

Homemade Herbal Medicines for Common Ailments

Simple and safe, homemade herbal medicines can help you heal common ailments on a shoestring.

By Stephen Harrod Buhner



Turn your kitchen into an herbal apothecary for a safe and effective way to remedy common ailments. Photo by Jason Houston

Somewhat glumly, I celebrated my 61st birthday this past July. In the back of my mind, I've been sure for 45 years that God would make an exception to my normal and natural biodegrading process, thus allowing me to remain 35 years old well into my 90s. Somehow, it escaped the Universe's notice that some fine print in my birth contract negates, in my case, the aging process. A failing I am trying to get across, without success (so far).

In general, however, I am very healthy and I do have one very special thing going for me: I don't use any pharmaceuticals, unlike nearly everyone I know in my age group. On the rare occasion I do visit a physician, that statement always generates a great deal of surprise. It is, as I have found, a very unusual event in these early decades of the 21st century. (It wasn't when I was young.)

The reason I don't take even one prescription pharmaceutical every day is mostly due to my lifestyle — primarily because of my reliance on herbal medicines. I have been using homemade herbal remedies as my primary health care for about 30 years. I've

successfully treated everything from minor colds, flus, cuts and scrapes, which we all encounter on our journey through life, to irritable bowel syndrome and staph — with visits to many interesting conditions in between. Though herbal medicines may not be right for everyone's lifestyle, I have found the natural approach life-enhancing, self-empowering, inexpensive and safe.

The best treatments I've found for common ailments all use herbs you can grow in your garden or likely have in your kitchen cupboards, disguised as condiments and spices. And, of course, these remedies are not the final answer on what works; nearly every plant you see around you can heal something.

Skin Conditions

Burns. I usually just pace around while verbally — and loudly — exploring the world of expletives. But sometimes I also use the following remedies.

1. Honey: This is especially good for severe burns. It will stop infection, stimulate skin regeneration and keep the burned area moist. Honey is better for burns than nearly all medical interventions, even for third-degree burns.

2. Prickly pear cactus pads, filleted: Wear gloves to hold the pads while using a sharp knife to gently fillet the exterior skin off the pads. You will be left with slimy, oval pads of plant matter. Place the pads directly on the burn and bandage the wound. For a sunburn, rub the pads on the affected area.

Cuts and scrapes. Every one of us encounters life's sharp edges, often over and over again. Here's how I handle the aftereffects.

1. Wound powder: My homemade wound powder stops the bleeding, dries out the wound, inhibits infection and stimulates healing. I generally use a bandage the first day and then leave the wound open afterward (unless it's in a hard-to-protect area or is gaping).

A good wound powder recipe contains any berberine plant (such as barberry, goldenseal or Oregon grape root); comfrey root or leaf; juniper needles (the older the needles on the tree or bush, the better — old needles contain more tannins and will thus stop bleeding faster than young needles will); and maybe oregano, rosemary or thyme. The berberine plant and juniper needles will disinfect, and the juniper needles will also stop the bleeding. Comfrey will stimulate healing, and oregano, rosemary and thyme are also antibacterial. I usually make the following recipe and keep it in the freezer to retain freshness:

Measure out 1 ounce of the berberine plant root or bark, a half-ounce of the comfrey root, 1 ounce of the juniper needles, and a quarter-ounce of the oregano, rosemary or thyme leaves (optional). Combine the ingredients, mix them in a blender or food processor until well-ground, and then powder the mixture until fine in a clean coffee grinder. I often

sieve it afterward to get as flour-like a powder as possible. Sprinkle it liberally on the wound.

2. Honey: Stop using the wound powder after a few days and switch to honey. It's effective against all known drug-resistant bacteria and really speeds healing. Just cover the wound with honey, bandage, and change the dressing daily.

3. Wound salve: Use a combination of berberine plants, black walnut hulls, comfrey root, oregano leaves, rosemary leaves, Siberian elm bark (*Ulmus pumila*) and dried thyme. Add a quarter-cup each of the roughly ground herbs to a baking dish and mix. Cover the blend with about a quarter-inch olive oil, cover the dish, and bake overnight in an oven on its lowest heat setting. In the morning, let the mixture cool. Press out and then reheat the oil. Stir in finely chopped or grated beeswax — 2 ounces per cup of infused oil — and let melt. To check hardness, put a drop of salve on a plate and wait until the salve cools. It should remain solid but melt after a second of pressing on it with your finger.

Rashes. Rashes come in many forms, so treatments will vary. Here are a few.

1. For hives: Apply a tincture of *Echinacea angustifolia* root topically, using a cotton ball to administer it to the affected areas. Take a half-teaspoon of the tincture internally each hour or so as well. (Pass on *E. purpurea* — I've found it useless for hives.)

2. For poison ivy: Jewelweed salve is best. Good additives are calendula flowers, chamomile flowers and Siberian elm bark, all of which will soothe skin. Add any other herbs you want, but use the aerial parts of a jewelweed plant for half of the dried herbs by weight. Then, follow the same process as above for making the wound salve.

Stings and bites. Use prickly pear as you would for burns or echinacea as you would for hives.

Intestinal Upsets

Diarrhea. Any strongly astringent plant will work for ordinary diarrhea. Blackberry root, the main standby used for millenia, is extremely effective. Krameria root, older pine needles just pulled off the tree, and wild geranium (*Geranium maculatum*) are all very helpful for regulation. To use, roughly chop or grind the dried herb of your choice. Add 1 ounce to a quart jar that can take heat, and fill with hot water. Cover the concoction and let it steep overnight (or for two hours if you really can't wait). Drink it throughout the next day. Repeat as needed.

Irritable bowel syndrome. Juice 1 beet, 1 piece of green cabbage (about the size of a medium carrot), 3 carrots, 4 stalks of celery and 4 leaves of fresh plantain (*Plantago* spp.). Plantain is a common plant you can usually find growing in front yards, and is unrelated to the banana of the same name. Cabbage and plantain are the most important ingredients, but they don't taste very good by themselves. The other ingredients will improve the taste while assisting your adrenal glands, liver and immune system. Drink

this juice every morning for breakfast, eat oatmeal for lunch, and have whatever you want for dinner. Irritable bowel syndrome will clear fairly rapidly on this regimen.

Viruses and Infections

Colds and flu. Many plants have antiviral properties — plants get colds just like we do, but because they can't go to the doctor, they make their own medicines. One of the best antiviral remedies is ginger, but use the fresh juice or it won't work. When cold and flu season approaches, I buy about a pound of fresh ginger and juice it. Make sure you squeeze out the pulp — a lot more juice will be in there. Put the ginger juice in any handy bottle and keep it the refrigerator. If everyone around me is getting sick or I feel that first onset of illness, I stir together 3 fluid ounces of the juice, 1 tablespoon of honey, a sprinkle of cayenne, the juice of a quarter of a lime, and 6 fluid ounces of hot water. Drink this blend as a hot tea three to six times per day. This tea rarely fails to either stop an infection's progression or heal it altogether. It's pretty good for opening up the sinuses as well.

Urinary tract infections. Juniper berries are highly effective for urinary tract infections. Bearberry (*Arctostaphylos uva-ursi*) is nearly as useful, and berberines are handy, too. I make a tincture of juniper berries — works like a charm. To make the tincture, take 1 ounce of dried juniper berries, grind them as finely as you can, and add 5 fluid ounces of a 50 percent alcoholic beverage, such as vodka. Let the tincture steep for two weeks, decant it, press the berries to drain them of liquid, strain the tincture, and keep it in a bottle. Take 10 drops six times per day until the infection clears. If you use bearberry in place of juniper berries, take 30 drops six times daily. You can do the same if using a berberine plant.

Bidens also works for urinary tract infections. Bidens species constitute a fairly large grouping of plants, and all of the species you're likely to encounter are very good herbal medicines. They are sometimes called "beggar's ticks" (and even worse names), so you might be familiar with them under another moniker. Bidens plants are invasive and they grow pretty much everywhere. Bidens is a reliable, broad-spectrum antibacterial herb if you make a tincture from the fresh plant (dried bidens is useless for this). Pick bidens during or slightly before the plants are flowering. Cut up the plant, weigh it and put 6 ounces in a jar. Add 12 fluid ounces of pure grain alcohol. You can use vodka, but the resulting medicine won't be as strong. Let the mixture steep for two weeks, decant it, strain and press the herbs to drain them well, and bottle the liquid. Use when needed.

Bidens is good for general systemic bacterial infections, but it's specifically useful for infections in mucus membrane systems. If you have a urinary tract infection and almost get well but then have a relapse, bidens is the perfect plant to use. Take a quarter- to a half-teaspoon of the tincture up to six times per day for two to four weeks. Bidens is safe, and it hasn't failed me yet. *Bidens pilosa* is what most people use, but I use *B. pinnata* from my yard. Any bidens plant will most likely do.

Resources for Homemade Herbal Remedies

To learn more about herbal medicines, I recommend *Making Plant Medicine* by Richo Cech, *The Herbal Medicine-Maker's Handbook* by James Green, and my book *Herbal Antibiotics*, second edition, which contains a *materia medica* of more than 200 plants and their medicinal preparation methods. These books explain in-depth how to make nearly all of the herbal medicines you'll ever need to use.

Wholesome Healing

The plant medicines that grow in our yards or sit in our kitchens can fairly easily heal most common ailments. I have found that after your life is saved by a plant, nothing is ever the same again. Herbal medicines open up a new world to the perceiving self. All of us who read *Mother Earth News* know we should work to help heal the Earth, but your perspective will change significantly after you've experienced the Earth healing you.

Resources

Here are some of my favorite sources for healthful herbs and tinctures.

Elk Mountain Herbs
Healing Spirits Herb Farm
Mountain Rose Herbs
Pacific Botanicals
Sage Woman Herbs
Woodland Essence
Zack Woods Herbs

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