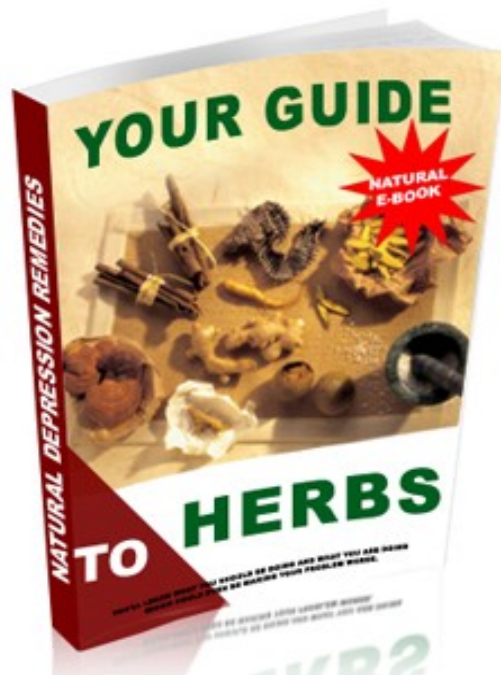


Your Guide to Herbs



By

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Herbs for Health and Home

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Introduction

The use of herbs for healing, health and keeping our clothes and homes clean and pleasant, goes back to the earliest of times.

Sadly, many of us have lost what was, for many, common knowledge about many herbs and their uses. And while herbs were generally found growing wild, we no longer have as much open and accessible land. While we now know much more about herbs and their uses, the urban sprawl in which most of us live has, by nature of its increasingly high density, very little open land that is not either cultivated as gardens or parks, and less likely to have wild herbs growing.

Even the farmlands have changed. Instead of fields with their hedgerows, berries and plants, we have acre upon acre of land without relief of hedges, trees, ditches for irrigation and drainage - but much easier for the large machinery required to plough, disperse seed and harvest as speedily and cost effectively as possible.

For those of us who live in towns and cities, it could be quite difficult to recognize other than the most commonly used herbs that we tend to use in our cooking, and which we can find ready packaged in the local shops.

With the resurgence of interest in things natural and herbal, there are however, many more varieties of herb now available, either in specialist herbal shops, or indeed in supermarkets, where you can find both dry and fresh herbs in abundance.

Of course, it is possible to grow lots of herbs in pots and window boxes, so even a sky high dweller can grow parsley, rosemary, chives, mint, basil, coriander etc. Many herbal remedies come from flowers and trees too. So if you have space, you can grow many of the varieties that have useful parts. Elderflower wine is a wonderful summer drink, and the flower has a wide range of medicinal uses too. Hibiscus is considered to be almost a weed in some parts of the world, but it's a source of red dye that is easy to use. In warm climates, this is a self sufficient plant with beautiful flowers that show throughout the year.

The herbs that we use most are good, not just in flavoring food, but for a whole range of domestic purposes, as well as providing specific health benefits.

Rosemary, for example, can be used as a stimulant, an antispasmodic, and stomachic. This is an herb that helps liver function, digestion and circulation.

Generally it is used externally, and helps reduce bruising, skin conditions like eczema, and is thought to prevent baldness and to improve bad breath.

As with many plants that grow wild in the warmer climates, it helps keep bugs away too.

Before looking at more individual herbs, their uses, and the parts of the plants that are beneficial, let's look at some of the more general information about use of herbs.

Herbs are a great way of improving flavor in food, so we naturally ingest the leaves or the essence that has been absorbed into our food.

There really is nothing better than roast lamb with garlic and rosemary for Sunday lunch. The aroma fills the kitchen, and the mind and heart look forward to spending time with family or friends, enjoying a tasty and nutritious meal.

This is the sort of meal that always makes me feel extremely lucky. First, to have friends and family, second, to be able to afford to buy a good leg of lamb, and third, to be able to combine these with healthy herbs and a glass of wine - these combined constitute a wealth of good fortune.

However, to get back to the practical...

Herbs have very serious health benefits, and were used world wide before medicines were manufactured in large quantities, and often using chemicals that mirror the natural herbal benefits.

There are communities that still rely heavily on herbs, plants, trees and flowers for their medicines. In the western world, few of us would ignore modern medicine, and the pharmaceutical business has made huge progress in treating illnesses like cancer, where chemicals have a major role.

Nevertheless, many of us believe that we would be foolish to ignore the natural ways of maintaining good health or restoring good health, and by this, we primarily mean the use of herbs and plant life.

If we take the time and effort to help keep ourselves healthy, we should have less reliance on modern medicine; less need to take strong antibiotics, painkillers, anti-inflammatory tablets etc., and hopefully avoid serious illness or the need for surgery and hospitals. And let's face it;

hospitals are not the healthiest places to be these days.

We can more easily ensure we have our five a day portions of fresh fruit and vegetables (and herbs, of course) and in combination with enough sleep, some fresh air, and some sensible exercise, we can be reassured that we are promoting our good health.

Animals seem instinctively to know what to eat and what not to eat. Dogs seem to be well aware that Oleander, for example, is poisonous from the tip of the leaf to the toe of the root. Conversely, that grass is helpful in dealing with digestive problems also seems to be known by the whole canine kingdom.

Humans have long used herbs and berries and flowers to maintain health and to cure, to enhance food, to remove stains, and for cleaning clothes, making pigments for coloring clothes, and for cosmetics.

Of course, there are risks with using natural things. Some parts of plants are dangerous and should only be used with great care and precise knowledge, or not at all. The quantities involved are sometimes critical too. So a little knowledge can be dangerous, and, as with everything that we eat or use on our skins, it is very important to find out the facts before experimenting.

Going back to nature is wonderful, but it should be done advisedly when it comes to herbs, berries and plants.

Woven in with the knowledge about herbs and their uses, are myths and folklore too, perhaps because human kind needs stories and symbols and legends, and ways to link the simple and the natural, with the psychological.

The most famous story is of course the tempting of Adam by Eve with the apple. The apple has, as a consequence, been linked with difficulty in dealing with earthly desires, with disobedience and losing our innocence. Throughout the Christian world, apples are linked in literature with these concepts.

In Greek literature, there are lots of apple stories too. For example, there is the story of The Apple of Discord and the beginning of the Trojan War - the desire for immortality and Hercules labors - one of which was to obtain the golden apples of the Gardens of the Hesperides.

Basil on the other hand is associated with the stimulation of the senses, protection from evil spirits and bringing prosperity.

Basil is traditionally placed by the door. It does tend to ward off the mosquitoes of course, but on the other hand, it keeps the evil spirits out, and brings riches to the people entering the home.

It is also quite handy to have in New Mexico, where it is known to stop wandering husbands as long as you dust it over your heart. It helps with the finances too, because if you have some in your pocket, it will attract money there too.

Another handy herb is the clover. This is said to keep the devil away, and is also representative of the Holy Trinity.

Dill is known to help babies sleep, and this is also supposed to keep the witches away.

There are so many herbs and so many of them have links with interesting stories and myths from ancient times. Sometimes the links seem a little

more than just a story, and the herbs have become symbols precisely because of one of their qualities.

In the household, too, herbs and plants have a wide range of uses, such as cleansing agents, soothing balms, and diffusions.

Lemon juice first thing with hot water is known to cleanse the system and help rid the body of toxins and free radicals that can lead to premature aging and illness.

Similarly, it's a lovely way to clean surfaces, the microwave etc., without strong chemicals and without the risk of damage that they can cause. Bleach, for example, can corrode surfaces if used without sufficient dilution.

The world is beginning to see that natural is best in many cases. Using herbs and plants instead of chemicals, and to enable us to improve our food, our health and our homes is very satisfying.

First, it is possible to grow almost all of the world's herbs, as long as you have, or can create, the right conditions. Second, maybe there is a little bit of the white witch in each of us, and the desire to make our own potions is deep inside even the most committed supermarket shopper.

Certainly it is very useful to have herbs on hand, and always pleasing to know that you have grown something so beneficial and useful from seed, or nurtured it from a small plant.

In recent years, it has become much more fashionable to eat herb leaves in salads. Fresh parsley, for example, is found with rocket and a variety of salad leaf in packs on almost all

supermarket shelves. Growing leaf salads is really easy in almost all climates. You need only a shallow soil bed, and sufficient warmth for germination.

You could keep yourself supplied with rocket, basil, mint, peppermint, parsley, marjoram, oregano, garlic, rosemary, thyme, sage and coriander to name just a few, by using just a few big plant pots.

With this combination you can, amongst other things, keep your breath fresh, make salves for bites and stings, and keep flies and mosquitoes out of the house and aphids off the houseplants.

We are all more conscious, or at least more informed now, about the benefits of eating our greens and five portions of fruit and vegetables daily.

If you can grow your own herbs and salad leaf, you can ensure you have something good so very easily. Although if you read the mythology, you may not want to grow your own Fennel...for some reason it is said to bring sorrow.

However, the majority of the herb family does only good and, at the very least, herbs will be beneficial to your health and your home.

Chapter One –

Common Window Box and Garden Herbs

Of course, you don't have to grow your own these days, as you can buy herbs galore in most supermarkets. Mostly these are in little pots that will last a week or so as long as they are watered and get some light.

Some of the main herbs that we use for cooking can be used for infusions or oils that will be beneficial for our health.

Sadly, not all herbal remedies keep for very long, but there are some that can be useful in the bathroom or kitchen cupboard as concentrates, and can be diluted for use as and when necessary.

Another extremely healthy use of herbs is in infusions. Many herbs and plants have parts that can be covered with hot/boiling water, and can then be drunk.

These are best made daily, or when required, in order to be really effective.

Although, of course, in order to lose weight, you really have to eat less and exercise more, there are a number of herbal infusions that are beneficial.

These sometimes reduce the appetite, and sometimes act as a diuretic. Drinking an herbal infusion first thing in the morning and last thing at night is generally held to not only be very healthy and much better for you than coffee, but will assist in weight loss.

All of these are easy to grow either in a small garden, or in pots. Most will grow on a sunny window ledge, or sunny position in the house, and of course, depending on the local climate, you may be able to grow herbs all year round.

Parsley seeds are a tad problematic. Some growers recommend that when sowing the seeds in the garden, you lightly cover with soil and then pour boiling water over. This is intended to warm the soil and therefore help the germination process. Parsley does not, according to many growers, like to be moved, so either plant this in its final place in the garden, or in a pot.

Mint is very easy to grow. It does need fresh soil every year, and will take over if you are not careful. Generally, it is worth sinking a bucket, or something similar, to stop the roots from spreading too far if it's planted in the garden. Otherwise, just plant it in a big pot.

There are lots of different varieties of mint. Moroccan mint makes wonderful tea that is very good for the digestion. Peppermint is a great mouthwash, and there are lots of different mint leaves that can be used to flavor foods or used in salads.

Mint is an herb that can be easily frozen in ice cube trays or small pots. This way you can have

mint all year round, and not just in the summer, which is its growing season.

Basil just loves the warmth, and will grow easily in a pot or in the ground as long as there is enough warmth and sunshine. Available as shrubs, as leaf plants and with lots of different varieties, it is known as the king of herbs. Vasilis (Basil means king in the Greek language). An infusion of basil is good for nausea.

Again, this is a leaf that can be frozen, but it is best to use the shrub variety for this, as the leaves are slightly stronger.

Basil is wonderful with tomatoes, onions and with lamb. A few leaves in a salad or with fresh vegetables will be good for your digestion. Keep some basil by the kitchen door and it will help keep flies and mosquitoes at bay.

Coriander is related to parsley, and is generally used in Asian cooking. The herb leaf is often used in packed salad leaves these days. Be careful though, as the packs of leaves found in supermarkets are often dipped in a bleach solution to help prolong their shelf life - so they need to be thoroughly washed in water before use.

Rosemary is available in a number of different varieties, but all are shrubs. This, when bruised, emits a wonderful aroma, and is a perfect accompaniment to lamb, and other meats, and is great used with barbeque vegetables.

This is another powerful herb with many healthy uses. It is an anti spasmodic, and helps promote healthy liver function. However, it is a strong herb, and can be poisonous if not used properly, and as a consequence, is generally used externally.

The leaves can be cooked in wine or mixed with oil for use as a salve for eczema, and also to reduce pain in rheumatism.

Rosemary is extremely easy to grow either in pots, in borders or just anywhere in the garden. It is a lovely herb to have along a path or close to the kitchen. Like Basil and Lavender, it has a powerful scent, keeps nasty bugs at bay, and has lots of uses in addition to its glorious fresh scent.

Thyme is slightly more difficult to grow in my opinion. But like rosemary, it's an herb from the Mediterranean, and is often to be found wild in the countryside. Thyme has a strong taste, and is generally small leafed and dryer than basil, for example.

This is a wonderful healing herb and used for a wide range of ills = from reducing menstrual pain to nervous exhaustion - there are two main thymes, garden and mountain.

Mountain Thyme is known for its benefits for respiratory problems, as it helps clear mucus etc., and it is great for improving nervous disorders, gastritis and even for hangovers.

Garden thyme is used for its sedative properties, for bronchitis, laryngitis and for improving appetite. It can help reduce stomach gas and is very effective as an antiseptic, and is also used to help relieve the pain and irritation of shingles. It is, however, potentially dangerous if taken internally in great quantities, and can have a damaging effect on the thyroid.

Chapter Two –

Common Chinese Herbs

Many herbs used in Chinese medicines grow in Europe, the United States, as well as in Asia.

As with most herbal remedies, they can be used in salves, tinctures, infusions or in cooking, and often they can be found in general stores, garden centers or supermarkets.

In China, however, herbal medicine had and still has a very high status, and has been practiced consistently since nearly 3000 BC.

There is an ancient list of over 300 herbs, and instructions on their use, that dates back to 2700 BC, and most are still in use today.

The knowledge of herbs world wide has, of course, increased dramatically since then, and there are more than 2000 herbs now grown and used.

Some of the herbs are very powerful, and generally not to be used by the novice. For example, opium, which is extracted from the Chinese poppy, ivy, hemlock, henbane and mandrake, were all used to put patients to sleep before surgery.

While very effective as sedatives and pain relievers, they can be poisonous too. Hemlock is known to be dangerous when incorrectly used, and opium is addictive and very dangerous, as we know

with the world wide problem of heroin from which it is made.

The Chinese have a great respect for their herbalists, and would always recommend a consultation before making decisions on which herbs to use and how. The mixing of different herbs for infusions is quite precise.

Chinese herbalists are more likely to recommend a mixture of herbal remedies, often taken as infusions, and look to heal the whole person, rather than the individual ailment.

Chinese herbs are generally used as infusions, decoctions, tinctures, syrups, tablets, powders, compresses, poultices or as bath additives and made from a combination of herb flower, leaf, and pre prepared root and bark steeped in hot water.

A decoction uses the roots, bark, seeds and rhizomes of plants boiled in water. However, while this can extract goodness, it can also lose oils.

Chinese medicine also uses either glass or ceramic pots for boiling or infusing, as metals can destroy the goodness in the herbs.

Chinese herbalists also believe that aluminum is dangerous to health, and in fact, it has been linked by some with Alzheimers. It is worth checking on your kitchen equipment and thinking about whether you should replace any aluminum saucepans.

Aluminum foil is also potentially dangerous. If used to cover hot dishes with tomato or tomato sauce, the acid in the tomato can strip aluminum, which can then flake and fall into the food.

For diffusions, the common rule is to have 1 oz of herbs which you bring to the boil in 6 oz of water. Boil for 10 - 15 minutes, then strain off the herbs, squeezing them to get all the goodness.

Tinctures and tonics are easily used, but not so easy to make, and use alcohol as a carrier for the herb. Unless you are very knowledgeable, you should buy tonics and tinctures from an herbalist. They are more expensive than infusions but have a much longer shelf life, and can be diluted.

Syrups are more acceptable to children than infusions. However, they are not to be taken to excess, as there is a lot of sugar in them.

You will be able to buy herbal remedies in tablets and powder form almost everywhere. Nearly all supermarkets, even the small mini markets, are likely to stock at least one, if not three ranges of herbal tablets.

Echinacea is recommended for warding off winter colds and flu, valerian for helping to induce sleep, and all sorts of tablets for keeping you mentally alert, physically fit, getting rid of toxins, reducing joint pain, stopping menstrual pain - the list is endless.

Compresses and poultices are used externally, and are simple to do. Don't use man made materials in a poultice, and try and use 100% cotton if you can. Soak the fabric in the infusion or decoction, and then lay it on the area needing treatment.

For a paste or poultice, you will need to mix the herbs and water to create a semi solid mass which you put on the area needing treatment and cover with the fabric to hold it in place. Again you need to be sufficiently knowledgeable about the

herbs you are using, as too strong of an herbal oil on the skin can cause irritation at the very least.

Baths are a lovely relaxing way to self-heal with herbs. A few drops of essential oil of lavender will help relax the muscles and the mind, and act as an effective aid to sleep.

Or you can put together some lavender, some rosemary and other herbs in a muslin bag and suffuse this in your bath to create the aroma that you prefer.

Some of the Chinese herbal names are as follows:

Dang Gui	Angelica Root
Dan Shen	Red sage root
	Salvia
Hong Hua	Safflower
	Saffron
Shen Jiang	Ginger
Long Dan Cao	Chinese Gentian
Bai Xian Pi	Dittany Bark
Ku Shen	Flavescent Sophora root
Ren Shen	Ginseng Root
Fang feng	Ledebouriella Root
Di Fu Zi	Broom Cypress Fruit
JiGuCao	Speargrass
Yin Chen Hao	Oriental Wormwood
Shan Yao	Chinese Yam
Huang Qi	Astragalus Root
Chen Xiang	Aloeswood
Bai Shao	White Peony Root
Chuan Xiong	Szechuan Lovage
	Chuanxiong Rhizome
Chen Pi	Tangerine Peel
Gan Cao	Licorice root
Da Zao	Date
Fu Ling	Poria

	Tuckahoe
BanXia	Pinellia tuber
Sha Ren	Amomem fruit

You can search for products and herbs by name on a number of web sites. A particularly detailed one is www.chinesenaturalherbs.com

Astragalus is known to work with the body's natural defense system. It will help prevent tiredness, diarrhea and promotes a healthy appetite. The Chinese name for this is 'Huang Qi', and in China, it is considered to maintain the qi. It is also now used with treatments for AIDS.

Chinese angelica is well known for dealing with blood conditions. It is used by women when menstruating and after giving birth, and if there has been excessive loss of blood. Not to be taken if you have runny tummy - it has the ability to deal with constipation very effectively.

Chrysanthemum Flower is great for helping with eye conditions. Dry eyes, blurring vision and black spots are conditions helped by this herb. When you have tired eyes at the end of the working and traveling day, this is a really beneficial herb to use.

Cleavers works with the throat glands and is renowned as a tonic. It is also excellent for skin problems, and is used by eczema sufferers, and is considered beneficial for use with ulcers and tumors.

Coltsfoot is very beneficial for respiratory conditions, bronchitis, sore throats and coughs.

Comfrey is recommended for short term use only, and as a poultice. It is reputed to be beneficial on bone fractures and some types of ulcer, as well as respiratory problems.

Dandelion is used all over the world, of course, and is full of potassium. In Greece, dandelion leaves are called 'horta', and are gently steamed and served with oil and vinegar. This is good for constipation, de-toxing the liver and gall bladder, and also it just tastes good.

Echinacea is another very well known herb and used to help maintain a strong immune system. It has other common names - 'coneflower', 'black susan' and 'sampson root'. It is said to help recovery from virus infections, and to contain natural antibiotic properties. It is also apparently used in treatment of bites from rattlesnakes.

Elderflower is used world wide for dealing with hay fever, sinus and colds.

Fennel is used to help gastric wind and to promote a healthy appetite, and can be used as a compress on the eyes to revive and relieve soreness.

Ginseng is perhaps one of the more commonly known Chinese herbs, although it is grown across the Asian continent. It is used to promote general good health, and reputed to aid fertility and promote a long life by keeping the immune and nervous systems healthy.

Lavender is another wonder herb. It is one of the few natural oils that can be used directly on the skin. Lavender helps depression, headaches and sleeplessness. It is great in the bath as a relaxant and stress buster.

Lemon Balm or mint balm is good for the digestion and helpful if you have stress-induced stomach problems and cramps. It is also used to help with heart problems, reduce blood pressure and fever.

Licorice, as an herb, is good for treating bronchitis, and also is used for relief of colic, ulcers and stomach cramps. Sufferers of some heart conditions are advised to avoid it however.

Nettle is another world wide herb, and is most well known for easing urine infections, skin infections, and is good for the health of the reproductive system. More recently, it has been promoted as a preventative for hair loss.

Passion flower helps promote good sleep, and is a stress buster. It is a relaxant, and used for tense muscles and also for people with asthma.

Chamomile is generally sold as a tea to aid relaxation and before sleep. It also helps reduce inflammation, and stomach and menstrual cramps. Gargling with this will help gum disease and cold sores.

Sage also works for gum disease, mouth ulcers and tonsillitis. Sage tea is promoted as a drink to help with the hot flushes of the menopause and for stomach gas. This is an herb with mythical status for Native Americans, who have traditionally used it to keep evil at bay.

Thyme is another world wide herb, and is generally used as a digestive.

Valerian is advised for short term use only and as an aid to sleep. However, it doesn't suit everyone, and should be used with care.

Chapter Three –

Herbs for Cleanliness

In the good old days, before we could buy cleaning products at the supermarket, our relatives would have used herbs and plants to ensure their homes, their clothes and they themselves were clean.

Of course, there are big advantages now that certain products are commercially available in the supermarkets. The time saved for the working person is substantial.

Marketing of cleaning products for the home is big business. Sometimes it's hard to resist the 'new wonder product' that will clean everything!

The National Trust in Great Britain, as you would perhaps expect, has a traditional approach to cleaning the treasures to be found in the historic buildings for which it is responsible. Interestingly, there are remarkably few chemical and commercially produced cleaning products used in these buildings.

Furniture and ornaments, as well as wood paneling and carvings, beautiful stair cases and fire places, are kept clean with very few products. A good natural fabric cloth for dusting, or a brush made of natural products is the normal way of keeping things clean.

On a regular, but not frequent basis, woodwork is wiped with a damp cloth using a natural soap. Sprays are almost never used, and waxing is not recommended as it tends to build up dirt rather than to clean.

So there are still some of the old herbal treatments we can use, and we don't need to have a cupboard full of powerful, and frankly, toxic cleaning agents.

Lemon, perhaps not strictly an herb, but as with vinegar, is a traditional means of cleaning surfaces.

A half slice of lemon in the microwave, and put on full power for a minute, will ensure you can wipe off almost all stains, and have a really clean microwave.

Similarly, when cleaning windows, vinegar or lemon juice is hard to beat, and is still a traditional way of cleaning windows across the Mediterranean, and old newspapers are used to apply and rub off.

OK, so when you feel you want to go back to the beginnings, here are some ways you can use herbs for domestic cleaning!

To make a soap solution, take a handful of soapwort leaves, and bring to the boil with some rain water and keep on the boil for four or five minutes. Take off the heat and allow it to cool before straining it. Store this in a bottle with a screw cap.

Use this as a concentrate and dilute with rain water when you want to create a soapy lather.

This is lovely for washing linens, and leaves a really nice smell in the fabric.

There are lots of soap and shampoo substitutes to be found from plants containing 'saponins'. Don't, however, use lemon juice directly on your hair, as it is far too strong. Olive oil is good for hair condition. Try some of the following natural soaps:

California soap root bulb
Soapberry fruit
Soap pot fruit
Soap tree yucca root
Soapwort root
Spanish bayonet root
Wild gourd fruit

For making a metal polish, use a horsetail solution:

Use 2 oz dried horsetail and 40 fl oz of water. Soak the horsetail in the water for at least two hours or more. Then bring to a boil and simmer for about fifteen minutes. Now leave it to cool before bottling the mixture.

As well as for cleaning, this is great to revive tired and aching feet. Soak your feet for ten minutes.

To make lovely furniture polish, use cicely herb:

You will need 1 oz of white wax, some sweet cicely seed and some turpentine. Grate the wax into a bowl and add the turpentine. Leave in the hot sun to melt the wax. Using a pestle and mortar, bash the cicely seeds until a smooth powder, and add to the wax mix until you have a lovely aroma. Ensure you beat the mix well and store in a screw top jar.

This wax will work beautifully on floors and furniture.

Or you could use the jojoba plant, taking the liquid from the seeds. Other plants have wax naturally coating the plant, and you could try using Candelilla, carnauba, sugar cane and wax myrtle.

To make your own disinfectant, use a solution with Thyme:

Use 2 oz thyme leaf and 20 fl oz of water, and bring to a boil, and then take off the heat and allow it to steep for about ten minutes. Strain off the herbs, and leave to cool before storing in screw top bottles. This solution is good for cleaning bathroom and kitchen areas.

A milder (1 oz thyme to 20 fl oz water) solution is very refreshing when added to bath water, and will help reduce muscle aches and pains.

Bug beaters can be made from fresh herbs as follows:

Mix together about a cup full of sage, rosemary and mint leaves and add some grated lemon rind and a teaspoon of cinnamon. If you bag these with muslin and use in wardrobes and drawers, it should keep your clothes free of moths.

Another moth mix uses mugwort leaves and flowers and sweet marjoram (3 parts mugwort to 1 part marjoram)

Laurel leaves, onion, mugwort, pine needles, tansy and yew leaves are all good for deterring moths.

Even nicer - just gather some reasonable sized stems of thyme, tie them together, and hang from the wardrobe rail.

If you are unlucky enough to be troubled by fleas, you could do worse than try black alder leaf, laurel leaf or eucalyptus leaf.

Far better than using toxic sprays, you can keep flies away with herbs:

Basil, kept watered from below, will give a lovely scent in a room and reduce the flies around. Dried basil will also work, as will fresh mint.

Aphid treatment on your house plants is easy: grow a couple of garlic cloves in pots near to the houseplants, and this will deter greenfly.

Feverfew flowers and larkspur seed are good for insecticides, as are thyme oil and tansy.

For effective ant attack, use lemon thyme in appropriate places - the ants don't like the smell.

Chapter Four –

Herb Remedies for Common Ailments and Personal Hygiene

There are some simple remedies for the every day ailments that you can keep in your bathroom for easy access.

A natural breath freshener can be made with herbs for chewing. Parsley is good for dealing with 'dragon breath', otherwise known as garlic!

Basil, peppermint, parsley and dill are all herbs that can be used in salads, or just to pick at whenever you want.

Or you can make a mouthwash by making diffusions or soaking herbs in an alcohol solution and then diluting before use.

Toothpastes can be made by using dry plant parts mixed with oils.

Try clove - this is always good too for numbing the odd toothache if you can't get to the dentist straight away.

Lemon oil, nutmeg oil, sage and thyme oils are all good for cleaning teeth and gums.

Good health should not be about curing and restoring only. Good health is about generally

doing what is good for you, as well as eating and drinking what is good for you. So for sexual health, try an aphrodisiac bath with corn poppy, maidenhair, periwinkle, fragrant valerian, male fern and pansy.

Alternatively, an aphrodisiac tea can be made with jasmine flowers, rose hips, rose buds and tea leaves. Take equal quantities, and use 2 tablespoons in a cup of boiler water and allow it to steep for ten minutes. Add honey for sweetness, and lemon if you like.

For lack of appetite, try 2 parts watercress and 3 parts fresh horseradish. Soak 3 oz in 2 litres of white wine for a few days before straining off the liquid. Drink half a cup every day before breakfast.

For bites and stings, use bruised thyme leaf and savory. You need 4 oz petroleum jelly and enough (in equal parts) of the thyme and savory leaf. Melt the jelly and add the herbs ensuring they are covered in the jelly. Boil, and then simmer slowly for about 20 minutes before straining through muslin and putting into small pots for storing. Don't cover until the mix is cool. This is very good for mosquito bites.

For strengthening the blood, use 2 parts spinach and 1 part parsley. Blend three cupfuls in a juicer and add equal quantity of orange juice. Drink some 2 or 3 times daily.

For high blood pressure, take one part caraway, fennel, anise and milfoil, and 2 parts chamomile and peppermint leaf. Take one tsp and difuse in half a cup of boiling water. Drink about one and half cups a day.

For getting rid of gastric wind, use balm, chamomile and peppermint in equal parts, with a teaspoon of mix steeped in half a cup of boiling water. Use without sweetening. Take a mouthful at a time.

An easy cough medicine can be made with onions. Take six white onions with two tablespoons of honey, and heat in a double boiler on low heat for two hours. Strain and sip while warm throughout the day.

A natural diuretic can be made with equal parts of the following roots - fennel, asparagus, celery and parsley. Mix and steep a teaspoon in boiling water for at least ten minutes. Strain and drink up to a cup a day.

Always good for the digestive system is a mix of 2 parts peppermint leaf, 4 parts lavender flowers, and 5 parts thyme leaf. Take a teaspoon in half a cup of boiling water and steep for 4 or 5 minutes. Drink up to a cup and half a day in small quantities

If you can't sleep and are over exhausted, try a mix of 2 parts dill seed and anise seed, and 1 part chamomile and hops. Steep a teaspoon in half a cup of boiling water, leave to cool and add a little honey to sweeten. Drink before going to bed.

Or try equal parts of dill and fennel seeds and peppermint leaves.

If you have rheumatism, make a juice of cucumber, carrot and beetroot. This helps with uric acid retention.

For sprains and bruises try the following:

Marigold lotion - 10 fl oz of boiling water poured on to ½ oz marigold petals. Allow to cool before straining, bottling and sealing. Dip some lint or cotton into the lotion, and put on the sprain before bandaging lightly to hold the poultice in position. This will reduce swelling.

Or use sage oil made with 2 oz crushed sage mixed with 8 fl oz olive oil. Mix in a screw top jar and leave somewhere very warm and sunny for a few weeks before straining through muslin and storing in a clean jar. This can be rubbed on bruises.

For skin problems try elderflower ointment. Take 4 oz of white petroleum jelly and melt before adding enough crushed elderflower to fill a 1 ½ liter jug. Bring the melted jelly and flower to a boil and simmer on a low heat for about 20 minutes. Press through muslin to strain and store in small pots, but leave uncovered until cold. This is great for chilblains and chapped hands.

For sunburn, use the above method but with honeysuckle flowers.

Chapter Five –

Herbal Dyes

There are too many plant dyes to list here in full, but as with medicines, cleaning products, cosmetics etc., it was herb and other plant extracts that our ancestors used to color their fabrics, as well as their food.

Only natural fabrics will dye easily, so don't try to use dyes on man made fabrics. Of course with the ready availability of cotton and wool clothing at such affordable prices, our need to make and color our clothes is much less than for our predecessors.

Nevertheless, the 1960's was a period that will probably be remembered for more important things than tie dying, but tie dying was all the rage for a while. So as fashions change, and maybe sometimes just for fun, you might like to try home dyes with natural herb and plant extracts.

The difficulty with natural dyes is getting even coloring, so tie dye techniques are appropriate, as are progressive dipping to get a range of shades from light to dark.

Herbs and plants will vary in their colors, depending on where they were grown, how fresh the leaf or plant part is, and how mature when cut.

For certainty, try and use one color bath to avoid different shades.

As with all dying, you will need to 'set' the dye to ensure it doesn't just wash out.

There are lots of possibilities for fabric dying and not just for clothes.

You could try dying home made rugs (or manufactured cotton rugs), or fabrics for wall hangings, for use on collages, cushion covers, curtains, bags, covers for books and boxes - almost anything.

Lots of the plants can be found in the garden or open spaces. Take care, as always, when deciding to cut and take plants from the wild. There are areas where this is illegal and where one should 'take only photographs, and leave only footprints'.

If you are on private land, do ask before taking any plant parts.

However, for berries, needles and some flowers, you could generally find roadside areas and hedges of fertile picking ground.

While it is possible to get hold of almost all of the herbal dyes, the most easily obtained, and used are:

Almond leaves for a yellow stain with wool (alum as a mordant)

Alpine Cranberry stems and leaf for yellow to red on cotton, linen and wool using alum as a mordant

American Ivy fruit for pink wool dye

Apple Tree bark for yellow/yellow-brown wood dye

Blackberry young shoots for light gray wool dye with alum mordant

Chinese arborvitae leaves for yellow wool dye

Coltsfoot herb for yellow/green wool dye with alum mordant

Common plum bark for black wool dye with Copperas Mordant

Cornflower flowers for blue wool dye

Dandelion plant for magenta wool dye

Dyer's chamomile flowers for yellow to gold wool dye with alum mordant

Ginko biloba inner bark for light brown cotton with potassium carbonate additive

Goldenrod flowers for yellow-gold wool dye with alum mordant

Heather - new tips (plus alum) for green, flowers for yellow, tops for purple (plus alum) - for wool

Henna dry leaf for brown on wool

Juniper fruit for brown wool dye

Lady's mantle green parts for green wool dye

Larch needles in the autumn for brown wool dye

Larkspur flowers for green wool dye with alum mordant

Lilly of the Valley young leaf for yellow and fall leaf for gold wool dyes using chrome additive

Lombardy poplar leaf for lime-yellow wool dye with alum mordant

Marigold flowers for yellow on wool and silk with alum

Nettle herb for green-yellow wool dye with alum mordant

Onion outer skin for brown-orange wool dye with alum mordant

Peach Tree leaf for yellow wool dye with alum mordant

Poinsettia flower bracts for red wool dye

Pomegranate fruit skin for yellow cotton dye with alum

Privet tips of branches for yellow-gold-blue wool dye with alum or chrome mordant

Rose of China (Hibiscus) flowers for yellow to grey wool dye with alum and stalks for olive green wool dye with alum

Saffron stigmas for yellow wool or silk with alum

St John's Wart tops for yellow wool dye with alum

Sorrel leaf for green-yellow wool dye

Sweet Potato dry leaf for yellow-blue-brown wool dye with iron water (rusty metal boiled in water)

Tall field buttercup tops for purple wool dye with baking soda additive

Tea leaf for tan wool dye - a couple of tea bags will nicely 'age' new cotton to give an antique appearance.

Turmeric root for yellow cotton (use potassium carbonate and citric acid additive)

Wild marjoram herb for red wool dye with alum mordant

Woad leaf for blue wool dye with alum mordant

Conclusion

There are lots of fairly common herbs that you can grow, find in the wild, or obtain from garden centers, herbalists, local greengrocers or supermarkets.

The less common herbs can generally be purchased from herbalists or specialist suppliers, of which there are an increasing number.

The production of the more unusual herbs, and sale of both seeds and small plants, is now a thriving business, and mostly sales are done by mail order or via the internet.

The use of herbs in infusions, or teas, has become increasingly popular. Infusions can be made from fresh or dry herbs and plants, or from commercially packet dried herbs or T bags.

This is probably a reaction to the fast food, pre packaged and processed food and drink industry. We are beginning to be more aware of the numbers, the chemical compounds, the colorings etc in processed food products. And while coffee has its place, it is not healthy to drink much of it, and can increase your blood pressure. Naturopathy is making a comeback!

Some of the most famous herbalists and naturopaths promoted the view that the body will often be able to heal itself, if given the right help.

Herbs can help greatly by gently eliminating toxins and damaging elements in the body. Green leaf tea is considered to be one of the most beneficial drinks. It will cleanse the system, it will help

the immune system, and it is said to help protect against cancerous cell growth.

Herbs have long been famous for helping to relax the nervous system, and it is generally accepted that, when we are relaxed rather than tense, we sleep better and feel better. Valerian is used widely in 'natural' sleep aids and to help calm the nerves. A cup of chamomile tea at bed time is also a traditional sleep aid.

With infusions, of course, the herbs are taken in hot water. Within the last ten years, it has become the norm for people to take a small bottle of mineral water with them to work, or when going out.

It is perhaps strange that it took so long to realize the absolute benefit of drinking good water, when it certainly isn't new news that our bodies are more water than anything else.

Now it is becoming general practice to ensure children are drinking enough water at school, and that they eat healthy foods and at the right intervals. There are clear links between healthy eating and drinking, and children's educational performance and, of course, their general health.

Incorporating fresh herbs into the family diet is good for everyone. Children can plant and grow some of the herbs themselves, and will be more interested in how they are beneficial if they have seen the results of their own efforts in growing them.

Of course, we are still living in the fast world of the 21st century. Many of us work long hours, and spend more time commuting to and from our work place.

So either it's a mad dash to the supermarket to stock up on everything for the week, or limited time in the evenings for gardening.

However, it is worth thinking about taking time out for a lunchtime break spent tending some herbs on the office window ledge or terrace.

Perhaps we should make an hour or two during the week for tending the herb garden with the children, or making fresh soups using home grown vegetables and leaves.

The weekend could include a couple of hours visiting a local garden, or finding woodlands with wild flowers and herbs growing. Not necessarily to pick, but to find, photograph or draw, and to get some fresh air while learning something about wild plants. Do, however, be very careful if you do pick anything. It can be very dangerous to use something you are not entirely sure of, even if it looks 'very like' the particular herb you think it is.

Whenever using herbs in your home, for infusions, salves, to flavor food and drink, and as cleaning agents - it is always essential that you know as much as possible about the herb. Don't ever use herbs or plants in infusions or salves that you have found, but are not sure of.

Always ensure you are really certain that it is the plant you think it is. There are many plants, and leaves, that look similar, but one can be very beneficial and the other can be very poisonous. It is also really important that you understand which part of the plant should be used, and how, and of course, the concentration and quantity to use.

Some are quite strong, and it would not be beneficial to either drink concentrated infusions, or put neat herb on damaged skin.

There is probably an herbal remedy for almost all ailments. Clearly they are generally not too strong, and therefore may need a number of treatments to help you ease your ills. But better a little time and a natural substance, than promises of a quick cure and use of some strong chemical that could well have side affects.

If you don't want to go through the time and trouble of making your own remedies, you can, of course, visit your local herbalist and obtain remedies and teas that will have been made by specialist companies. A good herbalist is worth knowing, and can often give very detailed advice on herbal remedies and other foods that will help restore health and well being.

Most of us know that Chamomile tea helps us sleep, and that green tea is good as an anti oxidant. Parsley is good for getting rid of garlic breath and mint is a traditionally used digestive, and deals with acid tummy etc.

There are, of course, lots of well known brands of T bags, but generally, they are considered to be less effective than the leaves you pick from your garden plants, or indeed the dry leaf that you can buy in most stores or from herbalists.

One of the best early morning drinks is a mix of sliced fresh ginger infused in boiling water and then taken off the heat, and when cooled slightly, just add the juice of half or a whole lemon. If you need it to be sweeter, use fresh honey - about a half teaspoon per mug. This is a wonderful

remedy for colds and flu, and also for general cleansing of the system and easing joint pain.

Ginger has amazing healing properties and has, for many years, been linked with easing the pain of arthritis. Some people are adamant that you need fresh ginger juice, but others are equally certain that ginger powder is as good as to achieve a pain free life. This is, I think, one of the super substances. It can be grown in moist soils, but I think you need to have a bit of the green finger about you to keep it going and to harvest more than a tiny little root.

Fresh ginger is excellent to flavor foods, and is used extensively in Asian foods. It is also renowned for eliminating the pain of arthritis.

There are also many remedies that are sold in tablet or capsule form. For example, St John's Wort is used for mild depression. Care needs to be taken to ensure that the right quantities are used, and that certain combinations of herbal remedies are avoided where they might cause unpleasant effects when mixed.

And of course, if you are pregnant or breast feeding, you need to double check whether these remedies are recommended or not.

Aloe Vera is another very well known plant. It is cactus like in appearance, with sharp thorns on the edges of the long leaves.

When cut, however, the leaves contain a gloopy substance that is wonderfully cooling, and takes the pain away from burns, cuts, stings and a whole range of skin ailments. This is one of the few remedies that can be used in concentrated form directly on the affected skin.

Traditionally kept by the back door, together with the basil, parsley, mint and feverfew, this is a truly superb and natural healer. Feverfew is the basis for remedies for migraines, too.

The world of herbs and plants is incredibly varied. There is a mass of information available in libraries, on the internet, and probably on your own bookshelves.

This is an area of interest where you can be hands on and try to grow your own, as well as make your own, household and family remedies and cleansers.

There is enormous scope for experimenting with growing different herbs and different varieties. Beautiful herb gardens are a pleasure, as well as a benefit.

There are now numerous TV programmes on cooking, and in nearly every household, there is at least one person who loves to try out new dishes and use new ingredients.

The days of the heavy buttery sauces are gone, and the interest in Asian cuisine with an extensive use of herbs, berries and roots is matched by the greater accessibility of these foodstuffs across the western world.

The use of herbs and plants in medicine is still a subject for serious study across the world too. There are world centers, such as Kew in the United Kingdom, where they collect species of plants from around the world and carry out ongoing research into the healing properties.

Quite recently, a Kew employee was exploring the Himalayan hills in search of a particular type of

Iris that is said to have enormous medicinal potential.

Our hectic modern lives can, if we allow it, leave us drained and too tired to want to spend more time than necessary on our self maintenance. It is easy to buy everything ready prepared or processed, and keep lots of strong chemicals for everything from cleaning to keeping the flies away.

We can, however, enjoy the health and well being that comes from growing and using herbs and plants to enrich and enhance our lives - and its easy, as the song says, to start with a little parsley, sage, rosemary and thyme.....