

## **Making Herbal Remedies**

Making your own herbal remedies is both fun and cost effective. You also get to control exactly what goes in to your preparations. This document will give you basic instructions for making a variety of remedies. For more in depth information I highly recommend getting a couple of books on the subject:

The Herbal Medicine Maker's Handbook by James Green  
Making Plant Medicine by Richo Cech

Both of these books have tons of details about ingredients and methods so you can get serious about making medicine.

The most important aspect of making herbal remedies is using high quality herbs. If you buy your herbs locally find out where they come from. Are they responsibly gathered, sustainably or organically grown? How are they stored in the shop? They should not be exposed to direct sunlight, particularly if they are in clear jars. Ask to examine and smell the herbs. They should be variegated in color and have a good herbal aroma. If they let you, taste a little bit – it should have a distinct (if not necessarily pleasant) taste. If your local supplier doesn't pass these tests you can certainly find quality herbs via the internet.

Before we get started a note about quantities and practices. The ratios given here are a starting point. Experiment, see what works for you, what you like and take notes so you can replicate your efforts. When making remedies chop or grind your herbs finely to aid the extraction process by creating greater surface area. Whenever you make an herbal remedy that you intend to store for any length of time always always always label it with the name of the herb and what kind of preparation it is and the date of making. Store your herbs and remedies in glass containers out of direct sunlight. Certain preparations have a short shelf life and may also need to be refrigerated. If a remedy gets an off smell or grows mold or you just aren't sure about it, toss it.

First up, infusions, decoctions & syrups.

## **Infusions**

Infusions are the simplest herbal preparations. But don't let that fool you. A well-prepared infusion is powerful medicine. Infusions can be made hot or cold, one cup at a time or in quantity. Most of the time infusions are made with boiling water but some herbs are better prepared with cold water. These include any herb that has a mucilaginous quality like marshmallow, slippery elm, and comfrey.

For a hot infusion:

Place 1 oz of herb (or more for a stronger solution) in a mason jar or coffee press or other glass or ceramic container. Add 1 quart of boiling water. Cover and allow to steep for at least 15 minutes and as long as overnight. Strain, pressing down on the herb to get as much liquid out as possible.

For a cold infusion:

Place 1 oz of herb (or more for a stronger solution) in a mason jar and add 1 quart of cold water. Allow to sit for at least 20 minutes and as long as overnight. Strain, pressing down on the herb to release as much liquid as possible.

## **Decoctions**

The next step from an infusion is a decoction. Some herbs – mostly roots and barks - need extra heat to yield up their medicine. When you decoct you simmer or boil the herb for a while so it breaks down.

To make a decoction:

Combine 2 oz of herb with 1 quart of cold water in a pot. If you have time, allow the herb to soak for a few hours prior to decocting. Cover the pot and bring slowly to a boil. Reduce heat and simmer for at least 10 minutes and for as long as an hour – the amount of time depends on the size of the pieces and hardness of the herb. Soaking the herb beforehand will reduce the simmering time. After decoction press the herb to express solution from the pulp. Allow the decoction to cool and strain, pressing once again.

## **Syrups**

Once you know how to make a decoction you can make a syrup. Syrups are a lovely sweet way to get your remedy. They also extend the life of your decoction and honey adds its own medicine to the mix.

To make a syrup:

Make a decoction, then simmer it to reduce the amount by half to create a more concentrated version. Measure how much you have and then add honey in a ratio of at least 1 part honey to 2 parts decoction. So if you have a cup of decoction, add at least 1/2 a cup of honey. For me, this is plenty sweet. It does mean that I have to keep my syrup in the refrigerator. If you add honey in a ratio of 1:1 (1 cup of honey in 1 cup of decoction) you can usually leave the syrup at room temperature. Try it and see how sweet you like it. Syrups made with very bitter herbs like hops and horehound may need more honey than say, ginger syrup.

## **Tinctures**

We move on now to tinctures aka extracts. Tinctures are a favorite in the herbal medicine chest. They're concentrated, easily transportable, quick and easy to take with a really long shelf life. But I think I should say that they are not necessarily more effective than a strong infusion. Water is an excellent solvent and once it has dissolved part of the plant a new solvent is created which can dissolve still more. Is that a bit tricky to understand? Don't worry about it. Just know that infusions are really strong medicine. But sometimes they just won't do. Maybe the herb is really bitter or acrid to taste. Or maybe it just isn't convenient for you to be drinking infusion in the middle of the day. Or you just need a very little bit at a time. Or you are taking it right before bed and don't really want to drink a whole lot of liquid at that time. There are many reasons why a tincture might be preferable.

A tincture is an alcohol or alcohol and water based solution made from dry or fresh botanicals. Ethyl alcohol tinctures have an almost unlimited shelf life as long as they are at least 20% alcohol. If you want to get really specific, different herbs need different ratios of alcohol to water in a tincture but a good general rule is to use 40-50% alcohol. That will do pretty well for most herbs and it is easy to get 80-100 proof vodka for your menstruum. If you are using fresh plant material you do need to use at least 50% alcohol because the fresh material contains water. The other option for making an extract is to use glycerin and water. Those extracts are usually referred to as glycerites. To avoid spoilage you need at least 60-75% glycerin. If you are not trying to avoid alcohol all together you can include 10-15% alcohol in your solution and then you can do just 50% glycerin.

### *Folk Method*

This is the easiest way to make a tincture. All you need is a mason jar. Place your herb into the mason jar. Add enough menstruum to cover the herb by at least 1/4 of an inch. If the herb floats, add enough that there is 1/4 inch of menstruum below the floating bits. Cap tightly – it is helpful to place a square of wax paper between the jar and the lid to create a tighter seal. After about 12 hours check the jar. If the herb has absorbed all the extra menstruum add enough to regain the 1/4 inch extra.

Let the jar sit in a dark place for at least 4 weeks and better yet 6 weeks, shaking the jar once a day. Strain, pressing on the herb to release as much liquid as possible. At this point you can filter through a coffee filter to get out any remaining sediment but I usually skip this step.

### *Weight/Volume Method*

For this method you will need a scale and a measuring cup along with your mason jar.

First you must decide what ratio you want. Generally tinctures made with dried plant material are 1 part herb to 4 or 5 parts menstruum.

Weigh your herb. If you have 1 ounce and you have chosen a ratio of 1:4 you will need 4 ounces of menstruum. Place the herb in the jar and add the menstruum. If you are using leaves or flowers this amount may only wet the herb with no extra liquid. Don't worry about it. Cap the jar tightly – again wax paper is useful and leave to macerate for at least 4 weeks and preferably 6, shaking the jar once a day. Strain, pressing on the herb to release as much liquid as possible. Filter if desired.

### **Vinegar & Fortified Wine Extracts**

Finally, we have vinegar and wine extracts. These are made just like tinctures but their shelf life is not as long. Vinegar extracts are good for about a year. With fortified wines like port or sherry you will get a longer shelf life since the alcohol content is generally about 20% though it is not as long as an ethyl alcohol tincture. You can use the folk method or weight/volume method. Use only apple cider or wine vinegars, **not** distilled white vinegar. These extracts have the added advantage that they are good to taste. You can add an herbal vinegar to salad dressing, for example, and an herb infused wine to a sauce.