

Save Herbal Medicine



Despite recent changes in European legislation, Max Drake hopes to keep herbalism alive within our day-to-day culture. He shares a few simple autumn remedies to boost our health.

decreed that if herbalists can be officially regulated in some way, so that anyone who has the title 'Medical Herbalist' will be suitably qualified and trusted, then the traditional practice of herbalism can continue, with patients seeing a herbalist and getting an individual prescription made up for them according to their needs. This is supposed to make everyone happy.

The problem is that the regulation doesn't seem to be happening, and besides, it wasn't exactly a great idea in the first place. It would exclude most of the population from the completely normal human activity of trying to help people with ordinary herbs that we've known about since time began, and which are perfectly safe and highly effective. It would also criminalise practitioners who haven't gone through the official hoops to qualify as regulated herbalists, and yet who may have been practising for years quite safely.

So, in the meantime many herbalists, including myself, have broadened out their practice to include teaching courses on basic herbalism, holistic diagnosis, anatomy and physiology – in order to keep the practice alive. I've been teaching herbal medicine courses for six years now, and am really pleased to say that demand seems to be growing each time I schedule a new course. So I'm pretty certain that no amount of red tape and regulation is going to diminish the practice of herbalism any time soon.

You may have noticed that herbal products in most shops are increasingly looking like pharmaceuticals. This is a direct consequence of the Traditional Herbal Medicines Products Directive (THMPD), which became official in April 2011 – a piece of European jiggery pokery that is supposed to protect the consumer from unsafe products whilst ensuring that you get what you pay for. And indeed, you do get what you pay for, which is usually some sort of standardised extract of a herb or mix of herbs where the product license holder has demonstrated their product conforms to a tower of rules and regulations regarding clinical evidence, high grade manufacture and traditional use.

One issue we have in the UK with this is that medical herbalists have been free to ply their trade, on and off, since Henry VIII said it was a good thing. Whilst not wanting to outlaw the practice of herbalism completely by turning it over to Big Pharma, the government have

Thyme & Licorice Syrup

This is a traditional and very popular syrup for coughs and chesty infections at this time of year. Thyme contains an anti-infective essential oil, thymol, which is excreted through the lungs, whilst licorice root is an expectorant, acting upon mucous membranes, lessening irritation and relieving coughs and catarrhs.

There are dozens of different recipes for this popular syrup, and here's a simple and effective one that can be made in any kitchen.

Liquorice root (cut)	75g
Thyme herb (dried)	100g
Water	1.5 Litres
Sugar (white, granulated)	1.8kg

Place the cut liquorice root in the water, bring to the boil, and simmer for 20-30 minutes, adding either fresh or dried thyme herb for the last 5 minutes. Remove from the heat, and when cool enough to handle, press



through a muslin cloth and sieve. Purists among you might also want to filter the resulting liquid through a standard coffee filter, to remove any remaining bits of herb. Put the liquid back into a saucepan, simmer and reduce down to 1 litre. Add all the sugar and keep stirring until it is completely dissolved. Wait for it to cool for a bit and then bottle up into smallish bottles.

This will make quite a lot of syrup with the main cost being the bottles. The reason for using small syrup bottles (100ml) is to minimise the amount of time syrup is exposed to the air. Once opened you need to keep it in the fridge, where it will keep for 6 months or so. By making it in this quantity you can give loads to friends and family.

Horseradish for your Sinuses

The bushy dark green leaves of horseradish (*Amaracia rusticana*) are often found growing wild in city allotments, parks and gardens. Best known for its hot, pungent and fleshy taproot, it can grow up to 60 cm long. Harvested from early autumn through to spring, leave some in the ground, so it will grow again next year.

A compound called sinigrin is the key to the horseradish root's many medicinal properties. When the root's cells are damaged by cutting, grating or chewing, enzymes convert sinigrin to allyl isothiocyanate – otherwise known as mustard oil, and this accounts for the pungency and heat. The oil is destroyed by cooking, so horseradish is only really beneficial when used raw and the fresh root is way hotter than the stuff you get in bottles. The oil also breaks down and loses its pungency after about twenty minutes of exposure to air, so it needs to be prepared quite soon after chopping if you want to preserve it.

Like all herbs, the root contains many different compounds, some of which work in harmony with the strong stimulant oils in order to produce a therapeutic effect. It is particularly beneficial for sinusitis and sinus type headaches, as well as being useful for treating coughs and colds. Research has demonstrated anti-bacterial activity and this may account for why it is so effective in helping with sinus problems. The pungency seems to irritate the mucous membranes that line the nasal passages and sinuses, and can make you stream a



bit - but hidden within is something that, over time, can heal the problem by getting to the cause of it.

When preparing horseradish – a word of warning here – proceed slowly as it will make your eyes water! After thoroughly cleaning the roots and scraping off the outer cortex, put it in a blender. I usually wear a swimming mask and breathe through a snorkel at this point in the proceedings, particularly when taking the blender's lid off.

For treating sinus problems, headaches, and colds, I prefer to use a syrup, as this will keep for several months in the fridge, preserving the properties of the fresh root.

To make an easy syrup:

Grate/blend fresh root, let sit for 3 minutes to allow enzymatic reaction to occur. Put it in a sterilised jar and add sufficient raw honey to cover. Allow to stand at room temperature for 4 weeks, and then strain out through some muslin cloth. Keep it in an airtight jar in the fridge, using about a tablespoon whenever you feel like you need it.

It is best to avoid using horseradish if pregnant or breastfeeding.

Rosehips for a Vitamin Hit

Rosehips are the elliptical red berries you find at this time of year on Dog Rose or Wild Rose. They are the ones you get itching powder from when you split them open and sprinkle the fine-haired seeds down the back of someone's shirt. Not that I'd particularly recommend this form of playground bullying in this day and age, but harking back to bygone days of mysterious and irritating rashes, indignation and sworn vengeance, rosehips have definitely left their mark on many folk.

The good thing about rosehips though is that they contain loads of vitamin C, possibly up to 40 times more than you'll get in imported oranges, plus plentiful vitamins A and B. Rosehip syrup was rationed during the war years and people were encouraged to go out and harvest the hips to make their own, so it was highly valued, and really became a household staple after the war.

When foraging, ideally pick your rosehips when they are just going soft, maybe after the first frost. If you get them earlier whilst they're still hard you can slit the skins with a sharp knife before processing them.



Rosehip Vinegar:

Cram a load of washed rosehips into a jar and cover them in cider or pear vinegar. Leave them on a sunny window sill for four to six weeks and then strain and bottle. This is great for colds and sore throats, and also makes a nice salad dressing.

Rosehip Syrup:

Use a big jar. Lots of washed rosehips, scored. Sprinkle a layer of white refined granulated sugar on the bottom of the jar. Put a half inch layer of rosehips on top. Another layer of granulated sugar, then another half inch of rosehips, and so on until you get to the top of the jar. Put it on the same sunny windowsill, and after a while all the sugar will have liquefied, extracting all of the goodness out of the hips and into the syrup. Strain off and bottle. It should keep without any preservative all through the winter with no need to refrigerate. This is a great source of vitamin C, particularly for children, and they will love it.

Max Drake is a Medical Herbalist practising in Bristol. www.urbanfringe.co.uk