

Medicinal Uses of Culinary Herbs

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Culinary herbs are familiar and potent ingredients; their smell and tastes are distinct. They have strong qualities that impart flavor and aroma, and natural chemical constituents that act on the digestive system. It's no wonder that for centuries people have used many herbs interchangeably as seasonings, and when needed, prepared them specifically as medicine.

All of the following herbs can be grown successfully in the Northern climate, except for cinnamon, cardamom and ginger. You can buy these medicines at your local health food store in the bulk spice section - it is more cost effective than going to a supermarket, and a wiser quality choice. Many commercial herbs are irradiated, harvested at the wrong time of year, dried in ways that kill the life force (and therefore the medicine), or sprayed with chemicals during cultivation. Ask your local food co-op or health food store to carry organic or biodynamic herbs from good sources, especially local ones as these will be the most potent and effective.

Herbs are listed by plant family in order to see the correlations of properties among family members, and to begin understanding their relationships as part of an interwoven system.

*Apiaceae (Umbelliferae) (2 toxic wild members: water hemlock and poison hemlock)

Wild Carrot (Queen Anne's Lace) is a wild family member. Some cultivated family members are: carrots, celery, parsnip.

PARSLEY Leaf and root (*Petroselinum crispum*) biennial/perennial

Rich vitamin C source. Carminative – treats flatulence and colic. Emmenagogue – stimulates the menses, do not use in large amounts if pregnant. Leaves or root can be eaten. Diuretic – promotes excretion of excess water from the body. Used for edema, fluid retention, frequent urination, rheumatic complaints, intestinal worms. Chewing fresh leaves freshens the breath. The Maya consider fresh parsley juice a liver cleanser. Can be grown easily on a windowsill, and pinched for cooking as needed.

CORIANDER Seed (*Coriandrum sativum*) This is the seed of Cilantro herb, annual

Warming carminative –relieves flatulence, indigestion, colic. Stimulates the digestive juices and the appetite, drink tea of the seeds before meals. "Gripe water" remedy for kids diarrhea, steep a spoonful of seeds in a cup of boiled water for 10-15 minutes, and drink warm. Chew seeds to eliminate bad breath. Ground seeds also provide odor relief. Coriander leaves are called Cilantro, an important herb to eat for detoxing heavy metals from the body. Both seeds and leaves can be infused for urinary tract infections.

CUMIN Seed (*Cuminum cyminum*) Long season annual

Relieves gas and bloating in the digestive tract, stimulates digestion. Helpful remedy for nausea or morning sickness. An infusion before meals is warming to the digestion. Antimicrobial properties – helps treat tooth decay, used in tooth powders and mouth rinses. Treats bronchial/lung inflammation and respiratory problems. Effective pain reliever, can crush seeds and mix with hot water to form a paste, and use as a poultice over muscles. Mixed with a little fresh onion juice, apply to stings and swellings to reduce pain – helps promote blood circulation and to draw out toxins. Also promotes lactation.

FENNEL Seed (*Foeniculum vulgare*) annual

The bulb is also delicious, although milder in medicinal action. Fennel has the classic licorice candy flavor, used like anise as a flavoring. (*Glycyrrhiza glabra* root is true Licorice.) Promotes breast milk during nursing. Mothers and small children can drink the seed tea to relieve colic. Chewing the seeds after meals helps settle the stomach and ease digestion. Indian restaurants always provide fennel and other carminative seeds to chew. Very effective treatment for bloating, flatulence. Bad breath relief. Calms coughs and bronchitis, good herb to add to homemade cough syrups for its flavor and medicinal properties. Good tooth paste/powder herb. Can infuse seeds into muscle/joint rub oils for pain relief.

DILL seed (*Anethum graveolens*) annual

The green leaves are also used, and milder in medicinal properties.

Galactagogue (think Milky Way galaxy)- increases flow of mother's milk. Alleviates nervous system stress from disturbed sleep and insomnia. In parts of Asia, used to ease childbirth. Anti-spasmodic (eases cramps and spasms in the body), carminative (rich in volatile oils that stimulate digestion), and expectorant (removes excess mucus from respiratory system). Remedy for flatulence and colic, especially kids. Take one cup of tea before meals. Chew seeds for bad breath. Relieves nausea and vomiting. Relieves painful periods and regulates menstruation. The leaves cooked with fish helps brain function.

*Lamiaceae (Labiatae)

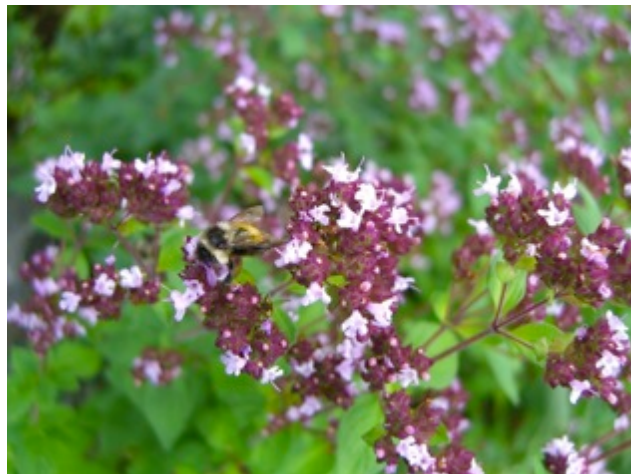
One of the largest plant families in the world: mints. Many wild and cultivated varieties.

THYME leaves (*Thymus vulgaris*) perennial

Strong antiseptic. External wash from tea for infected wounds. Internal tea or tincture for respiratory or digestive infection. Gargle for laryngitis, tonsillitis, sore throats and irritable coughs, especially with nervousness or anxiety. Expectorant (helps expel mucus from respiratory system) and anti-spasmodic. Helpful for bronchitis, whooping cough and asthma. Gentle astringent for kids diarrhea and bedwetting. Anti-septic and diuretic. Helps body fight against viral, bacterial, fungal, gastro-intestinal, and genito-urinary system infections. Helps re-establish a healthy bacterial population if on antibiotics or experiencing excess candida. Add a handful into bath to warm and exhilarate the body. Protects against degenerative problems.

OREGANO leaves (*Origanum vulgare*) perennial

Anti-fungal and anti-biotic. Tea reduces fever, by promoting sweating (diaphoretic). Treats colds and flu. Tea breaks up bronchitis, and treats inflammations of the mouth and throat. It can be used externally as a wound wash. Bruises can be soaked with the cool tea. Tea is an excellent remedy for coughs. Wonderful menstrual cramp tea. Excellent in vaginal steam baths to bring circulation and cleansing to uterus. and painful joints.



SAGE leaves (*Salvia officinalis*) tender perennial

My favorite use is to steep a pinch of sage and sea salt in a cup of hot water, and gargle several times to treat strep and sore throat. Its volatile oils soothe the mucous membranes and reduce inflammation while being highly anti-septic, -bacterial and -fungal. Specific for respiratory infections. Cool tea is a great mouthwash for inflamed and bleeding gums, tongue or mouth ulcers. Reduces sweating (helpful with hot flashes) and reduces breast milk production. Stimulates the uterine muscles – avoid if pregnant (culinary doses fine). Can aid childbirth and help expel the placenta. Good external wound healer – make a warm compress with tea over swollen area. Cleansing and diuretic properties helpful for toxic conditions, arthritis and gout. Often used in cooking heavy foods to aid their digestion. Promotes calmness of the central nervous system, calms the heart and brings mental clarity. Strong anti-oxidant. Useful externally for inflammation and painful joints.

ROSEMARY leaves and twigs (*Rosmarinus officinalis*) tender perennial/bring inside for winter

Contains anti-septic, -bacterial, and -fungal volatile oils, thereby enhancing the immune system. Bundled, brewed or burned as incense for protection against disease and negative energies. Circulatory and nervine stimulant, the smell increases concentration. Strengthens the senses. Tones and calms digestion as well as mental tension. Gives headache relief by stimulating blood flow to the head. Catalyzes movement in stagnancy or sluggishness, or depressed emotional states (can use with Tulsi, Lavender, Skullcap, Lemon Balm or Milky Oat tops). Tea can be used as a hair rinse to stimulate hair follicles. Externally provides nerve or muscle pain relief. A powerful antioxidant. Has an astringent and relaxant effect on uterus, relieves cramps and helps regulate periods. The essential oil is a bug repellent and treatment for scabies and lice.

BASIL leaves (*Ocimum basilicum*) annual

Sweet and pungent anti-bacterial, anti-fungal, anti-candida (essential oil), warming treatment for cramps, colds, flu, fevers. Has an affinity for the nervous system, strengthening, releasing tension and uplifting. Improves memory, concentration and clarity. Aid to digestion, and travel sickness. Clears phlegm from the nose and chest, and cleanses internal infections. The boiled herb or seed is a migraine remedy. A cool tea rinse prevents infections on wounds and treats infected wounds. Makes a delicious PMS tea. Put a handful of basil leaves in your bath (with marigold flowers if you have them) to treat fever. Mix 3 each marigold, rue and basil sprigs in a basin of warm water, leave in the sunlight then strain and flick around corners of the house for a cleansing – the air will feel light and peaceful. Excellent herb for vaginal steam baths (use with herbs such as oregano, chamomile, calendula, rosemary – only when not menstruating).

MINT leaves (*Mentha piperita* or *spicata*) spreading perennial

Both cooling and warming. Has a refreshing taste, and a cooling effect in the respiratory tract that can be felt on the skin. Hot peppermint tea is a warming remedy for winter ailments – it improves circulation induces heat. Helps disperse blood and tonify the heart. Excellent after dinner tea, mixed with something spicy like ginger (to treat acid reflux choose a bitter warming carminative instead). Relieves stomach and intestinal discomfort (lower digestive processes). Treats nausea, and lower digestive/bowel complaints. Helpful tea and as face steam for colds and sinus congestion. A nervine that eases anxiety and tension. Pain relief associated with menstrual cramps and general aches and pains. Good tea for kids to settle their stomach, nice in summertime ice cubes with edible flowers. Excellent anti-septic flavoring for cough, cold, indigestion, and throat remedies.

*Zingiberaceae (Ginger family) found in tropical climates of the world

(Turmeric (*Curcuma domestica/longa*) is also an herb in the ginger family)

GINGER rhizome (*Zingiber officinale*) tropical perennial

Very spicy stimulant of circulation. Promotes blood movement in the peripheries. Has blood thinning properties, inhibits blood clotting. Grate and apply as a warm compress over sprains to reduce inflammation, or on swollen glands to drain lymph. Breaks congestion and fever during colds and flu. Expectorant action in the lungs – relieves coughs and expels phlegm. Good preventative against winter chills, as tea or cooked into food. Boil 2-3 inches ginger root in 2 quarts water for 15 minutes, add juice of one lemon, a spoonful of raw honey, and pinch of cayenne pepper – drink immediately while wrapped in blankets, to sweat out a fever and pass a cold. Caution to pregnant women, very stimulating to blood flow and core of the body. An aphrodisiac. Very effective motion sickness remedy. Useful for colic, gas, indigestion. Gargle or tea for sore throats. An infused oil of grated ginger (optional pinch of cayenne pepper – avoid contact with eyes/mucous membranes) can be used to massage over sore muscles.

CARDAMOM dried seed pod (*Elettaria cardamomum*) tropical perennial

Valuable and difficult to grow herb. Some species are cultivated in hot climates in wet areas where poisonous water snakes and insects comprise a part of the micro-ecosystem. The precious seed pods grow close to the ground and are difficult to gather. Warming, calming digestive bitter. Anti-mucus agent helpful in lung tonics. Added to cooked fruit and desserts it helps increase digestion, absorption and reduce mucous formation. Eases gluten intolerance – sprinkle into baked goods, grains and cereals. Stimulates the flow of saliva and the appetite. Relieves griping pains. A valued aphrodisiac, exquisite with roses and honey.

*Liliaceae (Lily family)

Same family as chives, scallions, shallots, leeks, and onions

GARLIC bulb (*Allium sativum*) biennial – flowers the 2nd year

Easy to grow – needs one whole year to harvest. Plant individual cloves by mid-october one hand-width apart, harvest when leaf stalks begin to turn brown the next August. Can plant the bulbules (small seeds from the matured flower top) also, take 2 seasons to mature. Anti-viral, antiseptic, anti-parasite, anti-spasmodic, immune enhancing, blood vessel strengthening, antioxidant. It is absorbed into bloodstream from digestive tract, and excreted via the lungs, bowels, skin and urinary system, disinfecting them all. High doses of raw, high-quality garlic (capsules) help treat pneumonia. For bronchitis: boil garlic cloves and skins with oregano leaves, steep til drinkable and drink every 2 hours (same brew can be used as a brief face steam for 5 minutes). Toenail fungus: rub with raw cloves 2-3x daily, from new moon to new moon. Chopped garlic in raw honey with a squeeze of fresh lemon is a potent anti-biotic against flu and colds (the honey also helps prevent the “burn” of raw garlic in the stomach). Ear infections: Warm, crushed garlic infused into olive oil (strain before using) can be applied a few drops at once into ear, followed by a massage around neck and ears 3x day. Garlic with you in any form keeps away energy vampires of all sorts.

*Solanaceae (Nightshade family) annual, (wild members – Bittersweet nightshade, datura, wild tomato)

**CAYENNE PEPPER fruit
(*Capsicum
frutescens/baccatum*) annual**

It's hot to the tongue but cools the body post-digestion. Powerful stimulant rich in vitamin C. Circulates chi and blood. The burning sensation on the tongue sends messages to the brain to secrete endorphins, natural opiates which block pain and induce a feeling of well being. First aid: stops bleeding if applied powdered, directly onto cut. Warms the core, aids digestion, speeds metabolism, decongests the lungs. Avoid if you are prone to overheating or stomach acidity. Externally can be used in olive oil infused with ginger or Saint Johnswort gflowers for joint and nerve pain. Blocks irritation and bronchiole constriction caused by cigarette smoke and other airborne irritants. Instant immune soup paste: Blend few pinches of cayenne powder and turmeric with finely chopped garlic and ginger, mix into equal parts miso, tahini and honey (or to taste), keep on hand in fridge.



*Lauraceae (Laurel family)

CINNAMON bark (*Cinnamomum zeylanicum*) deciduous tropical tree

Mild astringent, warming digestive, stimulant, germicide. Causes shrinkage of mucous membranes, helpful internally to check secretions in diarrhea, sore throat, peptic ulcers and hemorrhage. Caution if you have a bleeding disorder. Good in combination with other herbs. Used in ancient Egyptian embalming blends. Boil and steep with organic roses to stop bleeding or diarrhea. Eases vomiting and flatulence. Temporarily accelerates physiological activity – stimulates all the vital functions of the body. Inhibits bacterial growth and helps normalize blood sugar levels. Used in desserts, helps the body balance the effects of sugar.

References: *The New Holistic Herbal* by David Hoffman, *Planetary Herbology* by Michael Tierra, *The Family Herbal* by Rosemary Gladstar, *Rainforest Home Remedies* by Rosita Arvigo and Nadine Epstein, *The Joy of Cooking* by Irma and Marion Rombauer, *The Ayurvedic Cookbook* by Amadea Morningstar, *Chinese System of Food Cures* by Henry C. Lu., *The Complete Floral Healer* by Anne McIntyre, *Herbal Antibiotics* by Stephen Buhner.