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Using your hedgerow harvest

Herbs can be used in many different ways. Simplest of all is nibbling on the fresh plant, crushing the leaves to apply them as a poultice or perhaps boiling up some leaves as a tea. Many of the plants discussed in this book are foods as well as medicines, and incorporating them seasonally in your diet is a tasty and enjoyable way to improve your health.

But because fresh herbs aren't available year round or may not grow right on your doorstep, you may want to preserve them for later use. Follow these guidelines.

Equipment needed

You don't need any special equipment for making your own hedgerow medicines. You probably already have most of what you need. Kitchen basics like a teapot, measuring jugs, saucepans and a blender are all useful, as are jam-making supplies such as a jelly bag and jam jars. A mortar and pestle are useful but not essential.

You'll need jars and bottles, and labels for these. It is a good idea to have a notebook to write down your experiences, so you'll have a record for yourself and can repeat successes. Who knows, it could become a future family heirloom like the stillroom books of old!

There is a list of suppliers at the end of the book to help you source any supplies or ingredients you may need.

Drying herbs

The simplest way to preserve a plant is to dry it, and then use the dried part to make teas (infu-

sions or decoctions). Dried plant material can also go into tinctures, infused oils and other preparations, though these are often made directly from fresh plants.

To dry herbs, tie them in small bundles and hang these from the rafters or a laundry airer, or spread the herbs on a sheet of brown paper or a screen. (Avoid using newspaper as the inks contain toxic chemicals.) You can easily make your own drying screen by stapling some mosquito netting or other open-weave fabric to a wooden frame. This is ideal, as the air can circulate around the plant, and yet you won't lose any small flowers or leaves that are loose.

Generally, plants are best dried out of the sun. An airing cupboard works well, particularly in damp weather.

Storing dried herbs

Once the plant is crisply dry, you can discard any larger stalks. Whole leaves and flowers will



keep best, but if they are large you may want to crumble them so they take up less space. They will be easier to measure for teas etc. if they are crumbled before use.

Dried herbs can be stored in brown paper bags or in airtight containers such as sweet jars or plastic tubs, in a cool place. If your container is made of clear glass or other transparent material, keep it in the dark as light will fade leaves and flowers quite quickly. Brown glass jars are excellent – we have happily worked our way through quantities of hot chocolate in order to build up a collection of these!

Dried herbs will usually keep for a year, until you can replace them with a fresh harvest. Roots and bark keep longer than leaves and flowers.

Teas: infusions and decoctions

The simplest way to make a plant extract is with hot water. Fresh or dried herbs can be used. An **infusion**, where hot water is poured over the herb and left to steep for several minutes, is the usual method for leaves and flowers.

A **decoction**, where the herb is simmered or boiled in water for some time, is needed for roots and

Part of a summer's hedgerow harvest: (from left) St John's wort in olive oil; dried mugwort; dandelion flower oil; raspberry vinegar; meadowsweet ghee; meadowsweet, mugwort and mint in white wine; rosehip oxymel





Cherry *Prunus avium*

Rosaceae Rose family

Description: A tall tree with smooth, shiny and red-brown bark, peeling horizontally; bears soft white flowers in spring; small red or yellow cherries follow in the autumn.

Habitat: Woodlands and hedgerows.

Distribution: Wild cherries are widespread throughout the British Isles.

Related species: The dwarf cherry (*P. cerasus*) yields sour Morello cherries. Bark of the North American wild cherry (*P. serotina*) is widely used in herbal medicine for coughs.

Parts used: Fruit and fruit stalks gathered in summer, bark harvested in autumn.

Wild sweet cherries, also known as gaskins, geans, mazzards and merrys, are not only delicious to eat but also good for your gout or arthritis. The fruit stalks and inner bark have medicinal virtues too, for treating dry coughs, sore throats and bronchitis. It is a bonus that children seem to love the tea or syrup, leaving their parents to drink up the cherry brandy.



We all know and enjoy the cherry blossom and cherry fruit seasons, but using the bark of the wild sweet cherry (*Prunus avium*) medicinally may be a new idea to some readers. The official *British Herbal Pharmacopoeia* lists the powdered bark of the American cherry (*P. serotina*) as an anti-tussive, i.e. anti-cough, remedy, but we have found the wild local equivalent to be excellent in its own right and recommend it to you.

Long used as a country recipe, a decoction or syrup of the inner bark of wild cherry, alone or with elderberry (as in our recipe), plums or sloes, remains a tasty and safe drink for sore throats and bronchitis that children find palatable. Its special affinity is for dry and irritating coughs. The stalks of the fruit also have a traditional use as a decoction for coughs, with similar effects to the bark. The fruit can be added for flavour.

The fruit has a reputation as a gout treatment, but you need to eat quite a lot of cherries to lower the high levels of uric acid implicated. Cherries work well as a gentle laxative, but anyone who has gorged on fresh cherries will have discovered that eating too many can cause diarrhoea.

Cherries contain anthocyanins, which are potent antioxidants, as well as vitamins A, B and C. They are cleansing and nourishing, and help to 'build the blood' in cases of weakness and anaemia. Cherries help with colds and recovery from illness, and taste so good you hardly need an excuse to eat them.



The cherry tree is the only fruit tree I know where people hold the bark in as high esteem as the fruit.

– Brill & Dean (1994)

A tree of virtuous blossom, virtuous timber, and rather less virtuous fruit, except for the purposes of cherry brandy.

– Grigson (1958)

Cherry brandy

Loosely fill a preserving jar with **cherries**. If they are sour, sprinkle with a little **muscovado sugar**, then top up the jar with **brandy**. Latch the lid down tightly and shake the jar well. Turn it upside down every few days to keep the sugar from settling at the bottom. After three months, strain and bottle. Enjoy at your leisure.

Cherry bark and elderberry cough syrup

Cut thin strips of **bark** from cherry branches in the autumn when the leaves are falling. One way to do this is to prune off a few small branches, then use a sharp knife to cut off all the bark. It is the greenish-white inner bark that is medicinal. Dry the bark in the shade.

Fill a small jar with the **dried bark** and top it up with **vodka**. Leave in a cool dark place for a month, shaking the jar occasionally, then strain. This is a cherry bark tincture.

To make the cough syrup, combine 1 part **cherry bark tincture** with 2 parts **elderberry glycerite** (recipe, page 63). For example, for a 150ml bottle of syrup you would use 50ml cherry bark tincture and 100ml elderberry glycerite.

Dose: 1 teaspoonful three or four times a day. Halve this for children.

Fresh cherry fruit

- anaemia
- constipation
- gout
- arthritis

Cherry bark and elderberry syrup

- coughs
- sore throats
- bronchitis

