

Ten Medicinal Herbs You Should Know

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By Debra Nuzzi, MH

ONE hundred years ago, the kitchen garden was also the medicine garden, and plants which produced medicinal benefit were part of the working knowledge of the common people. Those plants which were difficult to cultivate were sought in the surrounding fields and meadows, then preserved and added to the harvest storehouse to soothe and heal the illnesses of winter.

With the advent of the chemically synthesized drugs, the home pharmacy has all but disappeared, and with it the knowledge of simple herbal remedies for common ailments. This knowledge is now resurfacing: researched and regenerated by people who want to take an active and independent role in their own health care.

A very necessary part of this renaissance is self-education. Starting is easy. Just familiarize yourself with a few key herbs and begin to use them in your daily life. As you see how effective they are it will spark your desire to learn more, and you're on your way!

Following is a list of 10 commonly available herbs and simple ways to use them in personal health maintenance. These herbs are easily available and fulfill a wide range of benefits with a minimum amount of effort.

ALOE LEAF (Aloe Vera) - This plant has hundreds of uses, the most popular being its ability to alleviate the pain of burns and to speed their healing. It is very easily cultivated as a house plant, and should be in every kitchen. It is the best remedy for sunburn, often preventing later peeling. Immediately immerse the burn in cold water or apply ice until the heat subsides, then generously apply the aloe. It is best to trim the prickly sides off the succulent leaf, then split the leaf in half and gently rub the exposed gel onto the affected area. Aloe may also be applied to any cut or skin abrasion, and onto skin eruptions, remarkably speeding healing. To relieve the pain and itching of hemorrhoids, carve out a suppository sized chunk of the inner leaf gel and insert into the rectum.

BURDOCK ROOT (Arcticum lappa) - Well known as a blood detoxification agent and eaten as a vegetable known as Gobo in oriental cuisine, Burdock root is available throughout the U.S. It is used for skin eruptions and dry scaly skin conditions. Burdock is also used as a digestive stimulant and to lower blood sugar. Its seed is used as a diuretic and kidney tonic. The root is now found in supermarkets and can be cooked as a vegetable or made into a

decoction. Fresh plant fluid extracts of the root and seed are also available in health food stores.

COMFREY LEAF/ROOT (*Symphytum officinalis*) - Comfrey should be grown as a house plant in every home. Like Aloe, it is a natural herbal bandaid, useful for cuts, scrapes and burns. It is styptic, which means that it will stop bleeding. Commonly known as "knit-bone," it stimulates tissue regeneration. Used externally as a poultice, it helps heal bone fractures and deep wounds. Recovery rate is accelerated with use of this fresh plant poultice on muscle, tendon and ligamentous injuries. Thoroughly cleanse the wound with an antiseptic first, because Comfrey is so quick to regenerate the tissue that it will seal over the wound with the bacteria still inside.

DANDELION ROOT (*Taraxacum officinalis*) - Dandelion is naturally high in potassium, making it a safe diuretic, increasing the ability to eliminate waste products through the urinary channels. It helps restore kidney function and relieves liver and spleen congestion. It is extremely beneficial as a spring tonic which stimulates sluggish liver function. The root should be made into a strong decoction, which means that it should be cut into small pieces and simmered in a glass or enamel vessel for at least 10 minutes before straining and drinking. The fresh plant fluid extract can also be used. Set 20-30 drops into a cup of hot water and drink as a tea.

ECHINACEA ROOT (*Echinacea angustifolia*) - A powerful immune stimulant, Echinacea has become increasingly popular in recent years. Its antiseptic and anti-viral properties are used for sore throats, flu, colds, infections and allergies. It also has tumor inhibiting properties. The most potent form is a fresh plant fluid extract, however, medicinal benefit can also be derived by mixing a decoction, as explained under Dandelion.

GARLIC BULB (*Allium sativum*) - Best known for its antibiotic effect, garlic bulbs or the milder garlic greens can be eaten raw at the onset of a cold or flu. A small piece of bread may be necessary to make the spiciness more palatable. You can grow garlic greens by planting the bulbs in a 4-inch-deep pot, and trimming them to use in salads or stir fry dishes. Garlic oil is effectively used for ear infections. It is easily made by finely chopping enough fresh organic garlic bulbs to fill a jelly jar, and covering them with organic olive oil. Cover the jar with cheesecloth held on with a rubber band. Let the mixture sit in a warm room for a week or a sunny window for several hours (if you need it right away). Strain the oil and store it in an amber glass jar. The warmed oil is then placed in the ear and plugged with a cotton ball. Leave in overnight and treat nightly until the infection is gone. This therapy is not to be used in cases of eardrum perforation. A wonderful garlic cough syrup can be made by simmering freshly chopped garlic in apple cider vinegar for 10 minutes. Strain the resulting liquid, add honey and simmer down until the mixture is thick and syrupy. The vinegar neutralizes the garlic taste, making it much more tolerable, yet preserving the antibiotic effect.

GINGER ROOT (*Zingiber officinale*) - Ginger has a carminative effect, which means that it will help relieve digestive problems

which result in gas formation. It is also a diaphoretic, used both as a tea and added to a soaking bath to stimulate sweating and reduce fevers. In cases of abdominal menstrual cramping, a ginger fomentation can be made. A fomentation is prepared by slicing 1-3 large roots into a half gallon of water and simmering in a covered pan for at least 30 minutes. A cotton cloth is then dipped in the mixture, wrung out (wear rubber gloves, it's hot!) and applied to the abdomen as hot as can be withstood. Two folded bath towels are placed on top to help maintain the heat of the fomentation as the therapy progresses. Internally, 1/4 teaspoon of ginger or one dropperful of the fluid extract can be added to 1 cup of warm water to alleviate nausea/morning sickness/motion sickness and to aid digestion.

KELP (*Nereocystis leutkeana*) The kelp family, which includes kombu, wakame, arame and hijiki, is known for its ability to combat the effects of radiation in the body. Radioactive strontium-90, one of the more prevalent sources of radiation, is stored in our bones, and contributes to long term diseases such as leukemia, bone cancer, Hodgkins disease, anemia, and decreased production of red and white blood cells. The sodium alginate found in the kelp family binds with the radioactive isotope in the gastrointestinal tract and forms an insoluble gel like salt called strontium alginate, which is safely excreted in the feces. (For more information on radiation detoxification, see *Fighting Radiation with Foods, Herbs and Vitamins*, by Steven Schechter, ND. Kelp is recommended as a daily addition to the diet)

ST. JOHN'S WORT (*Hypericum perforatum*) - The extract and oil are used externally for bruises, strains, sprains, contusions and wounds. The extract is used internally as an immune system stimulant, for retro-viral infections, as an expectorant and antibacterial. It speeds the healing of wounds and burns and aids the regeneration of damaged nerve tissue. It is used as an anti-depressant and to treat bed wetting and children's nightmares. It is also known as Klamath weed, a common pasture plant, and is found throughout the U.S.

VALERIAN ROOT (*Valeriana officinalis*) - Valerian is classed as a nervine and sedative with mild pain relieving properties, which makes it a good candidate for stress, anxiety and restless insomnia. It has also been used for intestinal colic, menstrual cramps, migraine headache, and rheumatic pain. Although it smells like well used socks, the extract and tea are both recommended.

It is vitally important to properly identify the plant you are harvesting before you use it. Forest Service visitor centers carry plant identification books for their region, and the Petersen Field Guide series plus a range of medicinal plant handbooks are also sources of botanical identification. Most of these books can be found in local bookstores. It is wise to take classes or go with an experienced guide when you are in the early learning stages. Herbs are precious natural resources, and should be ecologically harvested. The following guidelines for harvesting help insure herb potency and purity and help preserve the species for further enjoyment.

Medicinal herbs should be:

1) Gathered in the proper season. General rules are: Barks in the spring; leaves before the plant flowers; flowers on the first day of opening; roots are best in the fall (although they are sometimes harvested in spring, previous to aerial plant development).

2) Gathered in wild habitats where the plants naturally grow or should be organically grown according to certification standards established by the state in which they were harvested.

3) Harvested in an area free of chemical/industrial pollution of air, water and soil.

4) Gathered at least 1/4 mile from any traveled roads, and at least 10 miles from any waste disposal or toxic dumping areas.

5) Protected from over-harvesting by leaving at least 3/4 of the stand intact for reproduction and continuance of the species. If roots are dug, root crowns and seeds must be replanted to perpetuate the growth and proliferation of the plant.

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