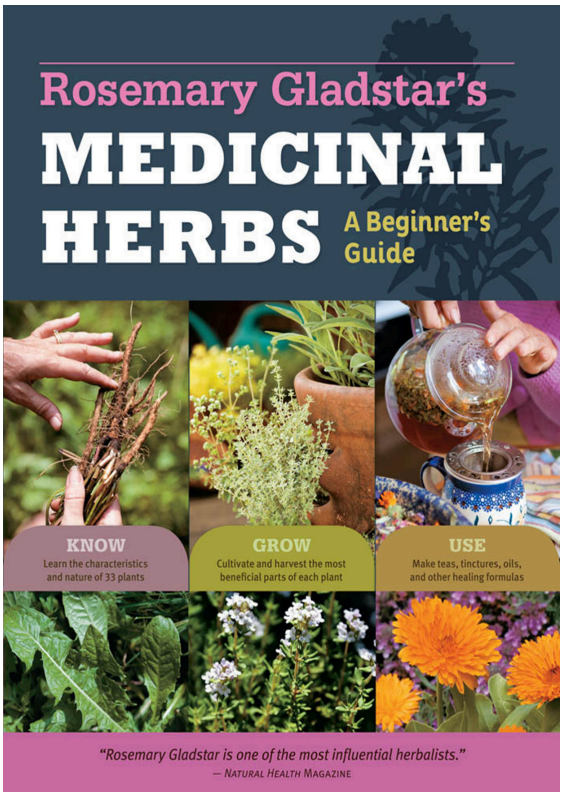


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CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1
Welcome to the Wonderful World of Medicinal Herbs

What Is a Medicinal Herb?

How Is Herbal Medicine Used?

The Benefits of Herbal Medicine

Starting a Home Medicine Garden

CHAPTER 2
How to Make Your Own Herbal Remedies

Setting Up Your Kitchen Pharmacy

Herbal Teas

Syrups

Oils

Salves

Tinctures

Herbal Pills

Baths, Poultices, and Compresses

The Skinny on Dosage and Duration of Herbal Treatments







CHAPTER 3
9 Familiar Herbs & Spices to Grow and Use

- Basil
- Cayenne
- Cinnamon
- Garlic
- Ginger

Rosemary
Sage
Thyme
Turmeric
CHAPTER 4
24 Safe & Effective Herbs to Know, Grow, and Use
Aloe Vera
Burdock
Calendula
Chamomile
Chickweed
Dandelion
Echinacea
Elder
Goldenseal
Hawthorn
Lavender
Lemon Balm
Licorice
Marsh Mallow
Mullein
Nettle
Oats
Peppermint
Plantain
Red Clover
St. John's Wort
Spearmint

Valerian

Yarrow

Resources

Credits

Index

CHAPTER 1
Welcome to the Wonderful World of Medicinal Herbs

RECOGNIZED AS THE OLDEST SYSTEM OF HEALING on the planet, herbal medicine traces its roots back to the earliest civilizations. Today, herbalism continues to flourish as a people's healing art. Even with the amazing technological advances of conventional (allopathic) medicine, herbalism — the art and science of healing with plants — is still widely popular. And its popularity is gaining, not waning. According to the World Health Organization, 80 percent of the world's population used some form of traditional medicine in 2008, and its rate of affordability, availability, and accessibility is surging.

So it's no wonder you're drawn to these healing plants and curious to learn more about them. But perhaps you're nervous about trying herbal home remedies: What are these herbs? Are they safe? Do they work? Can you grow them at home? Can you make your own remedies? When and how do you use them? How easy is it to get started? These are some of questions we'll address in this book.





My Story

I was one of the lucky ones. When I was a child, my grandmother took me into the fields and showed me the wild plants she knew. Quietly, with a gentle but stern voice, she taught me their healing powers. When she weeded her garden, I was often kneeling beside her, watching her carefully sort the plants she pulled. I learned early which herbs went into the edibles basket and which went into the compost, and, as importantly, I learned why.

We were a farm family growing up in the wake of World War II. Resilient, hardy, and handy, we were taught to use what was available, useful, and inexpensive. Herbal remedies were one of those things. My grandmother had up her sleeve an armory of useful herbal remedies that she had learned over a long and difficult lifetime. She was a survivor of the Armenian genocide of World War

I, and she told us grandkids that it had been her knowledge of plants and her faith in God that saved her life.

As kids, we suffered few illnesses or accidents that our grandmother and parents weren't able to treat effectively at home with herbal remedies. In fact, I recall only two incidents that required a doctor's care: when my younger sister swallowed rat poison (she survived, by the way) and when my older sister fell off the family horse and broke her hip. Not a bad record for a family with five active farm children … and good testament to the effectiveness of herbal home remedies.



Here I am with my younger sister and one of the calves on our family farm.

BOTANICAL BOOM

According to *The Natural Pharmacy*, by Schuyler Lininger et al., one out of every three adult Americans uses complementary/alternative medical care. Sales of botanicals have increased more than 300 percent since the 1990s and currently are an $8 billion industry.

What Is a Medicinal Herb?

If you use herbs in cooking, then you've already taken the first step in using herbal medicine. All of our common culinary herbs and spices are among our most important and esteemed herbal medicines. And if you garden, tucking herbs here and there in your vegetable and flower beds for their added scent and beauty, then you also have been "practicing" herbal medicine.

Garden herbs such as lavender, thyme, sage, basil, rosemary, mint, yarrow, and peppermint are some of our most trusted herbal medicines and have long histories of use as teas, salves, poultices, and tinctures for healing purposes. Open your refrigerator and you may find more common herbal remedies, including horseradish (one of the best remedies for sinus infections) and cabbage (a singularly effective poultice for shingles and hives).

But wait, you might say, aren't some of these plants vegetables and not herbs? Botanically speaking, an herb is an herbaceous plant with a nonwoody stem. However, when herbalists speak of medicinal herbs, they are basically including any plant that can be used in healing. Remember, herbalism is an art that evolved over centuries around people and people's needs. It only makes sense that people would use what they had available, in the kitchen or in the backyard. Many of the most common plants are still our best and most popular remedies for common ailments.

So even without knowing it, you may already be a practitioner of herbal home medicine.



How Is Herbal Medicine Used?

While conventional or allopathic medicine is particulary effective in life-threatening situations and unrivaled in its ability to save lives, herbal medicine is the medicine of the home. It is used most effectively for the myriad non-emergency health problems that arise in everyday life: simple first-aid situations, the bumps and bruises of life, headaches, colds and fevers and flu, coughs and aches and pains, and chronic illness.

But more important than "curing" illnesses, plants play a great role in preventing them. Rich in nutrients, herbs are the supreme preventive medicine, bolstering our body's ability to fight off pathogens that cause illness. How do they do this?

In addition to having superconcentrations of the important nutrients essential to the health of the human body, medicinal plants tend to be concentrated in specific chemicals that aid and abet the human immune system. When we eat medicinal plants, our own body becomes more resilient, hardy, and persistent, like the tenacious weedy plant that seems able to survive anything, from endless mowing to barrages of nasty "weed killers."

BALANCING ALLOPATHIC & HERBAL MEDICINE

Make no mistake, this book is about family herbalism. It is written as an introduction to using herbs to enhance health and well-being and to reintroduce the traditional practice of home health care for everyday common illnesses. But it does not advocate that herbs or home remedies be used to replace the guidance of trained health-care professionals.

Health problems that are beyond the care of a home herbalist include life-threatening illnesses such as heart disease and kidney disease, neurological disorders, clinical depression and anxiety, broken bones, poisoning, and life-threatening injuries such as gunshot wounds, wounds with excessive bleeding, and so on. Any life-threatening injury or illness should always be treated under the supervision of a competent medical professional.

A good rule of thumb to follow is that any injury or illness that does not respond to herbal remedies and home health care in a timely manner should be evaluated by a professional health-care practitioner. If an injury or illness gets worse, not better, then seek professional help. If you don't feel comfortable using herbal remedies to treat a particular injury or illness, then seek help.

One of the major differences between conventional (allopathic) medicine and herbal or natural medicine lies in their relationship to constitutional or foundational wellness. Conventional medicine, as we all know, is great for treating acute illness and can often temporarily alleviate its symptoms. Such treatment can be extremely comforting to someone in the midst of an "attack": an asthma attack, for instance, or an oncoming migraine. However, symptom suppression, while necessary, hardly means the cause or root of the illness has been addressed.