

Plant Your Own Simple Herbal Remedies:

Eight easy-to-grow medicinal herbs treasured for soothing relief of minor ailments.

Almost everyone is gardening these days. What with food prices so high and no end in sight, there's hardly a family around that hasn't plowed up at least part of the backyard to grow a variety of vegetables and fruits.

Now, however, another kind of crop is starting to take up residence in neighborhoods all over America-bushy, aromatic herbs.

We all know there's nothing like herbs to add flavor and spice to everyday foods. But thousands of years ago, it was their medicinal properties that made them so valuable. They were the "wonder drugs" of the Romans, Egyptians, Europeans and others who developed comprehensive herbal remedies.

Too bad most of them have been lost in the rush for today's modern miracle cures, because there's still plenty to say in favor of those old-time practices. Whether it's an herb tea to soothe a sore throat and loosen a cough or a poultice of herbs to lessen the pain of arthritis or sprains, there's a place for that kind of treatment in every home.

So while you're growing your vegetables this summer, why not add some herbs to the family plot? You can start some of them from seed or you can buy plants from a nursery for use this summer. And we'll tell you how to get others started from seeds or cuttings so you'll be all set for next spring, or maybe even for a little indoor gardening during the off season.

We've compiled a list of eight practical medicinal herbs you can grow yourself, although there are lots more. Some of them you'll recognize immediately because of their popularity as seasonings. But all of them, whether you know it or not, have properties that also classify them as medicinal.

HERBS AREN'T FUSSY

Best of all, herbs practically raise themselves. Most like an open, sunny, well-drained spot, somewhat sheltered from the wind. But the soil need not be rich; in fact, it's actually better in some cases if it isn't. And herbs are seldom bothered to any extent by bugs.

All of the herbs we're discussing are perennials, which means they'll come up year after year. The plant itself may be killed by the frost, but the roots hibernating all winter will send up new shoots at the crack of spring.

Still, some herbs are more tender than others. So it's a good idea not to plant outdoors until all danger of frost is past.

You can begin harvesting your herbs much sooner than you might think. The leaves of an herb plant can be picked at almost any time, though peak flavor is reached just before flowering. Picking stimulates new growth-so don't hold back. In fact, you can pull off up to a third of the plant all at once without doing any harm.

Once you've got the leaves, you can use them fresh or preserve them for the future by drying them. The same can be done with flowers and seedheads, too.

To dry, arrange the herbs (leaves, seeds or flowers) in thin layers on clean paper, cookie sheets or best of all, screens or mesh. Allow to air-dry. They'll take two days to two weeks to become brittle. Store in airtight glass jars in a dark place away from excessive heat.

Herbs can also be hung in bunches to dry, or you can dry them in your kitchen oven. But you must be careful not to overheat, or the aromatic oils will evaporate.

Dried leaves are more concentrated than fresh, so recipes will have to be adjusted to compensate for that. For example, when making an herb tea, put in one teaspoon per cup if you are using dried herbs and two if fresh.

"Some herb teas are best when made with fresh leaves, but you can use dried, too." says Bonnie Fisher, author of *Bonnie Fisher's Way With Herbs Cookbook* (Keats, 1980). Mrs. Fisher has been growing herbs for years. "Once I got started, I couldn't stop," she says. "The first year I planted only basil. Then I got curious and started reading books on the subject and experimenting on my own. Now I grow 125 different herbs. Interest is really catching on. Eight or so years ago it was almost impossible to find herb seeds, let alone plants. Now it's much easier to get what you need."

Of course, our list of medicinal herbs isn't a complete one. That would take volumes. Our group is intended to pique your interest and help you get started with your own herb garden, whether you're a seasoned gardener or a novice.

SAGE

Common sage is an attractive shrubby perennial growing from 18 inches to two feet. It has gray-green pebble-textured leaves and clusters of lilac-blue flowers. Sage is readily propagated from seed—you can start it outdoors after the last frost. The plants will grow in any kind of soil if they have full sun. Take care not to water from above in the evening, as sage can develop mildew from that practice.

Use the leaves from the matured plant either fresh or dried.

Sage is valued for counteracting rich and greasy foods such as goose and duck. That's probably why it has a reputation to this day as a digestive aid. In fact, many who take sage for intestinal inflammation testify that the strong, camphorous, slightly bitter tea is quite effective.

But that's not all it's used for. Some gargle with sage tea to relieve sore throat or bleeding gums. And the tea, made extra strong, is an excellent lotion for raw abrasions of the skin.

HORSERADISH

This sassy herb is best propagated from root cuttings. The cuttings should be about eight or nine inches long and have a crown or growing point. Plant 12 to 15 inches deep in soil that is rich, moist and well supplied with organic matter. Except for clearing the weeds, no further care is needed.

Horseradish is a vigorous perennial that can easily get out of hand. For that reason you may want to give it private room for growing.

The plant itself can reach a height of two feet and be about as wide. But it's only the root that is used for food or medicine. The root can be stored in a cool cellar, barn, outdoor pit or cold storage and will keep for months.

To use, just grate some of the fresh raw root. You'll immediately notice its pungent odor and hot, biting taste.

When eaten, horseradish acts as a potent diuretic. In fact it's the diuretic properties that make horseradish useful for gout and rheumatic problems and for bladder infections.

Externally, horseradish is used as an irritant to stimulate blood flow. It can also be made into a poultice for rheumatism.

Horseradish juice mixed with white vinegar is said to help remove freckles when applied to the skin.

GARLIC

Growing garlic is almost foolproof. The soil may be sandy, loam or clay, but garlic grows best in a rich, moist, sandy soil. Just divide the garlic bulb into its component cloves and plant them in a sunny spot about two inches deep and about six inches apart, leaving about a foot between rows. And keep them free from weeds.

The bulbs should be ready to harvest when the leaves of the plant turn brown and dry. In the off season, you can plant the cloves in a pot placed on a sunny windowsill.

Everyone knows how garlic enhances the flavor of foods. But you'll be glad to know that scientists have confirmed that garlic stimulates the flow of gastric juices and aids digestion. It dilates blood vessels and has been used successfully to relieve high blood pressure.

ROSEMARY

Rosemary is a sun-loving evergreen that flourished best in poor, sandy, well-drained and limes soils. It's a tender perennial, which means it may not make it through a harsh winter. For that reason, rosemary is ideal for growing indoors in a pot about 10 inches in diameter. Outdoors it will grow to as much as five feet, but indoors this bushy, needlelike evergreen can be kept to a reasonable height of about two feet by pinching back or harvesting tip cuttings.

"Either way, this is one herb you probably will not want to start from seed," says Bonnie Fisher, "unless you're very patient. Seeds generally take three to four weeks to germinate, if at all. You're better off getting plants or cuttings." Place them about three feet apart outdoors or one to a pot indoors. But no matter where it is grown, rosemary must never be allowed to dry out or be subjected to temperatures below 27°.

The leaves are used either fresh or dried. Use as a seasoning, but try it as a tea, too. In that form, it's been prescribed for everything from bad breath (it has a piney taste) to hair loss. In fact, it's still an ingredient in hair oils. Rosemary is believed to cure headaches, strengthen the

memory, stimulate the appetite and quiet coughs. The tea has even been used externally to clear the complexion

CHAMOMILE

Chamomile is a low-growing, apple-scented, mat-like perennial whose flowers are remarkably daisy-like.

In fact, it's the flowers that are most often used for medicinal purposes. Maude Grieve says a chamomile tea made by mixing one ounce of the flowers to a pint of boiling water has a wonderfully soothing, sedative effect. It's considered a preventive for nightmares and has sometimes been employed in intermittent fevers.

Chamomile flowers are also used as a poultice for external swelling, inflammatory pain, earache and toothache. It's even used to relieve the problem of sore gums.

"For months I had been enduring discomfort and pain resulting from irritated and inflamed gums," another letter writer told us. "I went to a dentist, and he suggested I have two teeth pulled. My 'gut feeling' told me that my teeth did not have to be pulled!

"Instinctively, I tried rinsing my mouth with lukewarm chamomile tea. You cannot imagine what relief that brought! It was like a soothing, calming effect that 'put out the fire' that had seemed to be burning my gums. I continue to rinse with chamomile tea after each brushing."

Chamomile can be started from seed in well-drained, rather dry, sandy soil. Thin the seedlings so they are about 18 inches apart. They should be pressed in firmly and kept well weeded. Once established they'll produce runners, which should be divided the following spring for further plant propagation.

Or purchase some mature, double-flowered plants to begin with. Chamomile doesn't require especially fertile soil, but add cow manure to insure an adequate supply of nitrogen.

The herb stays low except while in bloom. The foliage is very fine and fernlike with a delicate sprinkling of white flowers, almost too pretty to pick.

PEPPERMINT

Mints will grow almost anywhere, but thrive in moist, rich soil in shade or sun. Peppermint is best started by cuttings or root divisions of a bought plant and grows to about four feet tall. It has small reddish-violet flowers, which along with the leaves give off the characteristic menthol aroma when crushed.

Mint grows from creeping roots and spreads so rapidly that it can wreak havoc in your herb garden. For that reason you may want to plant it in a bed by itself in a big tub or indoors in a pot. Actually, you probably won't mind that it grows so prolifically because there are so many uses for this herb.

Brew a tea of peppermint to alleviate nausea, flatulence and colic. It's also good for raising internal heat and inducing perspiration. It can be taken for nervousness, insomnia, poor digestion, heartburn and migraine headaches.

"In slight colds or early indications of disease," claims Maude Grieve, "A free use of peppermint tea will, in most cases, effect a cure."

Made into a salve or a bath additive, it can relieve itching skin conditions.

PLANTAIN

You may be more familiar with plantain as a common perennial weed than as a medicinal herb. That's because plantain grows profusely on lawns, along roadsides and in meadowlands. It can overtake your lawn if allowed to spread, so think twice about where you want to sow seeds.

You can recognize plantain by its oval, smooth, thickish leaves, which range from 4 to 10 inches long and about two-thirds as broad. Purplish-green flowers, held on long erect stalks, reach the same length as the leaves but have blunted ends.

The flowers, along with the leaves, can be used to treat any number of minor problems. The fresh leaves can be applied whole or bruised in the form of a poultice, then rubbed over insect bites and stings to bring relief from pain. Plantain may even stop the bleeding of minor cuts and scrapes.

"The itching associated with poison ivy can be ... stopped when crushed leaves of the common plantain are rubbed on the affected area," says Serge Duckett, M.D., Ph.D., of the Jefferson Medical College in Philadelphia. And he should know, because he had success with it himself. So pleased was he with the results that he had since treated 10 others afflicted with poison ivy. "The cessation of itching in all cases was rapid," says Dr. Duckett, "and the dermatitis did not spread to other areas of the body" (New England Journal of Medicine, September 4, 1980).

CATNIP

As its name implies, cats adore this herb and will go into a state of ecstatic abandon over it. "Even mountain lions become silly and playful when they get ahold of catnip," says Mrs. Fisher. On humans, however, it has the opposite effect, and for that reason catnip tea (which has a minty, slightly bitter taste) is often used as a sleep inducer. "It's good in restlessness, colic, and nervousness," according to Maude Grieve, author of *A Modern Herbal* (Dover Publications, 1971). She also says that catnip will relieve painful swellings when it is applied in the form of a poultice.

A woman from Cameron, Missouri, found yet another use for catnip. "I suffered with a stomach ulcer for several years, trying all sort of remedies," she told us in a letter. "Finally, I tried catnip tea. It worked like a charm; my ulcer was gone in practically no time."

Whether you use catnip as a tea or a poultice, you'll find that it is quite easy to grow as long as you have well-drained soil. It can be started from seeds, plants or stem cuttings.

In the spring it's pretty easy to use cuttings; stem ends four inches long stuck into soil or other planting media will usually root within a week.

Harvest the catnip when half the blossoms are open, early in the day after the dew has evaporated. For medicinal purposes use two or three heaping teaspoons of catnip in a cup of boiling water. Steep for 10 minutes.

Add honey and drink your catnip tea as you like it—hot or cold.

A WORD ABOUT SAFETY

A few words of caution. Never take any herb internally (or, externally for that matter) unless you know exactly what it is and what it may do. Even so-called safe ones may cause some upset if taken too freely. Stick to weak herbal teas or culinary herbs. Most of all, don't forget to take the time to enjoy your garden. "In the cool of early morning," says Adelpma Simmons, author of *Herb Gardening in Five Seasons* (Hawthorn Books, 1964), "evaluate your plants and appreciate their beauty. Brush fragrant plants, roll a leaf or two in your hand, and breathe in the wonderful aroma."