



Gathering Summary, July 28, 2010: Herbs & Their Traditional Uses

A Presentation by Veronica Honthaas

Summary [and additional text] by Catherine Haug

Introduction

(Photo of Yarrow, left, from [Wikipedia](#))

Veronica is a practicing traditional herbalist and reflexologist. A traditional herbalist is one who uses herbs from the local area.

Ronny believes every area has most all the herbs needed to promote health and healing for people living in that area, and that herbs are healing foods. Sharing her knowledge through teaching is an important aspect of her work.

She advises picking the herbs yourself, or buying from someone who did. While organic herbs may well be raised in better conditions than those raised with commercial chemicals, she advises that local herbs, whether Organic or not, are better because they usually are fresher. Plus, many Organic herbs come from places that are polluted. She says, "It's better to buy USA not-Organic, than foreign Organic, in most cases."

The use of herbs is simple and free, and very empowering.

The number one book that she recommends is *Health through God's Pharmacy*, by Maria Treben (see Sources & References). Ms. Treben is from the Swiss Alps, which is a locale similar to our own, and many of the same plants grow here as there.

During her presentation, Ronny discussed the following herbs and topics:

- [Comfrey](#) (*Symphytum*)
- [Echinacea, or Purple coneflowers](#) (*Echinacea*)
- [Elderberry](#) (*Sambucus*)
- [Elecampane](#) (*Inula helenium*)
- [Hawthorn](#) (*Crataegus*)
- [Horsemint or bee balm, wild bergamot](#) (*Monarda*)
- [Kale](#) (*Brassica oleracea*, a food)
- [Kinnikinnick or Bearberry](#) (*Arctostaphylos*)
- [Lemon Balm](#) (*Melissa officinalis*)
- [Mint family](#) (*Laminaceae, Mentha*)
- [Mullein](#) (*Verbascum*)
- [Onion & Garlic family](#) (*Allium*)
- [Oregon Grape](#) (*Mahonia*)
- [Pacific Yew](#) (*Taxus rebifolia*)
- [Pine Sap](#) (*Pinus*)
- [Plantain](#) (*Plantago*)
- [St. John's Wort](#) (*Hypericum*)
- [Stinging Nettle](#) (*Urtica dioica*)
- [Usnea](#)
- [Yarrow](#) (*Achillea millefolium*)
- [How to store what is picked](#)
- [Basic herb teas](#)
- [Sun teas](#)
- [Making tinctures](#)

The Herbs

It's important to keep your sense of adventure, as you explore the use of herbs, and with that statement, Ronny began her discussion with Yarrow. However, I've organized this summary in alphabetical order, for convenience. She came prepared to discuss a few specific herbs, but also addressed requests from the audience.



Comfrey

(Drawing from [Allotment Vegetable Growing](#))

Comfrey contains a toxic alkaloid, so use with caution internally, especially with a compromised liver. But it has many good uses, and is great applied externally to promote healing.

Echinacea

(Photo of purple coneflower with bee, from [Wikipedia](#))



Use the root & flower but very little leaf. It is not for everyone; respect it. Each of the different species of echinacea have different properties.

Indications:

- weakened immune disease (CAUTION: because echinacea activates the immune system, it may cause harm for folks with auto-immune problems)
- necrosis: use topically to heal necrotic tissue



Elderberry

(Photo of elderberry leaves & unripened berries by C. Haug)

Ripe berries are dusty to dark blue or purple, plus a red that we should not eat. They are very time-consuming to pick and clean.

All parts of the plant have medicinal value, but parts other than the berries can have problems. The leaves can cause diarrhea.

Make a tincture of the flowers and berries. Elderberry wine is delicious.

Indications:

- antiviral
- Specific for heart, veins & arteries, and lungs.

Elecampane

(Photo of elecampane from [Wikipedia](#))

The tubers (roots) of elecampane, a member of the sunflower family, are used to treat lung problems including pneumonia and tuberculosis.



Hawthorn



(Photo of hawthorn with ripening berries by C. Haug)

A member of the apple family, hawthorn produces red or dark blue/black haws (berries) that are used as a good tonic for the heart, by feeding and rebuilding. [*That is, it increases blood flow to the heart, thus strengthening the heart muscle.*] It takes time for it to work, and is considered safe to take hawthorn long-term.

Wear eye protection when gathering haws, as the branches have stiff, sharp thorns. Use these fruits to make a tea or tincture; or jam, jelly, syrup or wine. [*Haws, flowers, and leaves can all be used.*]

Indications: Take as tea or tincture for:

- heart palpitations or irregular heartbeat
- cardiovascular problems

Horsemint, a.k.a. bee balm or wild bergamot (Monarda)

(Photo of horsemint from [USDA](#))

There are several different plants called horsemint, but the question from the audience was about the one also called monarda, bee balm or wild bergamot. There's lots of it around here this time of year.

Monarda has a purple flower (although the photo here shows a pink flower). It is antimicrobial and antiviral.



Kale



(Photo of curly-kale from [Wikipedia](#))

This is a perfect example of herbs being food. In fact, kale, a member of the cabbage family, is so common as a vegetable, that we may not realize its herbal uses. It is alkalizing and a balancer.

Kinnikinnick or Bearberry (Uva-Ursi)

(Photo of kinnikinnick from [Wikipedia](#))

A low-growing shrub with red berries is typically used in formula with other herbs. Veronica uses the leaves, but there may also be uses for the berries.



Indications:

- weak kidney
- [*bladder control problems (2)*]
- hypoglycemia (This was a comment from the audience)
- [*diabetes, by helping to remove sugar from the blood (2)*]

Lemon Balm (see also mint family, below)



(Photo of lemon balm from [Wikipedia](#))

Lemon balm and lemon verbena are known for their antiviral properties.

Mint Family (Lamiaceae, Mentha)

(Photo of spearmint from [Wikipedia](#))

All members of this family are energizers, but not in the same way as caffeine. They oxygenate the blood. When added to herbal infusions, their flavor helps with getting other herbs down.



See also horsemint and lemon balm (above), which are also members of the Lamiaceae family.

Mullein



(Photo of mullein from [all-creatures.org](#) (5))

This maligned 'weed' is a biennial. The first year it grows as a rosette; in the second year it grows a spike that flowers (see photo, left). Its leaves are soft, like flannel.

Indications:

- Pain: use the root (dug before the 2nd year growth extends its spike) in topical applications for a potent pain killer.
- Ear infections: Infuse the flower head in oil
- Runny nose: Use an everclear tincture.

Onion & garlic family

(Photo of onion with green shoots from [Wikipedia](#))

This entire family of vegetables/herbs is very antimicrobial. Wild chives grow along the river when the level is down.



Oregon grape (mahonia)

(Photo of Oregon grape from [Wikipedia](#))

Dry the ripe berries to make tea. The root is known as a liver tonic [and to stimulate secretion of bile], but it's best to have a professional make it, and direct its use, as it can be powerful. There are better herbs for the liver such as dark leafy greens, dandelion and lemon.

Pacific yew

(Photo of Pacific Yew from [Wikipedia](#))

Around here, it is a low-growing evergreen tree; but it can grow to 50 feet tall in some places. It is native to the Pacific Northwest, and has been used widely by Naive Americans from this region, [*both for its wood & its medicinal properties (2)*].



Some books say it is toxic, but that is not true. All other types of yew are toxic, but Pacific yew is the only one that is not poisonous.

Both the bark and the leaves (needles) are used medicinally. It has no bad side effects. However, a drug known as taxol, that is made from the bark of pacific yew, can be toxic.

Harvest only the new shoots.

Indications:

- cancer
- colds and infections

Pine sap

Don't collect sap that is hard as a rock. Rather, scrape off fresh, 'gunky' sap with a knife. Use hot water to warm it, to make an infusion in olive oil; then strain. It will last years.

Also, pine needle tea is a good source of vitamin C.

Indications:

- bad cuts
- rope burns



Plantain

(Photo of plantain from [Wikipedia](#))

[*Not to be confused with plantain, the genus of fruits including the banana, plantain is not native to the US, but has naturalized here when it was brought to the Americas by Europeans as a medicinal plant.*] It is recognized by most as a common weed that

grows in driveways, along roadsides and in pathways.

Every part of the plant is useable. The young plant is good in salads. Its flower stalk is a tiny spike that produces mucilaginous seed similar to psyllium, to which it is related.

Plantain is a "draw-er" meaning that it draws toxins/poisons out from the skin.

Indications:

- Stings and snakebites: macerate the leaves (by chewing or other means) and apply directly to the skin to draw out the poison.

- Constipation: grind then soak the seeds in water or juice (much like you would use psyllium, which is in the same family) and take internally.
- Winter formula (such as for colds and flu): the mucilaginous seed coats the throat and other surfaces for a soothing and healing effect. Note that the inner bark of any elm tree is also good in this way.
- Pneumonia: plantain is good for the lungs; include it with other herbs for treating pneumonia (see also elecampane, above).
- Asthma symptoms: keep a tincture of the root and leaves in your purse to help relieve asthma symptoms.



St. John's wort

(Photo of St. John's wort flowers from [Wikipedia](#))

This is a wayside plant, but don't get it there as it might be sprayed. Use the yellow flowers medicinally, but note it is fragile to pick. It is known as "liquid sunshine" because of its mood elevating properties. It also helps the liver work better.

Use it also in combination with motherwort (*Leonurus cardiaca*, a member of the mint family), as a "happy juice." [;]

Make an alcohol tincture or oil infusion while fresh.

Indications:

- Minor depression
- antiviral

Stinging nettle

(Photo of stinging nettle from [Wikipedia](#))

Nettle grows as a small to moderate bush, but best to use when young. Wear gloves and long sleeves to collect plants.

On "stripping day," after collecting and drying, you don't need to cover your body to strip the leaves off. Your skin will be stimulated but not stung.

Make a tincture while plant is still green, or after drying. Can also make a tea.

Indications:

- Allergies and asthma: nettle is similar to plantain in its action (see above), and is nature's benadryl. In combination with plantain, nettles help the sinuses and plantain helps the lungs.



Usnea



(Photo of usnea on a branch from [Wikipedia](#))

A type of fungus or moss, it is a silvery blue-green and grows on tree branches and bark. When wet it is very elastic.

Use everclear when making tincture (regular vodka is not strong enough). A strong water decoction also works, but does not store well.

It is a good dye, producing a chartreuse color. We have lots of usnea in our forests.

Indications:

- Usnea is specific for strep throat.

Yarrow

(Photo of Yarrow, left, from [Wikipedia](#))

This off-white flowering herb is very common here. It is easily recognized by its medicinal smell, and it has many uses. The most common preparation is yarrow tea. Not too strong, and it tastes good - tastes even better when you need it.



Mountain yarrow is the best, and is even better after a fire because of the alkaline ash left on the soil.

It dries easily. When driving about in your car, collect it in a paper sack. It will dry in the warmth of the car, in this bag. Cotton sacks are also great, especially when you are riding horseback.

To make the tea, use the top of the plant, cutting just below the umbrel. Native Americans also use the leaf for children. Add a small fistful to a quart of hot water, then let it steep. There is much disagreement as to how long to steep. Many say 3 - 5 minutes, but Ronny steps hers for 20 minutes.

Indications:

- A cup of yarrow tea given at the first sign of symptoms of cold or flu works well.
- Add yarrow to bath water for a good soaking when you have a sprain.
- Will stop bleeding after a cut. Cayenne also works, and is handy when you get a cut while working in the kitchen.

Storage and Preparation

How to store herbs

Herbs can be used fresh, but to store them for long term, its best to dry them first, then store in glass jars with lids. To dry herbs, place in baskets or sacks (see Yarrow discussion), or on racks.

Herbal tea infusions

Use fresh or dried herbs to make infusions with water that has just been boiled. Steeping time varies with type of herb, and with taste. See Yarrow, above, for basic instructions.

Ronny's Basic Herb Tea Mix:

Combine: mint, raspberry leaf, nettles and oatstraw. Steep in boiled water a minimum of 3 hours, but overnight is better.

This is good source of minerals to help strengthen bones - better than calcium supplements because is whole food. And it's a whole-body tonic.

Regarding oatstraw: Use wild oats, regular field oats, or grow your own from groats. Grow them in soil. Harvest when stalk is still green and the shaft has put out the seed head, but the seed is still soft and milky. [*"Oat straw is useful for thyroid and estrogen deficiency, osteoporosis, ... to encourage sweating," and more. (6)*]

Sun teas

A question from the audience asked if it is better to use fresh or dried herbs to make sun tea. Ronny's answer surprised many: sun teas made from herb or green tea can be dangerous. It's far safer to use boiling water. If you want to make a sun tea, be sure of the quality of your herbs. [Note: the question of fresh vs dried was not answered].

Making tinctures, etc.

Use a quart jar to make the tincture. You will also need a strainer and a cotton cloth for straining, and another jar or bottle to store the tincture.

To extract the herb, use:

- 80-proof vodka, or brandy for most herbs. Some herbs (such as usnea) require everclear.
- Wine can also be used as a menstrum (liquid), but because it will make a weaker medicine than brandy, you will need to take more. Don't keep longer than 4 years if in wine.
- Apple cider vinegar pulls out minerals but not so good to pull medicinals from the herb. Vinegar infusions are good in salad dressings.
- Olive oil works best for certain herbs.
- Water decoctions (teas) using pure water will work with many herbs, but does not keep well. Best used as fresh tea, and prepared when needed.

Put herb into jar in a light-medium pack, about 1" from top of jar. Fill jar with alcohol menstrum.

Screw lid on jar and keep in cool place for 3 weeks is best.

Put a cotton cloth in a strainer to strain the infusion into jar or bottle and close with lid.

Sources & References

(Photo of elderberry bushes from [Wikipedia](#))



Books

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 - Horsemint: en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Monarda
 - Lemon balm: en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Melissa_officinalis
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4. USDA on monarda (horsemint): plants.usda.gov/java/profile?symbol=MOFI
5. All-Creatures.org on mullein: www.all-creatures.org/picb/wfshl-mullein-comm.html
6. Local Harvest.org on Oatstraw: www.localharvest.org/just-oatstraw-tea-C6547

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