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Digging Deep with Cynthia Brian Harvest a Medicine Chest

By Cynthia Brian



Make a sunflower tea from the leaves and flower petals to treat colds and coughs. Photos Cynthia Brian

"Flowers always make people better. Flowers are sunshine, food and medicine to the soul." - Luther Burbank

Whether you have a sore throat or a sore hip, your prescription for optimum health may be as close as your garden. Since the dawn of humanity, even before recorded history, herbs and plants have been used for medicinal purposes. Ancient cultures including the Chinese and Egyptian documented on papyrus the benefits as early as 3000 BC. One fourth of pharmaceutical drugs we find on the market today are derived from botanicals. According to the World Health Organization, approximately 80 percent of the Earth's population depend on herbal remedies as primary health care.

The falling autumn leaves signal the beginning of the influenza season as most of us rush to our local internist or drug store for the updated flu shot. I have already been vaccinated and now am preparing my first aid kit with natural remedies from my garden pharmacy. Many fruits, vegetables, herbs, seeds, and leaves that are growing in your garden can be harvested not only to be added to your dinner menu, but to boost your immune system, clean wounds, calm bites, reduce fevers, and arrest pain. Always consult your physician before beginning any new regimen

and of course, if you need medical attention, seek a physician.

Here is a short list of my favorite common specimens and the ailments they relieve.

Mint: Spearmint, peppermint, hyssop, or any mint except pennyroyal (poisonous), is not only great for making your breath smell fresher, but is useful for soothing headaches, reducing fatigue, calming stomach aches, fighting nausea, and keeping colds and flu at bay. For indigestion or diarrhea, chew on peppermint leaves. Nosh on mint raw, add it to salads, garnish dishes, or make mint tea. Mint is one of the wonder drugs.

Catnip: Besides making cats euphoric, catnip relieves cold symptoms, toothaches, flatulence, and breaks fevers. It is a member of the mint family, can be eaten raw or made into teas. Pregnant women should not consume catnip as it may induce contractions.

Rosemary: This Mediterranean herb is part of the mint family also. It's called the "remembrance" plant because it improves circulation to the brain. The oil in the flowers act as antibacterial and anti-fungal agents. Add rosemary to meats on the barbecue grill.

Sage: The name says it all. *Salvia*, derived from the Latin, *salvere*, meaning to be saved. Sage is a lifesaver as it aids in multiple ways. Sage reduces diarrhea, relieves cramps, kills bacteria, minimizes inflammation, reduces swelling, and fights colds. Make a poultice or salve for cuts, burns, and bruises.

Red Clover: It may be growing in your lawn or you may use it as a cover crop. The pink flowers can be made into a broth to ease coughs and colds.

Allium: Increase your intake of onions, garlic, leeks, shallots, and chives not only for the aromatic culinary delights, but also if you suffer from arthritis, rheumatism, or joint pain. Researchers have found dialyl disulphide, a substance found in alliums inhibit enzymes that cause damage to joint protective cartilage. Raw or cooked the delicious allium appear to boost your immune system. When we were kids, we even put a clove of garlic in our ears with a bit of olive oil to battle earaches. Garlic is reputed to keep vampires away, too.

Parsley: After a garlic infused meal, a bite of fresh parsley sprigs freshen your breath. Parsley also inhibits the secretion of histamines, which cause allergies and hay fever. A tea of parsley seeds or leaves is also helpful as a diuretic or laxative.

Dandelion: We all have dandelions sprouting somewhere in our gardens. Instead of cursing these tough weeds, embrace them as a nutritious addition to your diet to enhance the elimination of toxins. Dandelions may be used as a diuretic to help with PMS symptoms. Chop the leaves and add them to salads ramping up the intake of vitamin C and beta carotene.

Elderberry: Hippocrates named his elderberry tree a "medicine chest" in 400 BC. The blue/black berries made into jams, syrups, and wines are high in antioxidants, vitamin C, and iron.

Grape: Grind ripe grapes into a juice and drink without adding any other liquid to relieve migraines.

Winter savory: You use it to flavor stews, meat, and soups, but did you know that the leaves are effective antiseptics and also an ointment for insect bites and stings?

Lady fern: Roll some leaves in the palm of your hand and mash them to soothe minor burns, stings, and cuts.

Lavender: What is a garden without the soothing smell of lavender? Besides being a bee magnet, rubbing the flowers or leaves between your fingers then inhaling the fragrance is a sure stress reliever and tension liberator. If you are feeling depressed or anxious, lavender soothes the soul. Make a tea of lavender to induce sleep or use the petals in the bath as aromatherapy to bring on the calm.

Sunflower: It's not just the seeds that are nutritious, but a tea made from the leaves works as an astringent, expectorant, and fever reducer. Use sunflower tea to treat colds and coughs.

Aloe Vera: This is a plant that everyone must have around the house. For burns and minor abrasions, pop open a leaf and rub the jelly on the wound to keep it from getting infected. Aloe is a great mild laxative when added to water and alleviates heartburn and sunburn.

Cabbage: Crush a handful of leaves, wrap in a cloth, and apply to the forehead as a compress to help with headaches. When the compressed leaves dry out, replace them with fresh leaves.

Lemon: I use every part of the lemon for a variety of health treatments. Before any speaking engagement, radio or TV appearance, I drink a hot concoction of Meyer lemon rinds, juice, and pulp mixed with mint, water, and honey to clear my throat and enhance my vocal chords. Feel a cold coming on? Drink this brew with added torn lemon leaves, shredded ginger root, and Echinacea flowers. To clean my hands after gardening, I cut a lemon and rub them over my dirt stained digits. Want lighter, brighter locks? Squeeze the juice of any lemon on your hair and enjoy the sunshine. Migraine? Grind the peel and apply as a paste to the forehead.

Chamomile: Use fresh or dried florets and leaves to making a tummy calming tea. Chamomile helps steady jittery nerves and anxiety.

Rose: The fruit of the rose is the rose hip, one of the richest plant sources of vitamin C, high in vitamin A, B, and the antioxidant lycopene. Eat raw, cooked, or brewed to prevent colds and flu as well as an anti-inflammatory to relieve the pain of arthritis. Use the rose petals to make a lovely scented rose water for an astringent, skin toner, and body bath.

Apple: Filled with antioxidants, pectin, and fiber, apples fight tooth decay, decrease risk of diabetes, lower cholesterol, protect against Parkinsons, cancers, and perhaps Alzheimer's diseases, prevent cataracts, gallstones, and boost the immune system. An apple a day will keep the doctor away.

These are just a smattering of the plant based healing that you will find in nature's drug store, also known as your backyard garden. If the year was 1692 and I lived in Puritanical Salem, I'd be hung as a witch for prescribing these "devilish" herbal remedies. Since it's 2013 in Lamorinda, I'll keep stirring the cauldron of healthy natural choices and caution you to use these powerful potions wisely.

Cynthia Brian's Gardening Guide for October

"Tickle it with a hoe and it will laugh into a harvest." - English Saying

In primitive days before modern medicine, wise women harvested herbs, leaves, and fruits to make healing brews when people were ill. These sages were often midwives using natural curative concoctions to ease the pain and suffering of childbirth. As Christianity swept the land, it was ascertained that only men of the Church could be healers and since sickness was seen as a punishment for sins committed, these medicine women were considered to be in cohorts with the devil. The word "witch" comes from the word Wicca, meaning "Wise One" yet, soon these herbal healers became feared as evil sorcerers. When you whip up a bubbling cauldron of biological magic, remember that you are a good and godly wise witch, respecting and honoring nature to work its wonder. If you desire more treats than tricks next season, get thee into thy garden to prepare.

- SPRINKLE laundry detergent on sprouting mushrooms to kill them.
- RAKE leaves then use your lawn mower to cut them up to add to the compost bin.
- IMPROVE your soil before any fall planting by adding new soil, compost, fertilizer, and mulch.
- RID roses and mandevillas of aphids or gnats by putting cloves of garlic around the base.
- HARVEST the last of your tomatoes, peppers, grapes, zucchini, eggplant, and beans before the first frost.
- HAMMER the stems of cut flowers before placing them in a vase with water and a drop of bleach.

By smashing the stems, they drink up the water faster and last longer.

- PRUNE your berry vines after you have harvested the fruit for easier picking next season.
- MULCH your bare ground with two or three inches of newspaper. The zinc in the ink keeps bugs away.

Add wood chips or bark as a topper. The newspaper will decompose and can be tilled. (This is a great way to recycle your Lamorinda Weekly after reading it. It will become part of your landscape.)

- BUY your spring bulbs that need four to six weeks of refrigeration (tulips, for example) for planting next month.
- PICK any fruit that has fallen to the ground to prevent insect attraction or disease.
- SAVE seeds from your perennials, herbs, and vegetables by clipping the pods, drying them on a mat in the sun, or putting them in a brown paper bag. After they are dried, remove the chafe and leaves, separate out the seeds, and store in a sealed jar with a label.
- KEEP insects out of your houseplants by dumping pencil shavings into the container. Mothballs work also against moths and caterpillars.
- GIVE your potted patio plants a calcium bath by crushing eggshells in a bucket, adding water and letting it sit for two hours. Pour into the pots.
- DEADHEAD roses, annuals, and perennials to extend the blooms.
- MOVE containers to the shade as Indian summer shines brightest.
- PLACE three matchsticks into the holes you dig when planting fall flowers. The sulphur kills insects and enriches the soil.

- BUY trees boasting autumn colors now.
- CHECK around your house for fire hazards and flammable materials. This is a dry year and October is traditionally the worst fire month.
- AERATE and fertilize grass. Raise the blades on mowers.
- TRANSPLANT calendulas, Iceland poppies, dianthus, forget-me-nots, primroses, Shasta daisies, agapanthus, and daylilies.
- CAN or freeze your extra harvest of fruit and vegetables to enjoy in the cold of winter.
- PLUCK the florets on your herbs, such as garlic chives, basil, mint, and other flowering herbs.
- USE the colorful leaves from autumn trees such as Japanese maple, liquid amber, or grapes to create a beautiful fall display.
- CARVE pumpkins with happy faces or make funny jack o'lanterns. Roast the seeds and pack them for school lunches.
- RESEED old lawns now for the fastest, healthiest growth or fill in bare spots with blue star creeper, isotoma.
- CAST a healthy spell on your little wizards, warlords, and witches with a pitcher of fresh pressed apple cider.

Happy Harvest. Happy Halloween Haunting. Happy Gardening and Growing.

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Cynthia is available as a speaker and consultant.



Remember rosemary to boost memory and aid with circulation.



Feeling tense or have an upset stomach? Pick chamomile flowers and feel the tranquility.



Aphids attacking a mandevilla. Add cloves of garlic or spray with soap.



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