 - treating plant diseases;
- as flavoring for food and drinks;
- to make innumerable refreshing teas;
- as an addition or substitute for tobacco;
- and, of course, medicinally.

That's just what we use them for nowadays. In the past, they had other uses ranging from mead, beer and wine through to poisoning rivals!

What's in this book

You may be surprised at how varied the methods are, but in general most herbs are used in the form of a Standard Infusion or a Decoction. However, as some may be better used in other ways, I've included all the methods I can think of, both for herbal remedies and for a few other uses (since many people grow herbs for use in the kitchen, where flavored oils and vinegars are useful, and much cheaper to make than to buy).

For the methods covered, please refer to the Table of Contents.

Safety First

Herbs may not look much in many cases but many of them are potentially deadly. If you have them in your garden, and you have kids (or you ever allow children into your garden), you need to know this stuff. One or two are so poisonous, you could die ***just from handling them too much***. So never use a herb unless you're sure of its identification.

Before using any remedy for the first time, it's best to do a **patch test** by putting a small quantity of the oil or cream to be tested, about the size of a penny, on an area of skin such as the inner forearm, where it is unlikely to be affected by anything else. Leave it for 24 hours and if there is no adverse reaction, then you can go ahead and use the product.

Preserving herbs for the medicine cabinet (and the kitchen)

Storage time

Herbs stored properly will remain effective for at least a year (bark up to 3 years). Because they do lose their flavor and medicinal value over a period of time, it is best to replace stocks annually.

Drying herbs

Most herbs can be dried, although some need freezing (see below) or they will lose their savor, which is to say they will lose the essential oils that make them effective not just as flavoring, but also medicinally.

It's not difficult to dry herbs well, but you do need to take a little care, both in the selection, preparation for drying, and the final storage. It's best to do one herb at a time at first, until you are familiar with the process.

Collecting herbs for drying

Firstly, you need to collect the herb you are going to dry. Choose a dry, sunny morning, as early as possible (but not so early that the herbs are still covered in dew). The oils in the plant are at their highest levels early in the day, so this is the best time to harvest them, and the plants should not be wet or they won't store well.

If you're collecting **leaves, flowers and the parts of the herb above the ground**, take a basket or some other flattish container out with you and a pair of kitchen scissors for woodier varieties.

Select healthy plants, and the freshest leaves, tops or flowers. Handling them with care, being careful not to bruise them, cut a few at a time and put them into the container, continuing until you have the amount you wish to process. Take them indoors out of the sun as soon as you have finished.



To collect **roots**, you need to choose a day when the soil is moist but not wet, and the weather is dry. If you also want the aerial parts, you should cut these first and take

them inside. Dig the roots up carefully. It is safest to dig around the plant first, far enough out to avoid damaging any of the roots, bulbs or rhizomes you wish to collect. Lift the whole plant and shake off any excess soil, then take it indoors.

Small **roots** can be dried whole, but larger ones need to be sliced lengthwise and threaded onto a string for air drying. Don't wash them before drying, as this could lead to a fungal attack. Brush off as much soil as possible, the remainder can be removed once the roots are dried.

Seed heads to be dried indoors should be put into a paper bag (do not use plastic), or a bag made from net curtaining material or thin cotton (cut up an old curtain or shirt).

Seeds are collected in different ways depending on the plant. For some herbs, the seed heads should be collected before they ripen fully and dried indoors. Nasturtium seeds are collected while still green for pickling. Other herbs are allowed to produce seeds to ripen naturally on the plant, when they can be collected. Check individual entries in the herb catalog.

Bark should only be collected from small areas, and **never** all the way round the branch or trunk (except for branches which you will be removing anyway), otherwise you will kill it. You will need a small sharp paring knife for this job. Take great care, and always cut in a direction away from yourself, so that you will not be injured if the knife slips.

To dry **bark**, scrape off the outer bark and separate into layers.

Garlic bulbs should be laid out to dry off in a single layer (preferably on a wire mesh tray) making sure they do not touch, and allowed to dry until the outer skin is like paper. They can then be hung in net bags or plaited into strings like the plastic ones you still sometimes see in Italian caf s, which you should hang up in your drying area. These will be fine for culinary use, but for use as part of a herbal remedy, garlic should be used as fresh as possible, or macerated (see below).

To dry bulbs other than garlic see separate heading below.

The drying area

To preserve the flavor and effectiveness of your herbs, you should choose somewhere out of the sun for drying (except bark). Forget hanging them in the window. This might look good, but it does nothing for the quality of your herbs — nothing good anyway.

As well as being out of the sun, the drying area should have low humidity: your herbs will not dry well if they are subjected to steam! The temperature should not go above about 32 C (90 F). Try and find a place where they can be undisturbed, and if there is any likelihood of attack by insects or other pests, put them inside a paper, thin cotton or net bag (like you do with seed heads) and hang them up.

To dry in bunches



It's important that air can get to the center of the bunch — about 10 stems per bunch is about right. Tie the bunches firmly with a long piece of strong thread, making sure there is enough left to make the "handle" to hang them up by. Alternatively, you can put this on afterwards. Either way, you need to make sure that the thread goes round several times and the knots are tight enough so that the herbs don't fall out as they dry.

Hang them up in your drying area, making sure that there is a free flow of air around each bunch.

Drying herbs flat

Spread a thin layer of herbs on a clean dry surface or paper. Put them in an area with reasonably good air flow, but not enough to blow them away. This method is suitable for small roots, flowers, leaves and all aerial parts.

Drying bulbs other than garlic

Remove the papery outer skin, slice them up and lay in a single layer onto an oven proof dish. Put this in the center of a very cool oven, set to the lowest setting. The temperature should not be allowed to rise above 35°C (100°F). You may need to leave the oven door open to ensure this, so it's best to do it when the kids are out somewhere and shut the cat and dog out of the kitchen.

Drying bark

Unlike other parts, prepared bark is dried in sunlight. Lay it on some kitchen paper and put it on your windowsill in a room where it won't get wet — avoid the kitchen window, because of the possibility of steam condensing on the glass.

Storing your dried herbs

Once your herbs are dry (and cool), they need to be transferred to their final storage containers. Herbs which have been dried whole should have the leaves stripped off. You can compost the wooden part, burn it or throw it away.

Store herbs in airtight jars made of dark glass or airtight tins. This is to keep light off them, so that they remain in good condition for as long as possible. Label each jar with the type of herb and the date it was packed. Put the jars in a cool dry place.

Herbal pillows

To make a herb pillow, you first need to dry the herbs you are going to use. After the herbs have dried leaves/flowers etc can be stripped off the branches (as dry twigs are not very comfortable!) and used to stuff your pillow. It's best to use proper ticking material, which is tightly woven so as not to let the stuffing through. This is pretty hard to find, though, so an alternative is to use 2 or 3 layers of some other material. You could also experiment with tougher materials like denim, perhaps recycling an old pair of jeans.

Freezing herbs

You can freeze any herb, pretty much, but it's most important for the softer types that don't dry successfully. These include chervil, chives and garlic chives, coriander/cilantro leaves, mullein flowers, parsley, sorrel and sweet cicely.

To freeze herbs, all you need to do is chop them up, put them in a freezer bag and put them in the freezer. Don't forget to label them — one chopped herb looks very much like another, especially when it's frozen. Once frozen hard, it's easy to take as much as you need for your remedy or recipe.

An alternative method is to freeze chopped herbs in sections of an ice cube tray inside a bag. When they have frozen, you can decant them into the bag and re-use the tray. This way you can take a pinch of herbs at a time and reseal the bag.

Decorative edible flowers like borage and violet can also be frozen individually in ice cubes to float in drinks.

Making herbal vinegars

This is an unusual (gourmet) way to add herbs to your diet. Vinegar is a natural preservative, so it is also a good way to use up culinary herbs when you've already got plenty frozen, dried or both.

Very easy, all you do is to fill a jar loosely with the herb of your choice, cover it with warmed (not hot) vinegar, seal with a non-metallic lid and put it on a sunny windowsill for 2 weeks. Shake it daily, then strain off the herb and re-bottle adding a couple of sprigs of the same herb which will serve both to decorate and identify it.

Macerating garlic

According to scientific research, the best way to preserve the active medicinal properties of garlic is by storage in oil using the following method.

Select some unblemished cloves of garlic and peel them. If you have a garlic press, use this to crush the garlic, putting it through twice, so that there are no big lumps. Alternatively, you can chop the garlic and then crush it with a pestle and mortar.

If you don't have either a pestle and mortar or a garlic press, then you will need to crush the garlic before chopping with the blade of the knife. To do this, sandwich the garlic clove between a work surface or chopping board and the blade of a broad-bladed knife. Push down hard and squash the clove as flat as you can. This is easy once you have the knack, but even then you will sometimes find garlic cloves flying round the kitchen! After crushing, chop the garlic finely.

Having chopped and crushed the garlic (the crushing is very important to release the two components which react together to make the essential healing component), put the garlic in a small dish or other container (or leave it in the mortar) and leave it to stand and 'develop' for at least 20 minutes.

After standing, transfer the garlic to a small jar, preferably one made of darkened glass, and pour in enough oil to cover. You can use grape seed oil, light olive oil or rice bran oil (which is the best, if you can get it, as what properties it has do not interfere with those in the garlic). Screw on the lid, label and put the jar into a cool dark place.

Macerated garlic is fine for cooking, like the proprietary "Lazy Garlic". The only real difference between home made macerated garlic and the shop bought stuff is that the home made is much better for you because it has been properly developed.

Do not cook food which contains macerated garlic in the microwave, as it will lose its medicinal properties.

Making herbal remedies

How to make a cold extract

Add 25-50 grams of dried herb to 500ml (2 US cups, 16 fl oz) of cold water in a non-metallic container. Cover and leave to stand for 8-12 hours. Strain and use like an infusion.

How to make a standard infusion

A standard infusion, is made by adding boiling water to the parts being used. It is the method to be used in all cases where no specific method is given.



Warm a glass, porcelain or enamel teapot by putting in a little boiling water, swirling it round and pouring it away, then put the amount of herb specified in the description of the herb in the herb catalog, or if no quantity is specified, put 3 handfuls of fresh herb or 30g (1 ounce) of dried into the pot.

Pour over the quantity of water specified in the herb description, or about 500ml (2 US cups, 16 fl oz) of boiling water if no quantity is specified. Put the lid on and stand for at least 10 minutes. At this stage it is sometimes called a tisane, or just tea, and it can be used as a remedy. However, for best results, the brewing time should be longer than

this — anything up to 4 hours! The longer it brews, the longer it will keep in the fridge - up to 4 days for a 3 hour brewing, for example.

Strain the infusion before drinking, and sweeten with sugar or honey if you wish (unless specifically prohibited in the catalog entry for the herb you are using). Medicinal infusions are usually taken warm or cold over the course of a day, a sip at a time. The usual dose is one cup a day, but refer to individual herb entries, as this doesn't apply to everything.

How to make a decoction

This method is usually used for roots, bark and seeds, but can be used for any part, depending on the remedy required. Refer to individual herb entries. Use about 15 grams (a half ounce) to 500 ml (2 US cups, 16 fl oz) of cold water. Put the herb and the water into an enameled, glass or ceramic pan and bring to the boil.

For a decoction of green parts, boil for 3-4 minutes, then cover and allow to stand for a further 2-3 minutes. For harder (woody) parts, bring to a boil then lower to a simmer and continue cooking until the liquid has reduced by half.

Strain the decoction before use and use in the same way as an infusion. Dosage is similar, but refer to individual herb entries.

Juicing

If you haven't got a juicer, you can still extract the juice from herbs by chopping freshly picked herbs up and pressing to release the juice, then adding a little water and pressing again. Once extracted, juice should be taken as soon as possible, as deterioration starts to set in immediately after extraction.

How to make a tincture

Tinctures are made with alcohol, which means that they will store for an extended length of time. To make one, you need to buy some vodka. Make sure that it says on the label either the percentage alcohol content or the proof. To work out the percentage alcohol content from the proof, you need to divide it by 2. For example, alcohol with a proof of 86° has an alcohol content of 43%. You need to water it down to 25% alcohol (or 50° proof), so try and get something that is a nice easy number, such as 100° proof (50% alcohol), which you would just mix with the same quantity of water.

Put 125g of dried herb or powder in a container with a watertight and airtight lid. Add half a liter of 25% alcohol (or 4 oz herb to 5 US cups/2 UK pints of liquid). Cover and put into a cool place out of the light. Every morning and evening, shake the container thoroughly and put it back. After 14 days for powdered ingredients or green parts, or about 3 weeks for more fibrous materials, strain and filter the mixture before bottling in a dark-colored bottle with an airtight stopper. Label with the name of the herb and the date before storing.

How to make liniment

Fill an airtight container with fresh herb, or a quarter fill with dried. Add rubbing alcohol to fill the container, making sure the herb is completely covered, and leave in a cool, dark place for a 7-10 days, shaking every day until thoroughly mixed. Strain off the herbs and bottle the result, preferably in a brown glass bottle. Don't forget to write a label giving the date the liniment was made and a note of the herb/s used.

How to make a medicinal cream or ointment

30ml (one eighth US cup, 1 fl oz) olive oil

15g ($\frac{1}{2}$ oz) beeswax

15g ($\frac{1}{2}$ oz) lanolin

half a teaspoon borax

300 ml ($1\frac{1}{4}$ US cups, half a UK pint) boiling water

15g ($\frac{1}{2}$ oz) herb

Infuse the herb in the water for 20 minutes and strain. Put the olive oil in a bowl and stand in a second bowl of hot water (not boiling). Add the beeswax and lanolin and stir until melted. In another bowl, warm 3 tablespoonfuls of the prepared infusion and add the borax, stirring until dissolved. Add to the olive oil mixture and mix well, then stir in the remaining infusion. Keep stirring until it thickens. Pour into pots, label and refrigerate.

Another easier way to make an ointment

1 part of fresh or dried herb to 2 parts cold cream by volume

Using a pestle and mortar, pound together until the mixture is well mixed. Transfer to container, cover and leave in a cool place for a few days if possible, to ensure the ingredients blend properly.

How to make body lotion

1 handful of flowers or other source material

500ml (2 US cups, 16 fl oz) boiling water

1 tsp borax

250ml (1 US cup, 8 fl oz) rosewater

2 tbsp warm olive oil

Steep source material in boiling water for one hour. Strain and discard source material.

Stir borax into rosewater. Keep stirring until the borax dissolves and then stir in the olive oil, which must be warm. Continue stirring until the mixture emulsifies and the oil is completely incorporated. Stir in flower water.

Store in a colored glass container in a cool place out of direct sunlight.

Making powders

Some remedies are used in powdered form. This is easy to do with a pestle and mortar or a blender. However, due to their high essential oil content, it is important that a blender is washed thoroughly immediately after being used for this purpose or the plastic will deteriorate.

How to make a poultice

A poultice is applied hot to a wound, boil or other area to soothe, irritate or draw impurities (depending on the herb used). It is usually in the form of a paste which is smeared onto a bandage and then applied directly, but some poultice ingredients, such as mustard, are irritant and should be applied sandwiched between two layers of bandage.



Crush the herbs you will be using to a paste, adding hot water if necessary. To make the necessary pulp, you can add flour, cornflour or bread, mixing well so that the herbs are evenly distributed. Moisten a bandage in hot water and wring out, then spread the surface with the pulp and either use direct or, for herbs which are irritant, add another bandage over the top and apply this to the area to be treated. Leave in place for the time specified, moistening with hot water now and then to freshen.

After the poultice has been removed, wash the area well with cold water, or use chamomile or mugwort tea. This is particularly important for irritant herbs like mustard.

What a fomentation is, and how to make one

A fomentation is often mistaken for a poultice, and is used for the same applications, but in a milder form.

To make a fomentation, heat up an infusion or decoction and use it to soak a cloth or towel, which is then wrung out and applied as hot as possible to the area to be treated. As it cools, soak it in the hot liquid and wring out again, and keep doing this until the treatment is complete.

How to make a cold compress

This is like a fomentation, except that the infusion or decoction which the cloth is dipped into is cold. Wring it out and apply to the area to be treated and leave it in place until it has been warmed by the heat of the body, about 15-20 minutes. Remove and apply a fresh cold compress.

Repeat until relief is obtained.

Making herbal oils (an oil maceration) — fake essential oil

Making genuine essential oils is not something you can do at home, but you can make a reasonable substitute, certainly good enough for use in the bath. And even though these are not as strong as a true essential oil, you should still handle them with some care: do a patch test (see box) on a small area of skin before using them extensively (for massage, for example).

If using for massage, you just need to add a few drops to your massage oil base and shake well before use.

Follow the directions given for *internal* use, as oil is absorbed directly into the skin. For example, sage oil is not suitable for use by pregnant women.

You will need:

an airtight clear glass jar (a small preserving jar is ideal),
enough of the fresh chopped herb to fill the jar,
enough olive oil to cover the herb, and
some spirit vinegar to act as a preservative.

The olive oil is being used as a carrier, and should be the lightest you can find. If you can't find light olive oil you could substitute sweet almond oil, although this is likely to be more expensive. Grape seed oil is another option, but the result will only keep for 2-3 months.

1. Fill the jar with the chopped herb, pushing it down so that you can get as much in as possible.
2. Add 1 tablespoonful of spirit vinegar (not malt vinegar)
3. Cover with the oil
4. Seal tightly and put it on a sunny windowsill.
5. Every day or so shake the bottle hard "with intention" for several minutes, making sure that the sediment is completely dispersed throughout the oil, then put it back in the sun.
6. After 2-3 weeks, strain off the herb:
 - o put some cheesecloth, muslin or similar fabric into a colander on top of a large jug
 - o pour the oil through the cloth into the jug
 - o let it stand for half an hour or so to get as much of the oil out as possible
 - o twist the cloth with the herbs inside it to squeeze out the last drops
7. Transfer the oil to a smaller dark-colored airtight glass container.
8. Label it "<herb name> oil. Made on " and the date, then "Expires " and a date 6 months later (3 months if you used grape seed oil).
9. Store it somewhere cool.

This will keep for at least 6 months (up to 3 months using a grape seed oil base), but its best not to make more than you think you will get through in this time. If you're still using it after the expiration date, always check that the oil smells good before use.

To make aniseed oil and other oils based on seeds

You need about 2 tablespoonfuls of crushed seeds to 200ml ($\frac{3}{4}$ US cup, 6 fl oz) oil, otherwise follow the instructions given above.

Hot oil treatments

Warm up the oil (not too hot - despite the name, hot oil treatments actually use warm oil) and apply it after washing your hair, massaging it well into the scalp. Wrap your head in a towel and leave it for 2-3 hours (or overnight), then wash out with a mild (non-medicated) shampoo.

Steam inhalation

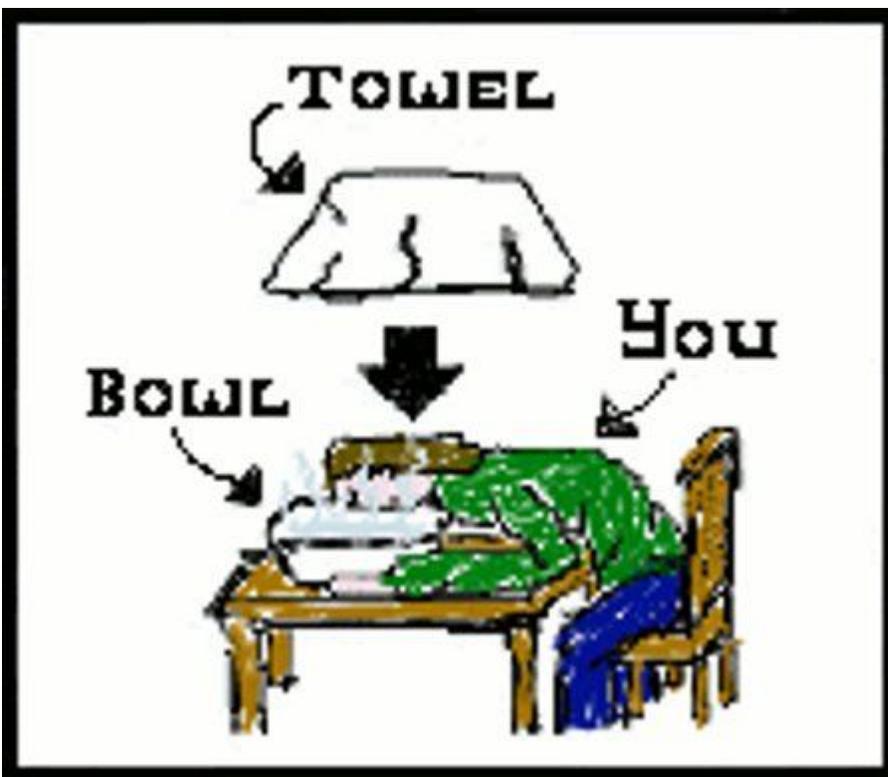
When I was a child, it wasn't uncommon to come across an adult sitting at the kitchen table inhaling the steam from a bowl of Friar's Balsam, but in case this is something out of your experience, I will explain how it works.



You will need a fairly big bowl that is stable and will not tip over easily — a washing up bowl with a flat bottom is the right shape, but a bit big. Perhaps a casserole dish or something similar is the best option you are likely to have ready to hand. Put the bowl onto a table which you can sit at with your elbows resting on it comfortably, and pull up a chair facing it.

You will also need one or two big towels (bath sheet size is best) or a couple of blankets. These are to wrap round your shoulders and pull over your head and the bowl, so as to make a sort of tent to trap the steam so that you can inhale it.

Here's a picture drawn by my son, Ethan to illustrate what I mean, although the towel should be big enough to wrap round your shoulders and drape over your head and the bowl, completely enclosing them, so as to concentrate the steam which you are inhaling.



You can also buy electrically powered steam inhalation units. I still advise using the towel or blanket to hold the steam in, though.

In either case, you need to fill the bowl or container with either 2-3 cups (say, a half liter of an infusion or decoction of the herb selected (which should be at boiling point), or a few drops of essential oil in 2-3 cups of boiling water. If you are using a non-plastic bowl, it would be best to warm this first (like a teapot) so as to prevent the liquid from cooling too quickly. As soon as the bowl has been filled, immediately lean your head over it, cover it with the towel and start inhaling the steam.

In the next book I will discuss some of the remedies, and what you can use them for.

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