

Three Local Herbs: Boneset, Elder and Usnea

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These effective, powerful remedies may be used in the treatment of influenza, respiratory infections, colds and other symptoms. Their anti-viral and anti-microbial activity, along with their sustainability and abundance in the Southeast, makes them essential to the practice of regional herbalism.

Boneset - *Eupatorium perfoliatum* (Asteraceae)

DESCRIPTION: Boneset is a symmetrical, erect herb, one to four feet tall, with a single stem ending in a slightly branched cluster of small, shaggy, white flowers. It blooms August to October. Boneset has distinctive opposing leaves that are slightly toothed and joined at the base so that the stem appears to puncture the leaves. The leaf has a rough texture and both the leaves and stem are covered with soft white hair. Frequently found in sunny open fields, at the edge of forests and along waterways.

KEY ACTIONS: Expectorant, diaphoretic, immune stimulant, antibiotic, digestive bitter, hepatic, analgesic, laxative, emetic

PART USED: Aerial (in flower)

CURRENT USES: Boneset is one of the most useful herbs for the treatment of colds and influenza: it stimulates immune response; helps reduce fevers and eliminates congestion. As an analgesic, it has a profound effect on body aches and pains caused by fever or rheumatism.

In frequent, small doses, boneset is a digestive system tonic. It has an invigorating effect on the entire digestive process and relieves indigestion, gas, belching, bloating, chronic constipation, and lethargy after eating. It also will improve a poor appetite, especially in the sick and elderly.

HARVESTING: Harvest boneset in late summer just as the flowers begin to bloom. Collect the entire plant from the ground up. If bugs have eaten the lower leaves, cut the stem just above damaged portions.

PREPARATIONS: Due to the bitterness of this herb, consider using it in syrup form or as a tincture added to a pleasant tasting or sweetened tea.

Tincture: Fresh plant (leaf and flower) – 1:2. Menstruum - 50% alcohol. Dried herb – 1:5. Menstruum - 50% alcohol.

Infusion: Use one and one-half teaspoon dried or one tablespoon fresh boneset for each cup of water. Steep for 15 minutes. Sweeten liberally with honey to counter the bitter taste.

Syrup: Make an infusion using one ounce of dried boneset (leaf and flower) for every pint of water. Let infusion steep for eight hours or overnight. Strain out herb and return infusion to a pot with a lid. Bring to a boil; cover and simmer until volume is reduced by half. Combine one part concentrated infusion with one half part honey. Mix well. Store in a sterilized glass bottle in the refrigerator.

DOSAGES: Boneset is an intensely bitter herb. This is probably not a remedy to use with children or anyone who is not convinced of the benefits of herbal healing. When using boneset infusions to treat respiratory symptoms, add liberal amounts of honey to make the taste bearable. When using boneset as a digestive aid, do not sweeten the tincture or tea; the bitter flavor is central to the medicinal benefits. Boneset tincture and infusion may be used interchangeably.

Boneset is contraindicated during pregnancy. Doses larger than those recommended here may cause nausea, vomiting, and severe diarrhea. If this occurs, discontinue use.

Tincture: To treat a respiratory condition with a boneset tincture, take 30 to 40 drops of tincture every hour. Add the tincture to a cup of hot water or tea and drink.

To stimulate digestion, take 20 to 30 drops of tincture in a small amount of warm water after meals or as needed. For a tonic effect, take **daily** after each meal for three to six months.

Infusion: Use hot boneset infusion to treat cold and influenza symptoms. Drink one-half cup infusion, as hot as you can stand it, every hour. Drink at least five doses a day or as needed to relieve symptoms.

To stimulate digestion or as a tonic to improve digestion, take two tablespoons of warm infusion after meals daily for three to six months or as needed.

Syrup: Take one to two teaspoons as needed to relieve coughs and soothe throat irritation. Boneset syrup may be added to hot tea.

Elder or Elderberry - *Sambucus canadensis* (Caprifoliaceae)

DESCRIPTION: Elder is a beautiful shrub that grows up to 15 feet tall and has dark green compound leaves with sharply toothed edges. Clusters of small, fragrant white flowers bloom in early summer. In late summer, lush bunches of dark blue-purple berries weigh down the branches. Avoid the toxic (though less common) red elder (*Sambucus pubens*), which has red berries and a black center or pith within the branches. Common around ponds and along streams and found in transition zones at the edge of forests and open sunny areas.

KEY ACTIONS: The entire elder bush is medicinal, but individual actions vary significantly for each part. Flower: diaphoretic, expectorant, anti-catarrhal, astringent. Leaf: emollient, vulnerary (external use only). Berry: anti-viral, diaphoretic, anti-catarrhal, expectorant, laxative, diuretic, astringent. Bark: emetic, cathartic, astringent, anti-inflammatory

PART USED: Flower, leaf, berry, bark

CURRENT USES: Although all parts of the elder shrub have medicinal properties, the flower and berry are most commonly used in herbal practice. Leaf preparations are for external use only. Bark is rarely used. Hot infusions of elder flower are diaphoretic, expectorant, and decongestant; they are commonly used to treat colds and influenza. Taken at the onset of cold and influenza symptoms, elder flower supports immune response. Elder flower also relieves itchy eyes, runny nose, and throat irritation due to allergies.

The medicinal properties of tart elderberries are similar to those of the flower, but the berries are also anti-viral. Elderberry syrup soothes coughs, helps treat respiratory infection and relieves allergic reactions. The wonderful flavor of elderberry syrup makes it an excellent remedy for children. Elderberry wine is a gentle digestive aide and is mildly laxative.

Infused elder leaves are used topically as a wash for wounds and burns. Salve made with infused elder leaf oil is used to heal wounds and relieve skin irritations. A fresh leaf poultice helps to relieve painful bruises.

HARVESTING: Elder leaves should be harvested in late spring or early summer, before the flower blooms. Fresh leaves should be allowed to wilt overnight before infusing them in oil to make skin salves.

Elder bark is harvested in the early spring just as the leaves are emerging or in the late fall after berries are gone. The bark is scraped off the larger branches, and smaller, thinner branches may be cut into small pieces and used whole.

Harvest the entire flower cluster when in full bloom at midsummer. To dry, place **each** elder flower face down on a screen lined with a thin cotton cloth or a paper towel (in order to catch the

pollen and smaller petals that will drop off in the drying process). When the elder flowers are completely dry, store them carefully in glass jars.

Collect berries in late summer. Only ripe berries that are slightly soft and tart should be used. The berries may be dried or used fresh to make syrup, wine, cordial, jam, or pie.

PREPARATIONS: The most common elder preparations are flower infusions or tinctures, leaf salves, and berry syrups or tinctures.

Tinctures: Fresh flower – 1:2. Dried flower – 1:5. Menstruum – 50% alcohol. Fresh berry – 1:3. Dried berry – 1:5. Menstruum – 50% alcohol.

Infusion: Use two teaspoons dried or one tablespoon fresh flowers (approximately one flower head) for each cup of boiled water. Cover and steep for 20 minutes. Strain. For the strongest diaphoretic effect, reheat before drinking. Sweeten with honey if desired.

Syrup: Make a simple syrup using fresh or dried elderberries. See my book, *Medicinal Plants of the Southern Appalachians* for a recipe.

Salve: Make a standard salve using infused elder leaf oil.

DOSAGES:

Tincture: Take one-half teaspoon of elder flower or berry tincture every hour or as needed to relieve cold and influenza symptoms. To increase diaphoretic properties, add tincture to hot tea before drinking.

Infusion: Drink one cup of hot elder flower infusion every hour or as needed to relieve cold and influenza symptoms such as chest congestion, cough and fever.

Syrup: Take one teaspoon of elder berry syrup at least four times a day. Syrup may be added to tea. Reduce the dosage slightly for children between two and six years of age. Not to be given to babies under two years of age.

Salve: Apply elder leaf salve as needed.

Usnea (also Old man's beard, tree moss, usnea lichen) - *Usnea spp.*

DESCRIPTION: A gray-green thread-like lichen that is a combination of lichen and alga organisms growing in symbiotic union. Species identification is difficult, bordering on impossible, as morphological variation within populations in a given area are endless.

HABITAT: Found growing on the branches of trees and on dead wood. Usnea is intolerant of air pollution (especially sulfur dioxide). It absorbs readily pollutants and is sometimes analyzed to measure the accumulation of airborne toxins.

KEY ACTIONS: Antibiotic, expectorant, anti-inflammatory, vulnerary, anti-fungal

PART USED: Entire lichen

CURRENT USES: Used to treat lung infections (including bronchitis, pneumonia, and tuberculosis); sore throat (including strep throat); *Candida albicans*; urinary tract infections; and mouth ulcers. Topical preparations are used to heal wounds and treat skin infections.

HARVESTING: Gather fresh lichen any time of year. Look for tree branches covered with usnea on the ground after storms or high winds. Pull lichen from the branches, cutting away any bits of bark that remain attached. Process fresh or dry for a short time.

PREPARATIONS:

Decoction: Decoct 2 tablespoons fresh or 1 tablespoon dried usnea for each cup of water. Cover and simmer for 20 to 30 minutes.

Tincture: Fresh or dried – 1:3. Menstruum – 70% alcohol.

Salve: Prepare a standard salve using infused usnea oil.

DOSAGES:

Decoction: Drink one cup three to four times a day as needed. Decoction may also be used as a wash for wounds, or as a gargle for throat infections.

Tincture: Take 30 to 60 drops in a small amount of water or tea, three to four times a day as needed. Can be combined with other tinctures.

Salve: Use as needed to treat skin infections.
