

# Sustainable Cold Care Remedies

1

By Patricia Kyritsi Howell

Several years ago, on a sunny afternoon that seemed balmy, even in the midst of winter, I decided to move a load of firewood from the woodpile up to the house. I was feeling smug when I parked the truck near the woodshed, because it's rare that I replenish the stash of wood on the porch before we're out of decent wood.

Just as I was working up a sweat, a bitter wind blew up the valley. I thought about trotting back to the house for a warmer coat and hat but suddenly felt too tired and carried on until the truck was full. I drove to the house chilled to the bone. By morning, I had a horrendous cold in the making. I staggered to the herb cupboard. As I was pulling out ingredients for an herbal brew, I decided to try something new to treat my cold.

Like the 60 million people in the USA who spend \$3 billion a year on medicinal herbs, I have access to plenty of effective herbal remedies. However, few of these herbs are grown in quantities adequate to meet consumer demand. Most top selling herbs—such as echinacea, goldenseal and ginseng—are still being harvested from wild plant populations found in shrinking native habitats.

Due to hundreds of years of over harvesting, many common medicinal herbs are now rare in the wild, and far too many native plants are on the brink of total extinction and classified as endangered. The majority of endangered medicinal herbs are valued for their roots. When the plants are over harvested without a plan for replanting, there is a significant impact on the plants overall survival. In contrast, when the part of a plant used as a medicine is the leaf, flower, berry or seed, the majority of the plant is left intact, and with rare exceptions, the plant's survival is not threatened.

As I stood in front of my herb cupboard and scanned the shelves I saluted the standard remedies I'd come to rely on over the years for cold and flu symptoms: echinacea root tincture or tea for immune system support, osha root tincture to relieve chest congestion and coughs, and potent goldenseal root tincture for persistent respiratory infections. I decided to treat my symptoms using herbal ingredients that don't kill the plants that offer their healing properties. I reached to the back of the cupboard for jars of leaves, berries, flowers and seeds.

While I was assembling my herbal brew, I realized that all the plants I had chosen were thriving beautifully in our garden or in the surrounding forest. And a few months before, during the summer, with little effort I had collected the above ground parts of enough healing herbs to take care of four or five people for the entire winter.

I began taking my herbal brew. My symptoms remained mild. I felt good that I had avoided getting seriously ill by drawing on completely sustainable sources. Several years have passed since my original "clinical trial." Today when my family, clients or I need herbs, I look first for leaves, flowers, berries and seeds that serve my needs, leaving the roots to grow in peace.

Whether you grow or purchase your herbs, I invite you to consider changing your buying habits so that you are using above ground parts of plants whenever possible. The results are usually as good as when you use the old herbal standbys, and sometimes better. A good herbal reference book can help you determine which part of a specific plant is used as medicine and how to use herbs that may be new to you.

I invite you to join me in widening the circle of healing around you by using herbs responsibly, and in some small way, ensuring their survival for generations to come.

## Ingredients of Sustainability Cold Remedy:

Boneset (*Eupatorium perfoliatum*)

Boneset is native and common in the Southeast along waterways and in open fields. For hundreds of years, the leaf and flower of boneset were widely used in the treatment of influenza, to reduce fevers, relieve the body pains that accompany high fever, break up lung congestion, and soothe spasmodic coughing. During the 1800's, boneset was one of the most frequently used household herbs in the eastern USA. Recent studies indicate that the immune stimulating properties of boneset rival those of echinacea. Because boneset is intensely bitter, use capsules; or disguise the taste by adding tincture to fruit juice or generously sweetened herbal teas.

Elder Flower and Berry (*Sambucus canadensis*)

This North American native is a beautiful shrub that grows wild along streams and on the edge of the forest. Several species may be available at local nurseries. The infused flowers make a delicious tea that is mildly sedative and helps relieve chest congestion and fever. Research conducted in Israel found that elder berry concentrate, or syrup, is an effective anti-viral and anti-microbial medicine. Elderberry syrup is now widely available and, because of its pleasant taste, especially appeals to kids when they are sick.

Thyme (*Thymus vulgaris*)

Though native to the Mediterranean, thyme will grow profusely in any sunny spot in the garden. Thyme contains powerful volatile oils with anti-bacterial properties that help break up respiratory congestion. Thyme has been used since ancient times to relieve coughs, sore throats, and chest congestion. Use thyme as an infused tea or make thyme honey (see sidebar for recipe.) The essential oil of thyme may be diluted and added to baths, or diffused into the air to relieve cold symptoms.

(All recommendations are intended to provide general information. For detailed guidance on using herbal medicines, especially when treating babies, children, elderly people or anyone who takes pharmaceutical drugs, refer to a reliable herbal reference book.)

## How to Make Sustainability Cold Remedy:

Make an herbal infusion using approximately four tablespoons each of dried elder flowers and thyme leaves. Place herbs in teapot or one-quart canning jar and add two pints boiling water. Cover loosely. Steep for 30 minutes. Strain and discard spent herbs. Reheat one cup of the infusion. Add one teaspoon elderberry syrup and one tablespoon honey (thyme honey if available. See recipe below.) Add 30 to 40 drops of boneset tincture and stir well. Drink 3 to 4 cups of hot infusion per day or as needed to relieve symptoms.

*Note: To avoid the intensely bitter taste of boneset, omit tincture and take 2 to 3 capsules of dried herb while drinking the tea.*

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**To Make Thyme Honey:** Use fresh thyme from your garden or local market. Fill a pint jar with fresh thyme leaves. Use a wooden spoon to bruise the leaves a bit. Fill the jar almost to the top with good local honey. Cap and put in sunny place outside, near a wood stove, or a hot water heater, for at least two weeks. When ready, pour contents of the jar into a saucepan and heat gently. While still warm, pour through a colander lined with muslin or cheesecloth to strain out the spent thyme. Store thyme honey in a sterile bottle. Take one teaspoon as often as needed to relieve sore throats and coughs. Add a tablespoon to a cup of herbal tea and drink frequently.

### To Learn More:

- United Plant Savers ([www.plantsavers.org](http://www.plantsavers.org)) is dedicated to protecting and preserving native medicinal plants. They conduct plant surveys and publish lists of “at-risk” and “to-watch” medicinal plants.
- Your local state Department of Natural Resources maintains lists of endangered and threatened plants.

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