

Plants for healing ©

By far the easiest use for foragers is to take the plant leaves or berries and make an infusion, as opposed to tinctures or oils. Some hedgerow or garden plants lend themselves to other uses though. Fresh comfrey leaves, for example, can be pulped and used as a poultice against sprains or bruises. More about comfrey later and other common plants.

Important **safety tip** though. If you're not experienced in making up herbal remedies, you do need to ask for professional advice: <http://www.nimh.org.uk>. I'm not talking about sticking a few (washed) wild strawberry leaves in hot water for an infusion, but actually making your own cream or concentrated syrup unless you know what the plant is actually going to do to you.

OK then, here is a short list of [common hedgerow plants](#) for infusion-healing – no, really, I do mean short – but I'm sure that you can all think of others.

1. Let's start with **nettles**. Nettle tea is rich in iron against anaemia. If nettles are combined with lime/hawthorn flowers, the infusion lowers blood pressure. It has been said that nettles absorb all the minerals from the soil and combine all the healing properties in its leaves. That said, nettles can be used to boost energy, act as a diuretic and stimulate the circulation. Nettle and sweet potato soup is a classic tonic recipe. Incidentally, if you're out for a walk and see some nettles, it's quite safe to pick a few of the seeds to eat – they give a nutty flavour and extra energy. As ever, if the plant stings you, try to find some fresh plantain leaves to stop the irritation.
2. **Blackberries** can be very versatile, rich in vitamin C and low in natural sugars. When added to wild strawberry leaves (another common hedgerow plant), blackberry leaves make an infusion to relieve stress. I've found that combining blackberries with the juice of fresh limes results in a great syrup to help with coughs and sore throats. That's a remedy that's already in the Waverley Healing Wheel Files section.
3. **Dandelions** – what a pest – all over my lawn, but if you want an infusion to help with the digestive system, particularly the pancreas, dandelions are great. They're full of essential vitamins and potassium too. There's a separate file in this website section on dandelion healing.
4. **Hawthorn flowers** can be added to **lime flowers** in a tea to help circulation.
5. **Meadowsweet** leaves (dried) can be used as a tea with honey to help against headaches and to relieve wind or gastritis.
6. **Lady's Smock**: an infusion of the flowers and stems helps with circulation or digestive problems.
7. **Chickweed** has good cleansing properties, due to vitamins and minerals.
8. **Linden Tree** flowers are commonly as a treatment for anxiety, digestive problems and insomnia - their calming properties are ideal for infusions to drink before bedtime.

Note: if you suffer from [insomnia](#), I'd suggest an infusion of limeflowers, valerian, lavender and chamomile, perhaps sweetened slightly each night.

Incidentally, I grow a few hedgerow plants in the back garden (lemon balm, brambles and wild strawberry) and I'd definitely recommend the use of lemon balm for healing digestive problems, either as an infusion or as a relaxant in a hot bath. Lemon balm is attractive to bees too: very eco-friendly. OK then – off we go with a few tips on common herbs for healing.

Calendula (English marigold)

So, this is all about the humble **calendula**. I'll start with its healing properties, because the English (pot) marigold is one of the most useful plants in the garden. **Important safety tip here** though, which is that calendula is good for healing, but the French marigold is less so – it's a different species and related to the sunflower family. Still, here's a picture of the English marigold, to start with.



The key uses of calendula leaves or flowers are anti-bacterial, generally antiseptic and anti-inflammatory. For using these remedies, please see our piece on Natural Healing elsewhere in this website section, for more details.

- ✚ Poultices against gout (leaves).
- ✚ Compresses against burns (buds).
- ✚ Tinctures against painful periods.
- ✚ Infused oils against broken capillaries or varicose veins.
- ✚ Creams or salves for cuts, grazes, dry skin, etc (see below).
- ✚ Infusions as a mouthwash, against fever or for digestive problems.

For many years now, I've been using calendula in salves, because it's great against the following conditions.

- Chapped or dry skin.
- Acne, eczema and spots.
- Chilblains.
- Cuts or grazes.
- Scalds.
- Minor sunburn.

Basically, it's a brilliant skin moisturiser and can be enhanced in the spring/ summer by adding daisy heads to the mix. Sometimes, I use calendula to leaven the strength of other salves too, eg my winter warmer ointment is designed to fight off the cold and restore circulation. The only problem is that this salve has a lot of abrasive stuff in it like black mustard seeds, chilli powder, grated ginger, pepper, etc – and so I would normally add about 5g of calendula to the mix, just to smooth the overall effect on the skin.

Comfrey

Comfrey (*symphytum officinale*) is great in winter, when people feel joint stiffness, strained muscles or even fractures after a fall on ice. Normally, herbal remedies use the leaves and roots of comfrey. It should be noted that pregnant or nursing mothers should avoid using comfrey. Also, the internal use of comfrey may affect one's liver – please check with a doctor first.

However, one of the main benefits of comfrey is its ability to help with **broken bones** – in medieval gardens, the herb was referred to as *knitbone*. Comfrey tablets were even standard issue in World War II first aid packs, due to the fame of this herb to speed up the healing of bones and wounds. Other **typical uses** include the following.

- a) An ointment of comfrey helps new tissue to grow.
- b) It hydrates, soothes and repairs the skin.
- c) Comfrey relieves pain and swelling muscles and joints – especially if the causes are degenerative arthritis, acute myalgia in the back, sprains or contusions or strains after exercise.
- d) Comfrey can also be used to relieve skin irritations such as rashes, sunburn and stings.
- e) The leaf infusion is an expectorant against respiratory inflammations or gastric problems.
- f) Externally, comfrey can be made into a salve, poultice or compress. I make a comfrey salve for those needing help with joints or cramp, normally blended with plantains.



Nettles

The humble stinging nettle (*Urtica dioica*) is really one of the healer's best tools. Nettles are an excellent source of vitamins, iron, calcium, magnesium and nitrogen.

The seeds can be eaten raw and have a nutty taste and young leaves taste like spring greens. If you soak the leaves in water or steam them, the stinging chemicals (eg formic acid) are removed. It's probably a good idea to wear thick gloves when harvesting nettles. Incidentally, nettles were used as a source of green and yellow dyes for clothing. Nettle fibres can be woven into cloth.

As a **medicine**, nettles are really good in these areas:

- a) Nettle tea or soup is rich in iron against anæmia and helps with digestive issues
- b) Nettle tea or soup is also good for lower blood pressure and varicose veins
- c) As an infusion, nettles combat inflammation and hayfever
- d) As a salve, nettle and chamomile are good against skin rashes or hives
- e) Nettle rinse is good against psoriasis of the scalp or dandruff
- f) A tincture or decoction of the root good for prostate problems.

Scott Cunningham suggests there are many **magickal uses** for nettles:

- a) To remove a curse and send it back by putting nettles in a poppet
- b) To be sprinkled around a house to ward off evil
- c) To be carried with yarrow to calm fears
- d) To be worn as an amulet against negativity
- e) To be used in a purification bath.



Slippery elm (*ulmus rubra*)

Any sabbat is often a time of excess and this herb is just great for stomach and/or digestive problems. Normally, herbal remedies use the inner bark of the slippery elm, but the roots can be used for an eye tonic too.

It's thought that First Nation tribes were the first peoples to use slippery elm paste (ie the bark plus liquid) for healing wounds. The paste was rubbed into a wound to clean out any infection and then washing removed both the paste and any pus or thorns or splinters. Other typical uses include the following.

- a) An infusion from the bark for sore throats.
- b) An infusion from the bark for stomach upsets, eg IBS, acid reflux, etc.
- c) Slippery elm is a laxative that helps to relieve constipation, diarrhoea and haemorrhoids.
- d) Pregnant women could drink slippery elm tea to help with labour pains.
- e) The infusion is an expectorant against respiratory inflammations.
- f) Externally, slippery elm paste can be made into a poultice is good for small wounds, boils, burns, ulcers and other such cuts.
- g) Sometimes, the nutritional benefits of slippery elm are used to help infants or those recovering from illness – by adding some of the paste to warm milk.



Yarrow

This is not the most obvious herb to choose, but it is very common and is often overlooked by healers. It's one of those very safe herbs to use and you can make a pleasant yarrow and marigold tea as a cold remedy or put yarrow in a bath to combat skin irritations. In fact, yarrow (*achillea millefolium*) was used by our ancestors over 60,000 years ago.

For the herbal healer, it's the yarrow leaves and flowers that are used for medicines for the following complaints (usually from July-September).

- a) Common colds or fevers
- b) Hayfever
- c) Stomach upsets, eg diarrhoea, wind or gastric pain
- d) The leaves can relieve toothache
- e) It helps with wounds or bleeding.



So, how can yarrow be used – here's a short list.

1. The leaves can be eaten in a salad or brewed to make ale or boiled as an infusion. The infusion encourages sweating, reduces fever and encourages the appetite. It's quite nice when mixed with peppermint. **Tip:** put a leaf or two in your nostril, to stop a nosebleed.
2. If you're going to put the flowers in boiling water, it can be used as a steam inhalation against hayfever.
3. The effect of yarrow on wounds has long been noted, due to its antiseptic quality (bit like chamomile really) – best here as a salve.
4. Yarrow is good as a massage oil against inflamed joints.
5. Yarrow sedates the nervous system and can be used against nervous dyspepsia. It helps to heal the mucus membranes throughout the gastro-intestinal-tract.

Plantain herb

I was sorting through some salves the other week and came across a blend from last year, where I'd mixed comfrey and plantain into an ointment. And, looking out of the window, I see that there are both rib-leaved and broad-leaved plantains all over the back garden. They're not really weeds though, so here's an overview of their medicinal uses – you use the leaves and they're both very safe herbs to use.

Broad-leaved or common plantains (*plantago major*) and rib-leaved plantains (*plantago lanceolata*) are good for these complaints.

- Colds: plantains work against catarrh and combat yellow mucus.
- Irritable bowel syndrome, wind and blocked stomach.
- Cuts or wounds: plantains have an antiseptic effect. This also works for insect bites or rashes.

So, how would you use plantains best? As mentioned above, a salve or cream is good, perhaps in conjunction with another herb.

- Make up a tincture with fresh leaves.
- Have a daily infusion for digestive problems – big handful of leaves + boiling water + honey, let stand for 5 minutes and then strain off before drinking.
- Add fresh leaves to an insect bite or sting.
- Or, you could make a poultice by pulping up some plantain leaves + adding boiling water + soaking a bandage (or clean towel) in the mixture and covering the wound.
- Internally, you could also tweak the infusion so that it becomes a syrup (less water and more standing time) or a juice (adding more leaves).
- I've not done this, but I'm guessing that a plant with so many anti-catarrh properties would work well as a steam inhalation too. This method works fine with eucalyptus leaves – I'm happy for feedback on this one.



Lavender

Actually, lavender is a wonderful herb that calms a person, helps him or her to sleep and can flavour food too.

There's a lavender farm just outside Alton, which sells all manner of products – not just plants, but essential oils, pillows, lavender soaps and everything else. Let's start with the best uses of lavender for the body.

- Relief of anxiety or depression.
- Tremendous against headaches.
- The antiseptic nature of lavender is great against fungal infections, inflammations, digestive problems and many other bacterial issues.
- Relief of small burns and insect bites.

While on this subject, **lavender oil** has been tested and been shown to help (as an aromatherapy) with these conditions.

- High blood pressure and increased pulse rates for those in stressful situations, such as exams or pre-surgical operations.
- Depression.
- Labour pains.
- Insomnia.
- Fatigue.
- Migraines.
- Hair loss.
- Pain from toothache.

So, which is the **best way** to use lavender? Lavender water is still available to carry with you and a spray can be used for pillows or sheets. Lavender can be added to a bath or as an infusion. Other uses are massage oils, salves, compresses or steam inhalations. It is possible to make a lavender tincture too.



Chamomile

Actually, we're looking at **English/Roman chamomile** (*chamaemelum nobile*) in this text. One can also use German (false) chamomile essential oil as an antiseptic or anti-fungal remedy or for the removal of excess phlegm. Back to Roman chamomile then and this is the herb that, most often, turns up in your chamomile tea. Other healing properties are shown below.

1. Actually, let's start with that soothing cup of chamomile tea to forget the stress of the day and get some restful sleep. If it's been a difficult day, I use a mix of valerian root and chamomile in an infusion.
2. Roman chamomile is a relief for depression and anxiety.

3. It treats skin conditions well and reduces inflammation. For that reason, I make a Roman chamomile salve that has a little more cleansing oomph than the calendula one.
4. Roman chamomile helps with muscle cramps and other PMS symptoms.
5. Also, it boosts heart health.

It's worth noting that both German and Roman chamomile contain the essential oil, **chamazulene**, although German chamomile contains a higher concentration. Both herbs smell vaguely of apples and both types of chamomile are used safely as:

- mild sedatives
- insect repellents
- anti-spasmodic medicines
- deterrents against garden pests
- attractions for fruit or vegetable pollinators.

