

Getting started with herbs



Course booklet

Welcome

Hello and welcome to the course,

The aim of this course is to provide you with a basics on herbs.

This course is an introductory level course and is really a starting point in the exciting world of medicinal plants.

Safety

Herbs and medications

Herbs are often seen as 'safe' because they are natural but that is not the case, and when someone is taking medications they can interact with herbs (as well as a wide range of supplements and vitamins).

If you are taking any medication I do not recommend you take any herbs internally without first consulting a medical herbalist to check for interactions.

Herbs and particular medical conditions

In these courses we will only be looking at self limiting conditions, things that you would generally not seek medical attention for. e.g. coughs and colds.

It is important to seek medical attention when appropriate, either through a local doctor or local medical herbalist.

Herbs, pregnancy and breastfeeding

While there are some herbs that are beneficial in pregnancy and breastfeeding, they must be strictly controlled and for that reason I recommend anyone who's pregnant to see a medical herbalist for advice before taking any herbs (internally) at any stage of pregnancy (or breastfeeding).

External preparations can be used for pregnant women but if you are ever in doubt check with a local medical herbalist.

What is herbal medicine?

Herbal medicine is the use of plant based medicines to restore and maintain health.

Herbal medicine is the oldest form of medicine in the world, with over 80% of the world's population using herbal medicine as their only form of medicine (WHO statistic).

In the UK, herbal medicine is often seen as a 'complementary' medicine, as it can be used safely alongside orthodox medicine.

Many orthodox medicines in use today originated from medicinal plants, for example aspirin from willow bark, and digitalis from foxglove.

Medicinal plants have been used for thousands of years for health and nutrition, and modern scientific research is now starting to explain how that works. For example, Valerian has been shown to improve sleep in several studies* and is now available to buy over the counter as an alternative to sleeping tablets.

Ginkgo (Ginkgo biloba) is another herb that has been studied extensively in recent years, research has shown that Ginkgo can improve brain function in people with Alzheimer's and Dementia*.

Simples



What are simples?

A 'simple' is a term that is often used to mean one herb used as a medicine, but it can also mean simple as in very easy and quick to make.

Indigestion

There are many herbs that can aid digestion and they are best taken as a tea. If you are using tea bags of the herb you may need to add several tea bags to a mug of hot water to get a good strength. If you are using dried herbs the general rule of thumb is 1 – 2 tsp of dried herb to 1 cup of boiling water. If you are using fresh herbs double that.

Herbs to try for indigestion: Peppermint, chamomile, fennel, cinnamon, caraway, ginger.

Sore throats



Sage tea with a tsp of honey is an excellent gargle and it can then be drunk.

Coughs and colds



Thyme is an excellent herb for coughs as it not only fights any infection it also reduces the strength of the cough and helps to move any mucous.

Natural sleep

Chamomile is a lovely tea to take before bed to aid relaxation and natural sleep.

Additional herbs for restful sleep: lime flower, lavender and valerian

Teas and infusions

You can find out more about how to make these in my free eBook [Simple herbal teas](#).

Drying your own herbs

Gathering herbs from the wild



Gathering herbs from the wild can be very rewarding. Being able to take a herb from nature and then make it into a remedy is very special.

When gathering herbs from the wild remember the following things:-

- Check if the herb is endangered.
- Check that you have the correct herb; this comes with practice and confidence. If you can, go

out gathering with someone who can identify the herbs you want. Then once you have gathered them from the wild once, you will have the knowledge and confidence to do so again on your own. You can also use a plant key to identify plants.

- Make sure that you do not damage the surrounding ecosystems when you gather from a particular area.
- Make sure the herb has not been contaminated, either by car fumes, insecticides, pesticides or other chemicals. You should collect herbs away from roads and fields that have been sprayed with chemicals.
- Make sure you are respectful to the herb when gathering from it. When taking flowers leave enough for the herbs to be able to reproduce and feed the local wildlife. You should only take 10% from the plant.
- When taking leaves, break them off where the leaf meets the stem, this will encourage further growth.
- When gathering roots be very careful to only take the roots of the herb in question and no

others. If you can, plant seeds in the area where the herb was removed to continue the life cycle of the herb.

- When gathering bark do not take off in circular strips around the trunk as this will kill the tree. Take bark that is already loose. Make sure you clean and dry it well before using.

For more information on gathering and drying herbs, see a good general herbal.

Storage



If you are storing herbs for any length of time then they should be kept in glass containers with air tight lids. They should be kept away from damp and sunlight in

a cool dry place.

They should keep well in these conditions although it will depend on the individual batch.

- **Leaves and flowers** – last for up to one year.
- **Roots and barks** – last for up to two years.

Make sure you label your jars with the botanical name and common name of the herb, the best before date of the herb and preferably where it came from.

Drying herbs

Outside



Originally herbs would have been gathered and then dried outside. Hoffmann often recommends drying the herb in the sun. I think this is a good idea but is difficult to do. Not only do we have the unpredictable weather of the UK, we also don't often have the time or space to dry things outside.

If you do want to give it a go, gather the herb you want to dry and spread out as flat as possible on a flat surface in the sun. Try to protect from wind and creatures. After 4 hours in the sun, turn the herb over for another 4 hours. You will need to repeat this until the herb is dry enough to be stored.

In an oven

This is a method that's particularly tricky, not only do you have to get the temperature right, it has to be warm but not hot so that the herb doesn't burn, usually the lowest setting on your oven is best.

You also have the smells and material on the inside of the oven that may contaminate the herb while it's drying. As well as the material that you use to put the herb on inside the oven, for example Teflon coated trays can contaminate the herb.

If you do want to give this method a try, gather the herb you want to dry and spread out on grease proof paper on a flat metal tray. Place in a clean oven on the lowest setting, you will need to leave the door open a bit so that the steam can escape.

The time it takes will depend on the herb that you're drying; finer material spread flat will obviously take less time to dry. Check every hour to see how dry the herb is.

Hanging up inside



This is what you often see in films and in books of herbalists and healers. They have bundles of herbs drying in the rafters of their house. While this might be a pretty image it's not very easy to do well, but it will depend on your home.

If you want to give it a try, gather the herb you want to dry in bundles and tie tightly with string. Hang from the ceiling in a room that's warm but not too hot, that has a good draft but not somewhere where it will get damp and mouldy. Smells should not be able to come into contact

with the herbs as they dry as this will contaminate them. Like I said, it's not easy!

Paper bag method

This is probably my favourite method but I have tried the others mentioned for various different herbs. The paper bag method uses a paper bag to hold the herb while it's drying.

If you want to give it a try, gather the herb you want to dry and chop into small pieces to make it easier for drying. Place in the paper bag (make sure it's clean and dry), make a few small holes in the bag to allow air to circulate. Hang the bag up in a clean dry area, it doesn't have to be warm but that does often help to dry the herb. You don't want it too warm though, as this can encourage mould to grow.

It's a good idea to check on the herb every couple of days to check how the drying is going and if there is any mould. Depending on the herb, it will usually take between one and two weeks to dry fully in the paper bag.

The modern method – dehydrating



There is now a modern method of drying herbs that has now become affordable, dehydrating.

Warm air is circulated around the herb until it dries, for some herbs with a small amount of water content this can take approximately 40 minutes.

When using this method it is important to spread the herb out so that there is room around each leaf/part of the plant and you will need to check regularly on the progress of the drying.

The Test

To check if herbs are completely dry and ready for storage, they should break cleanly and make a snapping sound.

What next?

Other courses you may enjoy

If you've enjoyed this course I have lots more. You can take a look [here](#).