

## Making an herbal tincture

### Traditional method

#### What you will need:

Glass jar (mason jars work well) of an appropriate size, and a same-sized measuring cup  
80 or 100 proof vodka, preferably organic ('Rain' is one brand)

Fresh or dry herbal material

Muslin or cheesecloth; knife and cutting board

#### Step one: The Herbs

You will want the highest quality herbs you can get: the strength of the tincture depends on it! If you can grow them organically, be sure to harvest them at the peak of their vibrancy, before any yellowing or damage can occur. Sing or talk to them while you harvest, they love it! Follow your own rhythms and instincts, but in general:

- leaves are harvested under the Sun, before flowering, and just before the Full Moon.
- flowers are harvested under the morning Sun, at their peak, just before the Full Moon.
- barks and twigs are harvested under the Sun, right after the New Moon.
- roots are harvested under the evening Sun, or at night, when the tops of the plants have died back in the Fall or right before the plants come up in the Spring. Harvest just before the New Moon.

You can rinse leaves gently, but don't ever wash flowers. Roots and barks should be well washed and cleaned. Pat dry in a towel before proceeding.

If you are purchasing herbs, only buy organically grown. The residues on commercially grown crops (synthetic pesticides and fertilizers) make them unfit for medicine. If you can, buy them fresh, but dry herbs can make incredible tinctures! Make sure they are of a rich color, deep green or deep brown or fiery orange as it may be – this shows they have been properly dried and stored. They should have a strong smell, even if it's just the smell of 'green'. A small pinch under the tongue should produce a definite effect of some kind. If you can, buy whole herbs and chop them yourself. Herbs stored for six months to a year can still be good, if kept dry and out of the sun, but after a year they should be kept for teas only.

#### Step two: The Preparation and Tincturing

Once you have obtained your plant material, measure out enough to fill most of your glass jar. Then, lay it out on a cutting board. If it is finely chopped (almost powdered) already, you can just add it to the jar. Otherwise, use a knife (I like crescent-shaped blades) to chop it to a fine consistency. With some roots this may be impossible; just do the best you can. Some seeds and leaves, when dry, are easier in a mortar and pestle.

Once your herb is well chopped or ground, add it to your jar. Tell it that, soon, it will be

medicine and will help many people. Then, add enough vodka to cover it completely (this may take a while – be sure to wait for all the alcohol to trickle down), put the lid on the jar, and shake it vigorously for a little while. Store in a cool, dry place away from even indirect sunlight – but don't forget about it! Shake it well every other day.

#### Step three: Maceration and Straining

When in the jar, the tincture is said to be 'macerating', or steeping. This should continue for at least one Lunar cycle (one month, approximately), at which point it can be strained. Start by placing a strainer (medium mesh) over the mouth of the opened jar. Then, turn the whole thing over into the measuring cup. Wait for most of it to trickle out, then flip the jar back over, take out the wet herbs, and squeeze them through muslin or cheesecloth to get the last bits out (make sure your hands are clean!). Rinse out your jar, and pour the strained tincture back in. Store in a cool, dry, dark place. This tincture can keep for 10 years!

## Some additions to the Traditional Method

### What you will need:

Two glass jars and a measuring cup  
A scale  
Grain alcohol (95% pure alcohol)  
Distilled water  
A calculator  
Muslin or cheesecloth; knife and cutting board  
Fresh or dry herb material

### The Timing:

Harvesting and processing of herbs have always followed seasonal rhythms and cycles. The basic rule is a relationship, termed 'correspondence', that the herb has with its environment and with the universe. The correspondence is understood in terms of strong, universal symbols that resonate within us, the world, and the plant we are working with. The herbalist will strive to evoke layers of images and meaning as he or she interacts with the herbs – you have already seen this in the Traditional Method. Many like to use Elemental correspondences to govern harvesting and processing cycles: when the Sun is in a watery sign, like Cancer, we will harvest and process a watery herb, like Purslane, or Echinacea. This works for Moon signs as well (if not better). Ultimately, what is important isn't memorizing long lists of correspondences, but rather making your own and using them! (for example, telling the story of how well Echinacea fought off your flu last year while you make the tincture can have dramatic results).

### The Weight-to-Volume Ratio:

To get a consistent tincture from batch to batch, it is of course necessary to keep obtaining herbs of consistently high quality. It can also help to use the weight-to-volume ratio, a simple technique to ensure a repeatable process. Basically, it relates the weight of the herb you are using to the volume of alcohol you will steep it in. So, if you have 5 ounces of Echinacea root and 15 ounces of alcohol, you are making a 1 to 3 (1:3) tincture, because for every one part of herb (by weight) you are using 3 parts of alcohol (by volume). Chop your herb as usual, but this time, weigh it before putting it in the jar. Then, decide what you want your ratio to be. *Fresh* herbs do well at 1:3, or 1:2. *Dry* herbs are usually 1:4, but can be anything you want. Just remember, the higher the Volume number, the weaker the tincture. Thus, a 1:5 is roughly twice as strong as a 1:10.

### Solubility:

Certain herbs, we have found, produce a stronger tincture when they are steeped in an alcohol that is more concentrated than 80 or 100 proof vodka (which is 40 or 50% alcohol). We obtain this alcohol by mixing pure grain alcohol (which is 95%, or 190 proof) with distilled water until we obtain the right percentage. This isn't to say that all herbs do well with more alcohol in their tincture – some are damaged by too much! The term for the percentage of alcohol that the herb prefers to be tinctured in is *solubility*.

If you are mixing pure grain alcohol and distilled water to make a tincture, first determine your weight-to volume ratio. Weigh your herb, and multiply it by the volume number to determine what volume of mixture you'll need. The amount of alcohol required is given by:

$$(V \times S) : 95$$

where V is total volume and S is solubility. Measure out the alcohol, then make up the difference in the total by adding distilled water.

## Solubilities of Selected Herbs

The alcohol strengths listed represent the menstruum before adding the herbs.

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<b>Angelica</b> root		
<i>Angelica archangelica</i>	fresh	40%
<b>Astragalus</b> root		
<i>Astragalus membranaceus</i>	fresh	50%
<b>Burdock</b> root		
<i>Arctium lappa</i>	fresh	40%
<b>Boneset</b> tops		
<i>Eupatorium perfoliatum</i>	fresh	55%
<b>Black Cohosh</b> root & rhizome		
<i>Actaea racemosa</i>	fresh	60%
<b>Calendula</b> flowers		
<i>Calendula officinalis</i>	fresh	50%
<b>California Poppy</b> tops		
<i>Eschscholzia californica</i>	fresh	45%
<b>Catnip</b> leaves		
<i>Nepeta cataria</i>	fresh	40%
<b>Cleavers</b> tops		
<i>Galium aparine</i>	fresh	40%
<b>Dandelion</b> root		
<i>Taraxacum officinalis</i>	fresh	45%
<b>Echinacea</b> root		
<i>Echinacea purpurea</i>	fresh	50%
<b>Echinacea</b> tops		
<i>Echinacea purpurea</i>	fresh	40%
<b>Elder</b> flowers		
<i>Sambucus nigra</i>	dry	30%
<b>Elecampane</b> root		
<i>Inula helenium</i>	fresh	40%
<b>Feverfew</b> tops		
<i>Tanacetum parthenium</i>	fresh	60%
<b>Goldenrod</b> tops		
<i>Solidago canadensis</i>	fresh	40%
<b>Goldthread</b> rootlets		
<i>Coptis canadensis</i>	fresh	60%
<b>Hawthorn</b> berries		
<i>Crataegus spp.</i>	fresh	35-40%
<b>Lemon Balm</b> tops		
<i>Melissa officinalis</i>	fresh	40%

<b>Meadowsweet</b> leaf, flower, bark <i>Filipendula ulmaria</i>	fresh	40%
<b>Motherwort</b> young tops <i>Leonurus cardiaca</i>	fresh	50%
<b>Mugwort</b> tops <i>Artemisia vulgaris</i>	fresh	40%
<b>Nettle</b> tops <i>Urtica dioica</i>	fresh	40%
<b>Peppermint</b> leaves <i>Mentha x piperita</i> (hybrid cross)	dry	50%
<b>Red Clover</b> tops <i>Trifolium praetense</i>	fresh	40%
<b>St. John's Wort</b> tops <i>Hypericum perforatum</i>	fresh	40%
<b>Sage</b> leaves <i>Salvia officinalis</i>	fresh	40%
<b>Scullcap</b> tops <i>Scutellaria lateriflora</i>	fresh	40%
<b>Thyme</b> leaves and stems <i>Thymus vulgaris</i>	fresh	70%
<b>Valerian</b> root <i>Valeriana officinalis</i>	fresh	50%
<b>Yarrow</b> flowers and leaves <i>Achillea millefolium</i>	fresh	40%
<b>Yellowdock</b> root <i>Rumes crispus</i>	fresh	40%

Since fresh plants contain a certain amount of water, the final concentration of alcohol (once the tincture is strained) will be lower than what you began with. With many plants, you can assume that half of their fresh weight (50%, or .5) is water. In that case, the percent alcohol by volume of the final tincture is given by:

$$S \times 2V : (2V+1)$$

Where S is the original solubility of the menstruum (as listed above), and V is the volume-number in the weight-to-volume ratio (so, in a 1:3 tincture, V is 3. In a 1:4, V is 4, and so on). So, for example, if we were making a 1:3 tincture of fresh Echinacea, we would steep the roots in a 50% alcohol solution. When strained, the solution's actual percent of alcohol would be 50% times 6 (300) divided by 7, which is 42.85%.

## Elemental rulers for selected herbs

**Air** is the element of beginnings, the intellect, and the East. Very often these herbs will be aromatic, or have some subtle effect on the mind or spirit. They can help 'blow away' obstructions and congealment. They can have light, wispy shapes or reach, slender, into the air. Usually harvested for above-ground parts.

Comfrey  
Eyebright  
Mugwort  
Thyme

Elder  
Lavender  
Peppermint  
Wormwood

**Fire** is the element of passion, power, and the South. These herbs will have a spicy, strong taste and are usually very warming. Also, some can sting or irritate (burn) the skin. Often, their flowers will be of a fiery color (yellow, orange and red), and they can come in all shapes and sizes. Usually harvested for above-ground parts.

Angelica  
Wood Betony  
Hawthorn  
Mullein  
Rosemary

Basil  
Garlic  
Calendula  
Nettle  
Rue

**Water** is the elements of emotions, empathy, love, and the West. Always cooling and soothing, these herbs can help us reconnect to our feelings, ease tension, and relax inflammation. You will often find them in a moist setting, or in partial shade where they seem to do well. Harvested for all parts.

Burdock  
Catnip  
Echinacea  
Poppies  
Valerian

Chamomile  
Elecampane  
Meadowsweet  
Rose  
Blue Vervain

**Earth** is the element of wisdom, stability, and protection. Through Earth herbs we return to our centers, we are nourished and cared for. There is a direct affinity here with our physical body, giving direct, material healing to tender parts. Often harvested for their roots, these plants can also exhibit a 5-pattern in their leaves and flowers.

Black Cohosh  
Horehound  
Sage

Cinquefoil  
Pennyroyal  
Slippery Elm

## **Bottling your Tincture and Keeping Records**

After being strained, you need to bottle your tinctures if you're going to give them to others. Amber bottles work best at keeping the light out, cobalt works also. You should also obtain a small measuring cup, or better yet, a graduated cylinder.

Pour a small amount (2 or 3 ounces) of tincture into your measuring cup. Then slowly pour this into the glass bottle, stopping right as the mouth of the bottle begins to curve into the neck. This allows for ample 'shaking room', to keep the tincture lively.

Always label your tinctures clearly; you don't want to forget what's in the bottle and have to guess around later. The label should include:

- Name of herb, both common and Latin (if possible, to avoid confusion)
- Fresh or Dry, and the part(s) used in the tincture
- Date of Tincturing (and Moon / Sun sign if desired)
- Percent of alcohol by volume (40% for 80 proof vodka, 50% for 100 proof)
- Weight-to-Volume ratio, if applicable
- a Batch Number, if you plan on more than one batch per year.

It is also a good idea to copy down all the details of the label in a special 'tincture Recipe book'. Not only does this echo the fine tradition of the Herbal Grimoire, but it also is a good record of what's been happening in case the label on your tincture was damaged or unclear. It's also a great place to write down notes and ideas for each herb, to improve the process next time!