

What Will You Gather for Your Herb Cupboard?

By Marguerite Dunne



Whether your mini-Piper plane just grounded you on a desert island or you live in California and the Big One earthquake just erupted or you are snowed in on a mountaintop in Northern Canada or you just want *to be sure* living in the urban jungle of New York City, it's a real good idea to stock your herbal cupboard for whatever may be coming up on your health horizon. *And stuff does come up.*

In Renaissance times, the keeper of the hearth would pick up her basket and go out gathering each day. (Why do you think women still carry pocketbooks? *We like to gather.*) When the goodwife did gather, she would forage within one or two or three miles of her cottage and gather whatever was local and ready. Perhaps she would find two dozen or, at best, three dozen herbs. It would take all of the growing seasons – Spring, Summer, and Fall, to find these.

Roots are best gathered in the early Spring or late Fall; flowers, just at the bud, and leaves, when they first sprout. They were hung up to dry and lovingly stored in wooden cupboards (the damp basements would add mildew), and carefully parceled out as teas, tinctures, salves, and a good root soup when a loved one needed these medical vegetables. With her two dozen or so herbs, the goodwife had to solve every one of the households needs: her grandfather's asthma, her daughter's painful period cramps, her sister's difficult childbirth, her husband's broken arm from the fall he took thatching the new roof, her son's gnash from the mother bear who attacked him when he came too close to the cubs, her nephew's vomiting after coming home from a day in the forest, swimming in the nearby lake, her neighbor's mysterious stomach pains, that came and went and came again and somehow she was losing weight and changing color and nobody knew the name of what she had but she was growing weaker with time, and whatever that mysterious rash was

that was covering the arms and legs of marching armies who had come back from the Crusades.

We think that a medical diagnosis, which puts a name on something, will cure it; were that it was so easy. The keeper of the hearth could only see what symptoms were occurring, understand as best as she could how the body worked, and study the virtues of every herb, scrupulously, by trading new-found knowledge with the other women of the village. When necessity called, she would apply her knowledge at hand.

Today's herbalist has her own challenges. Among the clients with whom I have spoken recently were two women whose breast implants leaked and there were pockets of silicon lodged all over their bodies, many young women who'd lost their menstrual cycles completely after coming off of birth-control pills, a 300-pound woman who was on more than twenty-five different medications a day, whose hands shook and could not sleep at night, much less lose weight, and then there are so many survivors of 9/11, the people in the Twin Towers, the first responders, and the residents and merchants of Lower Manhattan, who now cannot catch a breath and have sharp pains in their lungs when they try to stand up. What is the name of the each one of these illnesses? I don't know. But I do know the virtues of the herbs, went to my massive apothecary cupboard, and found a way to help all of these people.

Here are some suggestions for your own herbal cupboard.

Burdock *Arctium lappa*

If you really want a rite of passage as an herbalist, go dig up your first burdock. (My first one, wildcrafted on a mountain, took three hours.) An alternative to help restore the proper function to the body, this is a blood cleanser par excellence. It also has an affinity for the skin.

Hawthorn Berries *Crataegus oxyacanthoides*

A cardiac tonic for all seasons, you do not have to be in retirement for heart support. Between the toxins and the junk food, hawthorn is necessary.

Boneset *Eupatorium perfoliatum*

Yes, there are many good reasons why Mom Nature wants to make us sweat, so here is the best diaphoretic in her book. Not only are the sweat glands stimulated, but the added benefit is the support of kidneys, thereby helping with the release of toxins in two ways. Boneset can also help in the relief of aches and pains.

Yellowdock *Rumex crispus*

A mild aperient (gentle laxative), yellowdock can help flush metals out of the body through the blood stream and stimulate the gallbladder. How many cans of tuna fish and soup have you eaten?

Mullein *Verbascum Thapsus*

Expectorant and mild sedative, this beanpole of a stalk bears huge, furry, floppy, lime green leaves with a pinnacle of delicate yellow flowers that will scatter about a thousand seeds by the Summer's end. Mullein can help tone and normalize the lungs and is considered a specific in bronchitis. An anti-inflammatory and demulcent, it can help soothe that irritated throat. When out of tobacco, the Colonials used to smoke it.

Lemon Balm *Melissa officinalis*

Soothing to the nervous system, this gentle anti-depressive is also helpful in relieving spasms in the digestive tract. In today's modern World, who doesn't need a nice relaxer? Calling Melissa.

Saw Palmetto *Serenoa repens*

The folk history lists saw palmetto as an aphrodisiac, but the way it actually works is to help treat urination problems, bladder inflammation, and prostate enlargement. A must for every man.

Red Raspberry *Rubus idaeus*

A womb tonic like none other. Women can drink this tea to prepare for pregnancy, during pregnancy, and during breast feeding. It can help tone the tissue of the womb, assisting in the labor and childbirth. As a woman's body develops, with so many different hormonal shifts throughout her life, red raspberry leaf is a must for every woman.

Pau d'Arco *Tabebuia avellanedae*

As this tall and stately tree grows in the Andes, so does the tradition the Incas have given us, the use of pau d'arco to help heal the body and resist disease. While believed to be an antitumor and powerful alterative, consider it to be "auxiliary troops" to your immune system's own strength. It will get in there and fight the good fight when you need that extra help.

Peppermint *Mentha piperita*

Okay, while you're on that desert island, you can fun too. The mint family actually contains about 60 regular members, and clever gardeners along with focused botanists are always coming up with variations. While peppermint is the family member that always has a sweet, pleasant taste to it, it is also doing some important work for your body. It is best known as a digestive aid. The oil of the peppermint is believed to soothe the gastrointestinal tract. My favorite one is the chocolate mint!

So now you have gathered some good herbs for your cupboard, to mix and match, infuse and decoct, help and heal. How many cups of herbal tea should you drink in a day? How many drops of the tincture or how many capsules should you take? It depends on the health issue and the health history of the person. Start where all herbalists have begun, where I began, start with one cup of tea a day and you see how you feel. Maybe you will need more cups of the same tea or maybe you will need one cup of tea for your immune system and two capsules of an herb to help you detoxify. It is a primary part of herbalism, *now you can take care of yourself*. And it's a wonderful journey.

© 2012 Marguerite Dunne

Sources

Today's Herbal Health by Louise Tenney
The Herbal Handbook by David Hoffman