

PRACTICAL HERBS



Henriette Kress

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MAKING AND USING HERBAL TEAS

There are three basic ways to make herbal teas:

- pour boiling water on the fresh or dried herb and let steep (infusion);
- bring the herb parts to a boil in water, then let simmer or steep (decoction);
- steep the herb in cold water (maceration or cold infusion, nourishing infusion).

Make one day's worth of tea at a time. Bacteria can grow in the refrigerator, too.

If you plan on using your herbal tea for a cough, add some sugar, honey, or the like: sugar increases mucus production.

Don't sweeten teas you use for digestive problems. The digestion of sugar will disrupt an herb's activity.

HOW TO MAKE AN INFUSION

Infusions are generally made from the soft parts of herbs—flowers, tops, and leaves.

For each cup, use 1 or 2 teaspoons of dried herb, or 2 to 4 teaspoons fresh, with 1 cup (250 ml) boiling water. Pour boiling water over the herb, steep 5 to 10 minutes, strain, and drink.

You can safely drink up to five cups a day of the milder herbs.

HOW TO MAKE A DECOCTION

Decoctions are usually made from the harder herbs or parts of herbs, such as bark, lichen, hard fruit, and larger seeds.

For each cup, add 1 or 2 teaspoons dried herb, or 2 to 4 teaspoons fresh herb to 1 cup (250 ml) cold water in a pan, bring to a boil, and simmer for 5 to 10 minutes. Remove the pan from the heat, let steep 5 to 10 minutes more, strain, and drink.

HOW TO MAKE A MACERATION

Maceration, also called cold infusion, is suited to any herbal part. I recommend against macerating herbs that are high in tannins, however. Your finished tea will be quite bitter.

For each cup, add 1 or 2 teaspoons dried herb, or 2–4 teaspoons fresh, to 1 cup (250 ml) cold water in a suitable container. Let stand overnight in your refrigerator. In the morning, strain out the herb, and drink. You may also bring the cold maceration to a boil before straining. Mucilaginous herbs such as mallows and mullein are perfect for macerations.



Everything you need to make an herbal tea.

Henriette Kress: *Practical Herbs*, 2011.

Read more here:

<http://www.henriettesherbal.com/articles/pract-herbs.html>

NICE HERBS FOR TEA BLENDS

Use mild herbs such as willowherb or cinquefoil leaves as a base for your tea. Mallows (leaf, flower, or root) give body to any tea you add them to.

Choose an herb to give your tea its dominant flavor. For instance:

- Minty: peppermint, Japanese mint, showy calamint, mountain mints
- Lemony: lemon balm, lemon verbena, lemon catmint, Moldavian balm, roselle, lemon grass, lemon thyme
- Anise overtones: sweet chervil, anise hyssop, young leaves of goutweed, aniseed, fennel seeds
- Herbal: basil, thyme, hyssop, sweet marjoram, tarragon, sage
- Hot: bee balms, ginger, and, if picked during a hot summer, basil and savory
- Berry: leaves of black currant, red raspberry, strawberry, or bilberry
- Sweet: licorice, stevia
- Mineral: nettles, horsetail, lady's mantle, sunflower leaf, green oats
- Interesting: give sweet flag (*Acorus calamus*) a twirl in your cuppa
- Surprising: try pineapple sage or scented geranium leaves. They taste like their scent!

Add something to complement the dominant note. For example:

- a few rose petals give interest to the spices
- just a hint of mint adds that little extra to the mineral herbs
- a little bitter is nice in lemony tea combinations

This sampling is far from complete.

FERMENTING

Fermenting can give a different, sometimes finer, aroma to herbs. "Black tea," for example, is fermented green tea. Start by crushing the fresh leaf to bring its juices to the surface. Leave the bruised parts somewhere warm overnight. Finally, dry your now-darkened herbs.

To crush fresh herbs for fermenting, I have tried every trick in the book:

- placing herbs in a plastic bag, removing all the air from it, and then pressing them firmly under a rolling pin;
- stomping on the bagged herbs with wooden clogs;
- crushing the leaves one by one in the diligent hands of many friends;
- recruiting friends to roll "cigars" from up to 10 leaves at a time, and then cutting the cigars into small pieces.

I find these methods so heavy on the work and light on the fun that I'd rather not bother.



A cup of herbal tea made with nettles, mallow, and a little rose.

If you own a pasta maker, however, you have it made. Set the flat rolls as close together as possible, put the crank in place, and crank your herb leaves through, one by one or a few at a time. The machine crushes leaves nicely and makes quick work of a basketful.

And it gets better: if you then crank the leaves through the thinnest “spaghetti” part of the machine, they’ll be all sliced up!

Put the crushed herb in a glass jar with a loosened lid. Set the jar in a warm spot—say, 122 °F (50 °C)—overnight. The top of a large dehydrator works nicely.

In the morning, spread the fermented material to dry on a cloth or baking parchment, or in dehydrator trays.

Finally, store your bone-dry tea leaves in an airtight jar and label (example: “Red raspberry leaf, fermented, July 2011”).

Herbs that lend themselves to fermenting include rowan leaf, rosebay willowherb leaf, and the leaves of various brambles such as blackberry, stone bramble or arctic blackberry.

AN HERBAL BATH

2–3 handfuls dried herbs
2 quarts (liters) water

Bring the water to a boil, add the herbs, steep for 10 to 20 minutes, and strain.

Pour the strained liquid into your almost-ready bath and adjust the temperature.

Enjoy your bath for 20 to 30 minutes.

A FOOTBATH

Herbs well-suited for footbaths include stinging nettles, willowherb, meadowsweet, and horsetail.

1–2 quarts (liters) fresh herbs
2 quarts (liters) water

Twist the herbs into 2–4-inch (5–10 cm) lengths, put them in a pan, and add water. Bring to a boil, and then simmer for 10 to 20 minutes.

To enjoy your footbath outdoors, pour your water-and-herbs into a basin. Add a few flowers for decoration.

Indoors, strain the herbs out first.

Either way, add cold water until the bath is hot but not scalding. Take off your shoes and socks, pull up your trouser legs, sit down with your feet in the water, and wiggle your toes for 10 to 20 minutes. Lovely!

Tip: Add nettles first to the boiling water and allow them to wilt thoroughly.

Otherwise, they’ll still sting—refreshing, perhaps, but not all that comfortable.



A foot bath with calendula flowers.

Rosebay willowherb (Epilobium angustifolium)



ROSEBAY WILLOWHERB

A useful beauty.

Epilobium angustifolium
(*Chamaenerion angustifolium*): Also called fireweed.

Family: Evening primrose family, *Onagraceae* (*Oenotheraceae*)

Perennial: Harvest in summer.

Habitat: Rosebay willowherb is common along roadsides, in meadows, and at forest edges. It spreads by both seed and runners and often covers large areas.

Appearance: The young shoots have an abundance of tiny leaves at the top; they are hairless. Any leaves on the stem spiral up along it. The leaves have smooth edges.

The flowering plant turns whole landscapes bright purple.

Look-alikes: Yellow and tufted loosestrife (*Lysimachia vulgaris*, *L. thyrsoiflora*)—the loosestrifes have opposite leaves; narrowleaf hawkweed (*Hieracium umbellatum*)—which has toothed leaf edges.

Important constituents: Tannins, protein, vitamin C, carotene, trace minerals, a hint of mucilage

PICKING AND PROCESSING

Use only the leaves. Gather them before the plant flowers: take a firm grip of the stem and yank it up. Then you can either take the stems home with you or strip the leaves into your basket. Stems in leaf can be hung to dry in small bundles.

Rosebay willowherb stalks are considerably larger and heavier than those of other herbs. If you dry the herb in bundles, make sure the twine you use is strong, and that the nail or hook is sturdy and attached to a stud or rafter, not just drywall.

Dry the leaf separately from flowers or flower buds. The dried seedpods (found with small flower buds) burst at the lightest touch and fill the area with white fluff to the point that you can't breathe. If you choose to keep your fluffy willowherb leaf, you'll get a tiny fluff explosion every time you open the jar. It's better to pick and dry new willowherb without flowers or flower buds.

The dried flowers lend a splash of color to dried tea blends. Pick them without their stems.

You can use any willowherb like rosebay willowherb. If I had to choose another species, I'd prefer one as large and as easy to gather.

Primrose leaf (*Oenothera* species) can be used in place of fireweed.

EFFECTS AND USES

Fireweed leaf is good for gut mucosa. I use it as a base in tea blends for digestive trouble.

The leaf also treats benign enlarged prostate. For that, I recommend daily

walks in addition to herbs; the walks will enhance blood supply to the area.

Fireweed was used for centuries to remedy the "green diarrhea" resulting from the change from winter foods (salted meat and fish, canned vegetables) to spring's first fresh produce. Because it enhances general enzyme production in the stomach lining and pancreas, the tea is still helpful for preventing the upset gut that comes with dietary changes.

Take willowherb tea regularly, and you'll find it easier to digest the foods you eat only now and then. Drink it if you plan, for example, to change your diet from omnivore to vegetarian, or vice versa. Drink it before you go abroad, too, to keep traveler's diarrhea at bay.

Use a strong willowherb tea as a gargle for inflammations in the mouth and throat.



This fireweed leaf is of a fairly good quality, although it's harvested in late summer.

Willowherb tea

1–2 teaspoons dried or fresh willowherb leaves

1 cup (250 ml) boiling water

Pour water over the herb, steep for 10 minutes, and strain. Drink up to three cups a day.

FOOD USES

The very young shoots of willowherb can be used like a kind of wild asparagus. Remove and discard the tuft of leaves at the top, cook the shoots as you would any asparagus, and serve with a nice sauce or aioli.

You can add the discarded tops to your herbal tea, or to stews and soups.

The young leaves make a nice addition to stews and salads.

During the world wars, Europeans used fermented willowherb leaf in place of scarce Chinese tea. In Russia, fermented willowherb leaf was sold under the name of “Kaporie Tea.” (See page 14 for more on fermentation.)



Willowherb shoots, perfect for willowherb asparagus.

Henriette Kress: *Practical Herbs*, 2011.

Read more here:

<http://www.henriettesherbal.com/articles/pract-herbs.html>

QUICK HELP FOR SMALL TROUBLES

BLEEDING

Shepherd's purse (*Capsella bursa-pastoris*) makes an efficient styptic. I've used it for small wounds on the hands or face—they usually bleed profusely—and in heavy menses. You can also use it for nosebleeds.

Show deeper wounds to a doctor. (Of course, you should always see a doctor if you have internal bleeding!)

Shepherd's purse is a common weed in dry places. Pay close attention, though: its heart-shaped seedpods resemble those of penny-cresses (*Thlaspi* species). Penny-cresses aren't toxic, but they won't stop bleeding. Look carefully



Seedpods of shepherd's purse (*Capsella bursa-pastoris*).

and the difference becomes plain: seeds of shepherd's purse have straight edges and are of uniform thickness; penny-cress seeds are thicker in the middle, with flaring rounded "wings" on the edges. Also, shepherd's purse tastes of cabbage, while penny-cresses are more oniony.

Dried shepherd's purse has a limited shelf-life. The tincture lasts longer.

In summertime it's easy enough to pick a fresh leaf, crush it between your fingers, and apply it to a bleeding spot. Dry or tincture the herb to use the rest of the year.

For nosebleed, eat a leaf or take a few drops of tincture every few minutes until the bleeding stops. Or drink a cup of shepherd's purse tea.

The tea or tincture helps with heavy menses, too. Use for a few days before menses and during bleeding. (And make sure you get enough magnesium, iron, and vitamins B and C.)

Shepherd's purse doesn't keep for long, so harvest new herb every year.

If you can't find shepherd's purse, try yarrow, cayenne pepper, usnea, or white deadnettle.

Tea of shepherd's purse

1–2 teaspoons dried or fresh shepherd's purse

1 cup (250 ml) boiling water

Pour water over the herb, steep for 5 to 10 minutes, and strain. Drink two to three cups a day.

Practical Herbs is written for everyone who likes to harvest and process their own herbs from the wild or from their gardens.

This volume includes comprehensive instructions for making herbal tinctures, oils, salves, vinegars, teas, and syrups.

Finnish herbalist Henriette Kress focuses on herbs that are easy to grow or find in northern Europe—stressing teas over tinctures, as local tradition dictates.

About the author

Henriette Kress learned her first herbs at her grandma's knee and has studied herbs and their uses ever since. A practicing herbalist since 1998, her website, <http://www.henriettesherbal.com>, is one of the oldest and most comprehensive on the Internet.

Said about this book

"Wonderful work, very readable, practical, clear, informative and full of care."

Christopher Hedley, herbalist, London, United Kingdom.

"For the beginning student, it has everything you need to get started. For the advanced herbalist, it is rich with practical offerings, formulas, recipes, and uses commonly overlooked."

Paul Bergner, editor, Medical Herbalism Journal, U.S. <http://www.medherb.com>

"An excellent foundational book for the beginner as well as a refreshing overview and common sense guide for the more advanced practitioner."

Kiva Rose, herbalist, U.S. <http://bearmedicineherbals.com>

"How wonderful to see such useful knowledge compiled into such a sensible, applicable and no nonsense style."

Zoe Hawes, herbalist, United Kingdom. <http://zoehawes.co.uk>

"It is, all in all, the best kind of book: one that you can trust, and that you'll learn cool new stuff from."

Jim McDonald, herbalist, Michigan, U.S. <http://herbcraft.org>

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