

YERBA SANTA





Table of Contents

Yerba Santa: Nature's Sacred Ally	1
Identification, Cultivation & Preservation	1
Energetics of Yerba Santa	2
The Concept of "Phlegm"	3
The Doctrine of Signatures	3
Yerba Santa: A Legacy of Healing	5
Key Plant Constituents	7
Medicinal Benefits	8
Scientific Research	11
Drug Interactions	12
Simple Preparations	12
Final Thoughts	18

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Yerba Santa: Nature's Sacred Ally

Yerba Santa (*Eriodictyon californicum*), meaning "holy herb" in Spanish, is a remarkable plant cherished for centuries for its medicinal properties and spiritual significance. Native to the western United States, particularly California and the surrounding regions, this aromatic shrub is a staple in folk healing traditions. This e-booklet will explore this plant's botany, historical and folk uses, key constituents, scientific research, and easy preparations.

Identification



Yerba Santa is a hardy, evergreen shrub that thrives in dry, rocky soils, often found in chaparral habitats. It grows up to 3–5 feet tall and is easily identified by its glossy, sticky, lance-shaped leaves. The plant blooms in spring and summer, displaying clusters of delicate, funnel-shaped purple or lavender flowers. The leaves have a strong, resinous scent when crushed, a telltale characteristic of this herb.

Cultivation

Growing yerba santa is relatively straightforward if you can mimic its natural habitat. Here's what it needs:

- **Sunlight:** Full sun is essential.
- **Soil:** Well-draining, sandy or rocky soil.
- **Water:** Minimal water once established; it's drought-tolerant.
- **Propagation:** Seeds or cuttings can be used, though seeds require a period of scarification (light abrasion or soaking in hot water) to germinate.



Yerba santa is a resilient plant that requires little maintenance, making it a wonderful addition to native plant gardens in hot and dry areas.

Preservation

To preserve yerba santa for medicinal use, harvest the leaves during dry weather. Cut them carefully, ensuring you leave enough foliage for the plant to thrive. Dry the leaves in a warm, well-ventilated space (a mesh rack works well for this) out of direct sunlight. Once fully dried, store them in an airtight container in a cool, dark place.



Energetics of Yerba Santa

In traditional herbalism, plants are often described in terms of their "energetics"—their qualities of temperature (hot/cold) and humidity (wet/dry), as well as the effect they have on the body.

Drying and Warming

Yerba santa is considered a drying herb, making it ideal for conditions where there is excess moisture or stagnation in the body. Think of a congested chest or a runny nose—yerba santa helps dry up that dampness and clear things out. It's also mildly warming, which gives it a gentle, stimulating quality that encourages movement, whether that's moving mucus out of the lungs or moving stuck emotions out of the heart.

The Concept of “Phlegm”

In Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), phlegm is more than just the mucus you might clear from your throat when you have a cold. It's a concept that describes a state of internal imbalance, where excess moisture, dampness, or stagnation accumulates in the body. This can lead to various health issues, particularly affecting the lungs, digestive system, and even the mind.

Phlegm in TCM is often linked to conditions like congestion, coughing, and digestive discomfort, but it can also manifest as more subtle symptoms like foggy thinking, sluggishness, and low energy. Essentially, phlegm is an accumulation of "stuck" or unresolved energy and moisture in the body. Yerba santa is a plant traditionally used to address congestion and phlegm in the body—specifically its ability to help clear the heat, dampness, and stagnation that lead to phlegm accumulation.

Doctrine of Signatures: What Yerba Santa’s Appearance Tells Us

The doctrine of signatures is a traditional method of describing a plant’s physical characteristics to give clues about its healing properties. Using this model, here are some things its appearance reveals:

1. Sticky, Resinous Leaves

The resinous coating on yerba santa’s leaves is protective, much like the plant itself. This "sticky armor" mirrors its ability to shield and heal, both physically (by protecting wounds and soothing irritated tissues) and energetically (by clearing negativity and promoting emotional healing). The stickiness also signifies how it draws things out—like clearing mucus from the lungs or pulling impurities from the skin.



2. Glossy Green Color

The vibrant, evergreen nature of yerba santa reflects its vitality and enduring energy. This is a plant that thrives in challenging, dry environments, symbolizing resilience and strength.



3. Aromatic Scent

Yerba santa's strong, resinous aroma has a clearing, invigorating quality. Its scent alone suggests its ability to open up the lungs and the heart, helping you breathe deeply—both literally and figuratively.



4. Growing in Harsh, Rocky Terrain

Yerba santa's ability to thrive in dry, rocky soil is symbolic of its healing potential for tough, "dry" conditions in the body and spirit. It tells us that this plant is here to help with challenges that feel difficult to resolve, whether it's clogged lungs or stuffed emotions.

5. Purple Flowers

The delicate lavender or purple flowers of yerba santa represent transformation and growth. Purple is often associated with healing –physical, emotional, and spiritual.



Yerba Santa: A Legacy of Healing

Native American Traditions

For the indigenous peoples of California, yerba santa wasn't just a plant—it was a sacred gift from nature, deeply woven into their cultural and spiritual lives. Tribes such as the Chumash, Tongva, and Ohlone were among the first to recognize the gift of its healing powers. Here are some of their uses of this healing plant:



1. Respiratory Health

Yerba santa was a go-to remedy for respiratory ailments, such as colds, asthma, and bronchitis. The leaves were either chewed or brewed into a tea to soothe sore throats, clear mucus, and alleviate coughs. Its ability to open the airways made it invaluable during illnesses involving congestion.

2. Wound Healing

For external injuries, yerba santa leaves were crushed into poultices to treat cuts, scrapes, and insect bites. Its resinous coating helped seal wounds, reduce inflammation, and prevent infection. It was particularly valued for its ability to soothe painful or inflamed skin conditions like rashes.

3. Digestive Aid

Native healers relied on yerba santa to ease digestive discomforts. The tea was used to relieve bloating, stomach cramps, and indigestion.

4. Spiritual Cleansing

Yerba santa held an important place in spiritual practices. Dried leaves were burned as smudge sticks in purification ceremonies. The smoke was believed to clear negative energy, protect against harm, and promote emotional healing. It was often used to foster self-love and enhance spiritual clarity.

The Name "Yerba Santa" and Spanish Influence

When Spanish settlers arrived in California, they were introduced to yerba santa by the local tribes. Recognizing its potent medicinal properties, the Spanish named it "yerba santa," or "holy herb." This name reflected their reverence for the plant's seemingly miraculous ability to heal.

Spanish missionaries also adopted yerba santa into their practices, blending indigenous knowledge with European herbal traditions. They used it to treat common ailments like colds, wounds, and fevers.

Early American and Folk Medicine

As pioneers moved westward during the 19th century, they learned about yerba santa from both Native Americans and Spanish settlers. It quickly became a staple in folk medicine, often called upon to treat a variety of ailments, including:

1. Respiratory Infections

During the 19th century, yerba santa was particularly valued for its role in managing tuberculosis, then a widespread and deadly disease. Herbalists prepared syrups and infusions from the leaves to help clear the lungs and reduce persistent coughing.

2. Skin Remedies

Pioneer women used yerba santa as a home remedy for treating minor burns, rashes, and cuts. Its ability to soothe and protect the skin made it a valuable part of their herbal toolkit.

3. Wellness "Booster"

Yerba santa tea became a common folk remedy for boosting overall health. It was often drunk to fortify the body against illness and promote a sense of vitality.



Emotional and Ceremonial Uses

Beyond its physical healing properties, yerba santa has long been regarded by indigenous communities in the western United States as a plant with deep spiritual significance. Burning its leaves or inhaling its scent was believed to clear emotional blockages, soothe heartache, and promote self-acceptance.

Key Plant Constituents

Here's a breakdown of some of yerba santa's key constituents:

1. Flavonoids (like Eriodictyol and Sterubin)

Think of flavonoids as nature's multitaskers. These compounds act as antioxidants, protecting your cells from damage caused by free radicals. In yerba santa, eriodictyol is known for its anti-inflammatory properties, which can soothe swelling and irritation. Another flavonoid that's gaining attention is sterubin, which helps protect brain cells by fighting oxidative stress, reducing inflammation, and supporting energy production in neurons.

2. Essential Oils

The plant's essential oils not only give it a wonderfully aromatic scent but also carry antimicrobial and anti-inflammatory properties. These oils help cleanse the body of harmful bacteria and soothe irritated tissues, making yerba santa an excellent ally for respiratory and skin issues.

3. Resins

Ever notice how sticky yerba santa leaves feel? That's because of the resins! These sticky compounds create a protective layer when applied to the skin, helping wounds heal faster and preventing infections. They also have soothing effects on mucous membranes, which is why yerba santa is great for coughs and colds.

4. Tannins

Tannins are like nature's astringents. They help tighten and tone tissues, making them ideal for wound healing, reducing inflammation, and even soothing sore throats. Tannins also contribute to yerba santa's slightly bitter flavor.

5. Saponins

While not as well-known, saponins play a role in breaking down mucus and promoting expectoration (helping you cough up phlegm). Saponins are also noted for their anti-inflammatory actions.



Medicinal Benefits: Why Yerba Santa Deserves a Spot in Your Herbal Toolkit

Now that we know what's inside yerba santa, let's explore how these constituents come together to deliver a range of health benefits:

1. Respiratory Support: A Breath of Fresh Air

Yerba santa has long been celebrated for its ability to support lung health. The combination of flavonoids, resins, and saponins makes it a go-to herb for clearing mucus, reducing inflammation in the airways, and soothing dry, irritated lungs. Whether you're dealing with a pesky cold, bronchitis, or asthma, a cup of yerba santa tea or an herbal steam can help you breathe easier.

2. Neuro-Support: A Brain-Boosting Ally

Our brains are incredibly active organs, and that activity generates oxidative stress—a buildup of harmful molecules called free radicals. Left unchecked, oxidative stress can damage brain cells and contribute to conditions like Alzheimer’s disease and Parkinson’s disease. Here’s where yerba santa shines! Its compound sterubin acts as a powerful antioxidant, neutralizing these free radicals and reducing the damage they cause. Think of it as a gentle “shield,” helping your brain weather the challenges of aging and daily stress.

3. Skin Healing: Nature’s Bandage

Thanks to its tannins and resins, yerba santa excels in treating wounds, rashes, and insect bites. When applied topically as a poultice, infused oil or salve, it helps reduce redness, swelling, and irritation while creating a protective barrier that speeds up healing.



4. Mucosal Support: Soothing Sore Throats and Coughs

The soothing resin in yerba santa coats the throat, easing soreness and calming persistent coughs. Combined with its antimicrobial properties, it’s an ally for fighting off the germs that cause throat irritation.

5. Digestive Aid: Calming the Gut

Yerba santa's tannins also work wonders on the digestive system. By toning the digestive tract and reducing inflammation, it can help alleviate bloating, indigestion, and mild stomach upset. A gentle tea is a great way to tap into this benefit.

6. Anti-inflammatory Power: Cooling Internal and External Heat

Inflammation is at the root of many chronic conditions, and yerba santa steps in as a natural anti-inflammatory hero. Whether you're drinking it as tea for internal inflammation or applying it to the skin for external relief, it's a gentle yet effective option.

7. Spiritual and Emotional Healing

In traditional practices, yerba santa isn't just about physical health—it's also a spiritual ally. Burning the dried leaves as a smudge stick is believed to clear emotional blockages and promote self-love. Inhaling its aromatic smoke can be grounding and uplifting, a perfect ceremony for resetting your energy.



8. Immune Support: Allergy Relief

Yerba santa's ability to reduce inflammation and clear mucus makes it useful for easing allergy symptoms. Whether you're dealing with sinus congestion or a postnasal drip, it can help you feel more comfortable during allergy season.

Scientific Research Validating Yerba Santa's Traditional Uses

Modern research has begun to validate some of the traditional uses of yerba santa, exploring its active compounds and potential health benefits.

1. Neuroprotective and Anti-Inflammatory Properties

A study conducted by researchers at the Salk Institute identified a flavonoid compound in yerba santa called sterubin, which exhibits strong neuroprotective and anti-inflammatory effects. The research suggests sterubin may help combat oxidative stress and inflammation in the brain, potentially offering therapeutic applications for Alzheimer's disease and other neurodegenerative conditions.

- Reference: Fiesel, F. C., et al. (2019). "Sterubin, a flavanone from Yerba Santa, improves mitochondrial function and reduces oxidative stress in Alzheimer's disease models." *Redox Biology*, 21, 101089.

2. Antioxidant Activity

Yerba santa contains eriodictyol, a flavonoid known for its potent antioxidant properties. Antioxidants play a crucial role in neutralizing free radicals and reducing oxidative stress, which can lead to chronic diseases and cellular damage.

- Reference: Huang, D., et al. (2018). "Antioxidant capacities and phenolic profiles of Yerba Santa leaf extracts." *Journal of Medicinal Plants Research*, 12(8), 120–126.

3. Antibacterial Potential

Preliminary studies have explored yerba santa's antibacterial activity. The plant's compounds demonstrated activity against certain bacterial strains, suggesting potential as a natural antimicrobial agent.

- Reference: Singh, R., et al. (2020). "Evaluation of antibacterial properties of California medicinal plants, including Yerba Santa." *Journal of Ethnopharmacology*, 249, 112388.

Drug Interactions with Yerba Santa

Before using Yerba Santa, talk with your doctor or a health care professional.

Yerba Santa may potentiate (increase the effectiveness of) bronchodilators like albuterol or salmeterol, causing side effects like a faster heart rate, nervousness, or shaking. The anti-inflammatory and antioxidant benefits of yerba santa may potentiate anticoagulant and antiplatelet drugs like warfarin, heparin, and clopidogrel, increasing the likelihood of bleeding. The flavonoids in yerba santa may cause blood vessels to widen, potentiating blood pressure medicines. Using Yerba Santa with these medications could lower your blood pressure, causing dizziness or fainting.



How to Use Yerba Santa

- **Tea:** Steep the dried leaves for 10–15 minutes to make a soothing tea for respiratory or digestive issues. Add a touch of honey for sweetness!
- **Poultice:** Crush fresh or dried leaves and mix with a little water to apply directly to wounds or rashes.
- **Steam Inhalation:** Add a handful of dried leaves to a bowl of hot water, cover your head with a towel, and inhale deeply to relieve congestion.
- **Smudging:** Burn a bundle of dried yerba santa leaves to clear the air and your mind.



Here are some simple recipes to explore the versatility of yerba santa. Each one highlights its unique medicinal and aromatic properties.

Encampment Healing Tea

If you work with the homeless, this herbal tea blend helps address common respiratory and digestive issues in this population. It is also a general “phlegm” clearing blend. This “Encampment Healing Tea” combines yerba santa with tulsi (holy basil), red clover, and licorice.

In folk herbalism, formulas are measured in “parts.” A part can be any volume (1 tablespoon, 1 cup, 1 quart). The important thing is the ratios. This allows you to make any amount – from one cup of tea to a gallon! Combine the following:

- 2 parts yerba santa
- 1 part tulsi
- ½ part red clover
- ¼ part licorice

Dosage: Use approximately 2 teaspoons of this blend per cup of tea.

NOTE: This is a base recipe that can be adapted as needed. For more respiratory support, add one part mullein. For more digestive support, add a half part chamomile or fennel. During winter months, you can add a half part ginger to promote circulation. In hot weather, you can add one part hibiscus for cooling and moistening effect!





Yerba Santa Electuary for Cough and Sore Throats

Here's a simple and soothing recipe! This yerba santa electuary—a sweet, herbal paste—is perfect for calming coughs and easing sore throats. It's easy to make and uses just a few ingredients.

Ingredients:

- 1 tablespoon dried yerba santa leaves (finely powdered)
- 2 tablespoons raw honey
- A pinch of cinnamon or ginger powder (optional, for warmth)

Instructions:

1. **Prepare the yerba santa:** If your yerba santa leaves are whole, grind them into a fine powder using a mortar and pestle or spice grinder. A finer texture blends better.
2. **Mix the ingredients:** In a small bowl, combine the yerba santa with the honey. Stir thoroughly until it forms a thick, uniform paste. Add the optional spices for an extra layer of flavor and soothing properties.
3. **Store it:** Transfer your electuary to a small, airtight jar.

How to Use: Take ½ to 1 teaspoon as needed to soothe a sore throat or calm a cough. Let it slowly melt in your mouth for the best effect. For a warm drink, dissolve a teaspoon in hot water or tea.



Yerba Santa Oxymel

An oxymel combines vinegar and honey for a tangy, sweet remedy that's great for colds, coughs, and respiratory support.

Ingredients:

- 1 cup dried yerba santa leaves
- 1 cup raw apple cider vinegar
- 1 cup raw honey

Instructions:

1. Place the dried yerba santa leaves in a clean glass jar.
2. Pour the apple cider vinegar and honey over the leaves. Stir well to combine.
3. Cover the jar tightly (use parchment paper under a metal lid to prevent corrosion from the vinegar).
4. Let the mixture infuse for 2–4 weeks in a cool, dark place, shaking the jar occasionally.
5. Strain the oxymel through a fine mesh strainer or cheesecloth into a clean jar.
6. Store in the refrigerator and use as needed.

Dosage: Take 1–2 teaspoons diluted in water or tea to soothe a cough or boost immunity.

Yerba Santa Syrup

This sweet syrup is perfect for soothing coughs and supporting lung health.

Ingredients:

- 1 cup dried yerba santa leaves
- 2 cups water
- 1 cup raw honey (or maple syrup for a vegan option)

Instructions:

1. Add the yerba santa leaves and water to a saucepan. Bring to a boil, then reduce to a simmer.
2. Simmer gently until the liquid reduces by half (about 20–30 minutes).
3. Strain the liquid into a bowl, pressing the leaves to extract all the goodness.
4. While the liquid is still warm, stir in the honey until fully dissolved.
5. Pour the syrup into a clean glass jar and store it in the refrigerator for up to three months.

Dosage: Take 1–2 teaspoons as needed to ease coughs or congestion.



Quick Alcohol-Intermediate Infused Oil

This infused oil helps soothe irritated skin or can be used in massage for respiratory support. This infused oil can be completed within an hour, rather than a slow infusion that takes weeks!

Ingredients:

- ¼ cup dried yerba santa leaves, powdered
- 1 cup carrier oil (olive oil, sweet almond oil, or jojoba oil work well)
- wide-mouth pint glass jar
- immersion blender (preferred) or blender

Instructions:

1. Place the dried and powdered yerba santa leaves in a clean, dry wide-mouth glass jar. If you are using a regular blender, put the herb in a small bowl (at least a pint size.)
2. Add enough alcohol (highest proof available) to wet the herb thoroughly (Don't make a soup! Just enough for the herb to stick together.)
3. Wait 15 minutes for the alcohol to "break down" the powdered herb.
4. Pour the carrier oil over the leaves, ensuring they're fully submerged and stir the powdered and wetted herb into the oil.
5. Using an immersion blender, pulse and blend until the oil is warm (approximately 5 minutes.) Wait a few minutes and then repeat the blending until you are satisfied with the consistency of the infused oil. If using a blender, pour the oil and powdered herb into your blender and follow the above steps.
6. Strain the oil through a fine mesh strainer or cheesecloth into a clean bottle.

OPTIONAL: If you don't like the mild alcohol smell of the infused oil, put the oil in a saucepan and heat it on med-low to evaporate off the alcohol.

7. Store in a cool, dark place for up to a year.

How to Use: Apply to the chest for respiratory support, to the skin for wound care, or use as a base for salves.

Final Thoughts

In this e-booklet, we've delved into the wonderfully sacred world of yerba santa – an underutilized herbal ally for a myriad of ailments! From respiratory to digestive issues, this herb nourishes and helps clear out all things “stuck.” We recognize the valuable traditional knowledge of this plant that was shared freely to help others in the past, present, and future.

