



The Ancestral Apothecary

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A NOTE BEFORE YOU BEGIN

Somewhere along the way, we stopped trusting plants. We traded the herb garden for the pharmacy, the kitchen apothecary for the supplement aisle, and the slow wisdom of botanical medicine for the quick fix of a pill. This guide is an invitation to find your way back.

The Ancestral Apothecary is not a replacement for your doctor. It is a reclamation. It is the knowledge your great-grandmother carried in her hands every time she brewed a tea, tucked a tincture into a cabinet, or reached for a root. It is the thread that connects traditional Chinese medicine, Ayurvedic wisdom, European folk herbalism, and the living traditions of cultures that never stopped listening to the earth.

Each chapter in this guide is built around a system of the body and the herbs that have served it across centuries and continents. You will find herb profiles written the way a clinical herbalist thinks about them: not just what they do, but how they work, what they combine with, and what the tradition actually says. You will find formulations that are rooted in real practice. And you will find recipes woven throughout, because the kitchen and the apothecary were never meant to be separate rooms.

Start with what is calling you. A chapter on sleep, on hormones, on your gut, on fertility. Let one herb become familiar before you reach for the next. That is how plant medicine has always worked. Not as an overhaul. As a conversation.

with love and roots,

Larissa

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A WORD ON SAFETY, BEFORE YOU BEGIN

How to read the icons in this guide

Herbs are powerful, and that power deserves respect. Before you brew, tincture, or dose anything in the pages ahead, please read this.

This guide is educational, not a substitute for medical care. If you are pregnant, trying to conceive, nursing, on any medication, or managing a diagnosed health condition, talk with a qualified healthcare provider or herbalist before starting anything new here, even something as ordinary as a tea. What is gentle for one body is not automatically gentle for another, and human research on many traditional herbs, especially in pregnancy, remains limited. Traditional use across generations is real evidence of a kind, but it is not the same thing as clinical evidence, and this guide tries to be honest about that difference throughout.

Look for these four icons beside herbs and formulas throughout the guide. They tell you, at a glance, what kind of attention that herb is asking for.

✓	Gentle food or tea use <i>Traditionally enjoyed in everyday amounts by most healthy adults.</i>
!	Check medications <i>May interact with prescriptions, supplements, or other substances. Talk to your pharmacist or provider first.</i>
Ⓟ	Pregnancy caution <i>Avoid, limit, or discuss timing and dose with your prenatal provider before use.</i>
℞	Practitioner guidance <i>Better used with individualized dosing from a qualified herbalist or healthcare provider than self-prescribed.</i>

None of this is meant to make you afraid of plants. It is meant to help you use them the way herbalists always have: with knowledge, attention, and real respect for how powerful they are.

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What Herbs Actually Are

The science, the tradition, and why
your ancestors were right



01 — WHAT HERBS ACTUALLY ARE

The science, the tradition, and why your ancestors were right

Before there were pharmacies, before there were laboratories, before there were clinical trials, there were plants. And the women who knew them. Every culture on earth developed a relationship with the botanical world around it, not because it was quaint or spiritual, but because it worked. The herbs in this guide are not alternatives to medicine. In many cases, they are the origin of it.

Aspirin came from willow bark. Morphine came from the poppy. Digoxin, still used in cardiac care today, came from foxglove. Quinine came from cinchona bark. The pharmaceutical industry spent the twentieth century isolating and patenting the active compounds in plants, removing them from their whole-plant context, and calling that progress. What traditional herbalism has always argued, and what modern research is beginning to confirm, is that the whole plant often works better than the isolated compound alone.

The whole plant often contains dozens of compounds that work together, what herbalists call the “entourage effect.” Removing one active constituent and discarding the rest is like eating the frosting and calling it cake.

HOW PLANTS ACTUALLY WORK IN THE BODY

Herbs are not magic. They are chemistry. The compounds in plants, alkaloids, flavonoids, terpenes, polyphenols, glycosides, tannins, saponins, interact with the biochemistry of your body in specific, measurable ways. Some are anti-inflammatory. Some are adaptogenic, meaning they help your body regulate its stress response rather than simply suppressing or stimulating it. Some are phytoestrogenic, meaning they carry compounds that gently interact with estrogen receptor sites. Some are nervine, meaning they act directly on the nervous system to calm or restore it.

What makes plant medicine different from pharmaceutical medicine is not that it is gentler or weaker. Some herbs are neither. What makes it different is the philosophy behind it. Herbalism, whether you are looking at Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), Ayurveda, or European folk traditions, works from the premise that the body is a self-regulating system and that the goal of medicine is to support that regulation, not override it. Herbs are used to create conditions in which the body can heal itself.

THE THREE GREAT TRADITIONS IN THIS GUIDE

This guide draws primarily from three lineages of herbal medicine, each with thousands of years of documented practice behind it. Understanding how each tradition thinks will help you use the formulations in this guide more intelligently.

TRADITION	ORIGIN	KEY PHILOSOPHY
Western Herbalism	Europe, Americas	Specific herbs for specific symptoms and body systems. Rooted in Galenic medicine and folk tradition.
Traditional Chinese Medicine	China, East Asia	Herbs classified by temperature, taste, and organ system. Always used in formulas, rarely alone.
Ayurveda	India	Herbs matched to constitutional type (dosha). Food and herb as inseparable medicine.

Throughout this guide, each herb is identified by both its Western and Chinese name where relevant, and formulations are drawn from clinical herbal practice in both traditions. Where the two systems

agree on an herb's action, you can trust that agreement deeply. It means the plant has been observed across vastly different cultures and still arrived at the same conclusion.

UNDERSTANDING HERBAL ACTIONS

Herbalists classify plants by their action on the body, what they do, not just what they contain. Learning these terms will help you read any herbal formula intelligently, not just the ones in this guide.

ACTION	WHAT IT MEANS	EXAMPLE HERBS
Adaptogen	Helps the body regulate stress response and restore homeostasis	Ashwagandha, Eleuthero, Rhodiola, Reishi
Nervine	Acts on the nervous system to calm, tonify, or restore	Skullcap, Passionflower, Oat straw
Emmenagogue	Stimulates or regulates menstrual flow	Mugwort, Blue cohosh, Dong quai
Galactagogue	Supports milk production in nursing mothers	Fenugreek, Fennel, Blessed thistle
Carminative	Relieves gas, bloating, and digestive cramping	Fennel, Ginger, Chamomile
Bitter tonic	Stimulates digestive secretions and liver function	Dandelion root, Gentian, Artichoke
Demulcent	Soothes and coats irritated mucous membranes	Marshmallow root, Slippery elm
Alterative	Gradually improves tissue nutrition and elimination	Nettle, Cleavers, Red clover
Trophorestorative	Deeply nourishes and restores a specific organ or system	Hawthorn (heart), Milky oats (nerves)
Hepatoprotective	Protects and supports liver cell function	Milk thistle, Schisandra, Dandelion

WHAT TCM ADDS TO THE PICTURE

Traditional Chinese Medicine classifies herbs in a way that is entirely different from Western herbalism, and entirely complementary to it. In TCM, every herb has a temperature (hot, warm, neutral, cool, or cold), a taste (sweet, bitter, sour, spicy, or salty), and one or more organ systems it enters. These are not metaphors. They are a functional classification system developed over more than two thousand years of clinical observation.

A woman who runs cold, who has pale lips, thin blood, and no appetite, would be given warming, blood-building herbs like Dang Gui (*Angelica sinensis*) and Long Yan Rou (longan fruit). A woman who runs hot, who has heavy periods, a red face, and night sweats, would be given cooling, yin-nourishing herbs like Bai Shao (white peony root) and Sheng Di Huang (*rehmannia*). Same complaint, different constitution, different formula. This is the genius of TCM herbalism, and it is why a good Chinese herbal formula rarely causes the side effects you see with pharmaceutical drugs, because it is built for the whole person, not just the symptom.

In TCM, you never treat the disease. You treat the pattern. Two women with the same diagnosis may receive entirely different formulas because their patterns, their constitutional landscape, are different. This is precision medicine that has been practiced for millennia.

THE MOST IMPORTANT THING TO UNDERSTAND

Herbs work best when they are used consistently, in the right form, at the right dose, for the right person. They are not a crisis intervention. They are a practice. The woman who drinks nettle infusion every morning for three months will experience something entirely different from the woman who takes a nettle capsule once when she remembers to. Context matters. Relationship with the plant matters. Preparation method matters enormously.

Chapter Eight of this guide covers preparation methods in full. But for now, understand this: a strong infusion of dried nettle leaf contains more bioavailable minerals than almost any supplement you can buy. A properly prepared tincture of ashwagandha root will outperform many capsule products. The method of preparation is not a detail. It is the medicine.

YOUR FIRST FORMULA: THE ANCESTRAL NOURISHING INFUSION

This is the formula to begin with. It is not designed to treat anything specific. It is designed to nourish the foundations, mineral reserves, blood, nervous system, and kidneys, which are the roots from which everything else grows. Susun Weed, one of the great living Western herbalists, has called nourishing herbal infusions the most important thing a woman can do for her health. This formula builds on that tradition with a TCM-informed lens.

THE ANCESTRAL NOURISHING INFUSION ✓

INGREDIENTS

- 1 oz (28g) dried nettle leaf (*Urtica dioica*) — mineral-rich blood and kidney tonic
- 1/2 oz (14g) dried oat straw (*Avena sativa*) — nervous system trophorestorative
- 1/4 oz (7g) dried red clover blossoms (*Trifolium pratense*) — gentle phytoestrogen, lymphatic
- 1/4 oz (7g) dried rose hips (*Rosa canina*) — vitamin C, adrenal support
- Optional: 1 tbsp dried spearmint — flavor, digestive ease
- 1 quart (950ml) just-boiled filtered water

METHOD

1. Combine dried herbs in a quart-sized mason jar. Pour just-boiled water over the herbs, filling to the top.
2. Lid tightly. Steep for a minimum of 4 hours, ideally overnight. This long steep is what makes this an infusion rather than a tea, it extracts the minerals that a short brew cannot.
3. Strain well, pressing the herbs to extract all liquid. Compost the spent herbs.
4. Drink 2 to 4 cups throughout the day. The infusion keeps refrigerated for up to 48 hours.
5. Practice daily for at least 4 to 6 weeks before assessing results. Minerals build slowly.

Yield: 1 quart (4 servings). Herbs can be sourced bulk from Mountain Rose Herbs or a local apothecary.

Begin here. Drink this for a month. Notice what shifts. Then move into the chapters that follow with that foundation already laid beneath you. The apothecary, like any good kitchen, rewards the woman who takes her time.

Building Your Herbal Pantry

The foundational herbs every woman should know

02 — BUILDING YOUR HERBAL PANTRY

The foundational herbs every woman should have within reach

Every traditional culture on earth kept a household medicine cabinet. In medieval Europe it was called a stillroom, a room dedicated to distilling, drying, and preparing plant medicines for the family. In China, every home had its apothecary jars. In Ayurvedic households, specific spices and roots were kept as a matter of course, used daily in food and medicine without any real distinction between the two. This chapter is about rebuilding that practice. You do not need a hundred herbs. You need ten that you know deeply.

The herbs in this chapter are the workhorses, the ones that address the most common needs women bring to herbalists: depleted energy, hormonal dysregulation, anxious nervous systems, sluggish digestion, and weakened immunity. Learn these first. Let them become as familiar as the food in your kitchen.

THE FOUNDATIONAL HERBS

Nettle Leaf

Urtica dioica | Western / Alterative, Nutritive tonic ✓

*Roman soldiers were said to have brought nettle seeds with them as they marched north through Europe, believing their own nettle (*Urtica pilulifera*) would not survive the cold. When it did not, they adapted to the local species and found it equally powerful. Medieval herbalists used nettle for everything from joint pain to spring cleansing tonics. It was one of the first plants consumed after winter, when mineral stores were at their lowest, a tradition that makes perfect physiological sense.*

Nettle leaf is the most mineral-dense herb in common Western practice. It contains bioavailable iron, calcium, magnesium, potassium, silica, and chromium in quantities that rival most supplements, and unlike isolated minerals, they arrive in a food matrix that the body recognizes and absorbs efficiently. As a nourishing infusion steeped overnight, it rebuilds depleted blood, supports kidney function, reduces histamine load, and gently improves skin and hair over months of daily use. It is the herb for the woman who is tired, wired, and running on empty. There is almost no condition in women's health that does not benefit from a daily nettle infusion as a foundation.

PREPARATION: The nourishing infusion is the only way to extract nettle's full mineral content. Use 1 oz (28g) dried nettle leaf per quart of just-boiled water in a sealed mason jar. Steep 4 to 8 hours minimum, overnight is ideal. The liquid will be dark green and earthy. Strain, press the herb, and drink 2 to 4 cups throughout the day. A short tea gives you flavor but not medicine. The long steep is non-negotiable. Fresh nettle can also be blanched and eaten like spinach, the sting is destroyed by heat.

Ashwagandha Root

Withania somnifera | Ayurvedic and TCM / Adaptogen, Kidney yang tonic ✓ !

Ashwagandha has been used in Ayurvedic medicine for over three thousand years. The name means the strength of a horse, a reference both to its smell and its ability to confer the endurance and vitality of the animal on those who take it. Ancient texts describe it as a rasayana herb, a rejuvenating tonic used by kings, warriors, and elders to rebuild strength after illness or depletion. It was often prepared in warm milk with honey and spices, a preparation called ashwagandha ksheerapaka that is still used in Ayurvedic clinics today.

Modern research confirms what tradition discovered empirically. Ashwagandha lowers cortisol by 20 to 30 percent with consistent use, improves thyroid hormone conversion, supports GABA pathways in the

brain, reduces anxiety with exhaustion (as opposed to anxiety with agitation, where it is less indicated), and meaningfully improves deep sleep quality. It is particularly valuable for women with subclinical hypothyroidism, adrenal fatigue patterns, anxiety that worsens at night, and poor recovery from stress. In TCM, it functions as a Kidney yang tonic, rebuilding the deep constitutional fire that stress and overwork burn through. Because it can influence thyroid hormone conversion, women on thyroid medication should use it alongside their prescriber, with labs monitored rather than adjusted by feel.

PREPARATION: The fat-soluble withanolides in ashwagandha are best extracted in milk or warm oil, not water, which is why moon milk outperforms a water tea. Simmer 1 tsp root powder in 1 cup whole milk for 5 minutes. Add 1 tsp raw honey, 1/4 tsp cardamom, and a pinch of nutmeg. Drink 30 to 60 minutes before bed. Alternatively, use a high-quality tincture (3 to 5 ml in water before bed) or an encapsulated root extract standardized to 5% withanolides. Give it 6 to 8 weeks before assessing results. Morning anxiety and evening fatigue are often the first things that shift.

Red Raspberry Leaf

Rubus idaeus | Western / Uterine tonic, Nutritive (P) R

Red raspberry leaf has one of the longest documented histories in women's health. Indigenous peoples across North America used it to prepare for childbirth. European midwives carried it as a matter of course. Nicholas Culpeper, writing in the seventeenth century, described it as strengthening the womb and easing the pain of labor. It appears in virtually every traditional materia medica written for women, across cultures that had no contact with each other, which is itself a form of evidence that deserves more attention than it typically receives.

Raspberry leaf contains fragarine, an alkaloid long thought to tone the smooth muscle of the uterus without stimulating it. Red raspberry leaf has a long history of use in women's herbalism, particularly during later pregnancy. Human evidence remains limited, and pregnancy use should be discussed with a qualified prenatal healthcare professional, who can help you weigh the tradition against your own history and stage of pregnancy. Outside of pregnancy, it is a source of magnesium, iron, calcium, and manganese, and many women use it as a gentle daily ally for menstrual cramping and heavy flow. As with any herb taken regularly, pay attention to how your own body responds, and treat tradition as a starting point rather than a guarantee.

PREPARATION: Raspberry leaf yields most of its medicine in a medium-length infusion. Use 1 to 2 heaping tablespoons per cup, steep covered for 15 minutes (covering traps the volatile aromatic compounds that contribute to its relaxing effect on smooth muscle). Drink 2 to 3 cups daily. For preconception, a long infusion (4 hours) with nettle leaf gives you the full mineral spectrum. If you are pregnant or trying to conceive, bring this to your prenatal provider before making it a daily habit, especially earlier in pregnancy. The taste is mild and pleasantly leafy, it is one of the most palatable medicinal herbs available.

Oat Straw

Avena sativa | Western / Nervine trophorestorative, Nutritive ✓

Avena sativa is the same plant that gives us oatmeal, but the medicine lives in the green vegetative stalks harvested just before the grain forms, not in the grain itself. Medieval monks cultivated oats extensively and prepared the green tops as a tonic for mental fatigue and nervous exhaustion. The seventeenth-century herbalist William Turner wrote of oats as a restorative for the brain and sinews. This is an herb that has been quieter than others in popular herbal literature, it is not dramatic, it does not produce noticeable effects quickly, and that quality is precisely why it has been underestimated.

Oat straw is a nervine trophorestorative, a category of herbs that rebuilds the structural integrity of the nervous system rather than simply calming it acutely. It is the long-game herb for the woman whose nerves have been worn thin by years of chronic stress, who startles easily, who feels emotionally raw and thin-skinned, who cannot recover her equanimity after difficulty. It is also deeply nourishing to connective tissue, bones, and the endocrine system through its silica and calcium content. It works slowly, measure the effects in months, not days.

PREPARATION: Oat straw requires a long infusion to yield its medicine. Use 1 oz per quart, steep 4 to 8 hours. On its own the taste is mild and slightly sweet. It combines beautifully with nettle and red raspberry leaf as a daily women's tonic blend. Milky oats (the fresh plant tinctured when the grain is in the milky stage) is even more potent as a nervine and is worth seeking out from small-batch herbal producers, it is the form most specific to nervous system restoration.

Tulsi (Holy Basil)

Ocimum tenuiflorum | Ayurvedic / Adaptogen, Nervine, Antimicrobial ✓

Tulsi is one of the most sacred plants in the Hindu tradition. It grows in virtually every home and temple courtyard across India, tended daily as an act of devotion. The Charaka Samhita, one of the foundational Ayurvedic texts written roughly two thousand years ago, describes tulsi as the incomparable one, an herb that protects the body from environmental stress, purifies the air, and strengthens the spirit. In many Indian households, drinking tulsi tea is the first ritual of the morning, as natural and non-negotiable as brushing teeth.

Modern research validates tulsi as a true adaptogen: it lowers cortisol, modulates the HPA axis, reduces blood glucose, improves cognitive function under stress, and has significant antimicrobial and antiviral activity. It is warming, aromatic, and deeply pleasurable to drink, which matters, because the herbs you will actually take consistently are the ones you enjoy. It is particularly valuable for stress-related immune depletion, brain fog driven by cortisol, and the anxious-but-wired nervous system state that so many women inhabit. It is well tolerated and can be drunk freely throughout the day by most healthy adults.

PREPARATION: Fresh tulsi makes one of the finest teas in the herbal world. Steep 4 to 5 fresh leaves or 1 to 2 tsp dried herb per cup in just-boiled water for 10 minutes, covered. It blends beautifully with rose petals, ginger, and lemon. Tulsi is also easy to grow on a sunny windowsill, a single plant gives you a daily supply of fresh herb through spring and summer. Dry the excess for winter. You can also find high-quality tulsi tinctures for times when you need a more concentrated dose.

Chamomile

Matricaria chamomilla | Western / Nervine, Carminative, Anti-inflammatory ✓

Chamomile is the most widely used medicinal herb in European history. The Egyptians dedicated it to their sun god Ra and used it as a fever remedy. The Anglo-Saxons named it maythen and considered it one of their nine sacred herbs. It appears in virtually every European herbal from Dioscorides onward. For centuries it was so common in English cottage gardens and roadsides that it was called the physician's physician, the herb that could treat almost anything that troubled an ordinary family. That familiarity has made us underestimate it.

A properly prepared chamomile infusion, two heaping tablespoons of good dried flowers, steeped covered for fifteen minutes, is a fundamentally different medicine from a supermarket tea bag steeped for two minutes. It calms the nervous system through GABA receptor activity, relaxes smooth muscle in the gut and uterus, reduces systemic inflammation, and is well tolerated at traditional culinary and tea

doses by most people. It is the first herb to reach for with menstrual cramping, digestive pain, anxiety, insomnia, and any inflammatory condition that benefits from a gentle, whole-body calming effect.

PREPARATION: Quality matters enormously with chamomile. The dried flowers should be bright yellow and aromatic, pale, dusty chamomile has lost most of its medicine. Use 2 heaping tablespoons per cup (far more than you think is necessary), pour just-boiled water over, cover immediately, and steep 15 minutes. The cover keeps the volatile oils, the source of its relaxing effect, in the cup rather than evaporating into the air. Drink 2 to 3 cups in the evening for sleep and nervous system support. A chamomile compress (strong cooled tea applied to the belly) is also highly effective for menstrual cramping and digestive spasm.

Ginger Root

Zingiber officinale | Western and TCM (Sheng Jiang / Gan Jiang) / Warming digestive, Emmenagogue ✓ !

Ginger has been cultivated and traded for over five thousand years. Sanskrit texts from 1000 BCE describe it as the universal medicine. It was one of the first spices to reach Europe from Asia, so valuable that in medieval England a pound of ginger was worth the price of a sheep. Arab traders kept its origin secret for centuries to maintain their monopoly. In traditional Chinese medicine, ginger appears in roughly half of all classical formulas, not because it treats a specific condition but because it improves the absorption and action of every other herb it accompanies.

In TCM, fresh ginger (Sheng Jiang) and dried ginger (Gan Jiang) are classified as distinct medicines. Fresh ginger is warming and dispersing, it moves stagnation, relieves nausea, and opens the surface of the body to clear cold. Dried ginger is hotter and more focused, it warms the Spleen and Stomach deeply, treating the cold and sluggish digestive pattern marked by loose stools, fatigue after eating, and cold hands and feet. Most women in the modern world run colder than they should, eat too many raw and cold foods, and would benefit from significantly more ginger than they use. Ginger can add to the effect of blood-thinning medications, so if you take a prescription blood thinner, mention regular medicinal-dose ginger use to your provider.

PREPARATION: Fresh ginger: grate or slice 1 inch of fresh root into 2 cups of water, simmer 15 minutes, add lemon and honey. Use freely for nausea, cold, and acute digestive complaints. Dried ginger powder: 1/4 to 1/2 tsp in warm water or food daily for chronic cold and digestive weakness. In cooking, ginger added to every savory meal is not seasoning, it is medicine. Crystallized ginger makes an effective and portable anti-nausea remedy for travel or morning sickness.

Milk Thistle Seed

Silybum marianum | Western / Hepatoprotective, Alterative ✓

Milk thistle has been used as a liver herb since ancient Greece. Dioscorides recorded it in the first century CE as a remedy for snakebite, which tells us the ancients understood it had something to do with clearing toxins from the blood. Medieval herbalists called it marian thistle and used it specifically for obstructed livers and spleen conditions. The white marbling on its leaves, said to be the milk of the Virgin Mary, gave it its common name. Long before silymarin was identified as its active compound, European folk medicine had correctly intuited its specific affinity for the liver.

Silymarin, the flavonolignan complex in milk thistle seeds, is one of the most rigorously studied hepatoprotective compounds in botanical medicine. It blocks toxin uptake by liver cells, stimulates liver cell regeneration, reduces inflammatory cytokines in liver tissue, and improves the liver's ability to conjugate and clear excess estrogen. For women dealing with hormonal imbalance, PMS, heavy periods, skin conditions, or any history of pharmaceutical drug use, liver support is not optional, it is

foundational. A liver that cannot clear estrogen efficiently is the root of more women's hormonal issues than most conventional practitioners acknowledge.

PREPARATION: Silymarin is not water-soluble, a seed tea is largely ineffective. The best forms are freshly ground seed (grind in a coffee grinder, add 1 tbsp daily to smoothies, oatmeal, or yogurt, it has a mild, slightly nutty flavor), alcohol tincture (which does extract silymarin effectively), or encapsulated standardized extract (look for 70 to 80% silymarin content). Freshly ground seed is both the cheapest and most bioavailable option for daily use.

Rose Petals and Rose Hips

Rosa spp. | Western and TCM / Heart tonic, Nervine, Nutritive, Astringent ✓

The rose is the oldest cultivated flower on earth, roses have been found in Egyptian tombs, described in ancient Persian poetry, and pressed into Ayurvedic medicine for at least four thousand years. Avicenna, the eleventh-century Persian physician whose Canon of Medicine was taught in European medical schools until the seventeenth century, distilled the world's first rose water and wrote extensively about rose's effects on the heart and spirit. In TCM, rose petals (Mei Gui Hua) are used specifically to move Liver qi stagnation, the emotional and hormonal stuckness that manifests as PMS, irritability, depression, and breast tenderness.

Rose petals calm the nervous system, gently lift grief and anxiety, and move the emotional stagnation that sits just below the surface in so many women's lives. Rose hips, the fruit of the rose, are one of the highest natural sources of vitamin C, gram for gram, they contain twenty times more than oranges, supporting adrenal function, collagen synthesis, and immune resilience through cold months. Together, petals and hips make one of the most complete and enjoyable daily tonics in the apothecary.

PREPARATION: Rose petal tea: 1 to 2 tbsp dried petals per cup, steep 10 minutes. Add cardamom and honey for an Ayurvedic heart tonic. Rose hip decoction: simmer 1 tbsp dried hips in 2 cups water for 20 minutes (the seeds and skin need heat to release their vitamin C). Rose water, distilled from fresh petals, can be spritzed on the face or added to food and water as a gentle nervine. Rose hip powder can be stirred into oatmeal, yogurt, or smoothies. The dried petals also make one of the finest additions to bath water for both skin and nervous system.

Dandelion Root and Leaf

Taraxacum officinale | Western and TCM (Pu Gong Ying) / Bitter tonic, Hepatic, Diuretic ✓

Dandelion was not always a weed. Before industrialized agriculture made lawns a status symbol, dandelion was deliberately planted and tended. Medieval gardens included it as a standard bitter green and liver tonic. The word dandelion comes from the French *dent de lion*, lion's tooth, a reference to the toothed leaf margin. Arab physicians in the tenth and eleventh centuries wrote about it extensively. It was brought deliberately to North America by European settlers as a food and medicine plant. The story of how it became a weed is really the story of how we stopped knowing what food and medicine were.

The root is one of the finest gentle liver and digestive bitters available, it stimulates bile production, improves fat digestion, and clears the liver slowly and safely. The leaf is a potent diuretic that, unlike pharmaceutical diuretics, does not deplete potassium, it actually contains substantial potassium itself. The leaf also contains more beta-carotene than carrots and more calcium than milk by weight. In TCM, Pu Gong Ying clears heat and resolves toxicity, it is used for acute infections, mastitis, skin conditions driven by internal heat, and liver congestion. The entire plant is food and medicine, available for free in any unsprayed yard.

PREPARATION: Root decoction for liver and digestion: 1 tsp dried root per cup, simmer 15 minutes, drink before meals as a digestive bitter. Roasted dandelion root makes a deeply satisfying coffee substitute with genuine liver-supportive properties. Fresh young leaves: add to salads (balance the bitterness with olive oil and lemon), blend into smoothies, or saute with garlic and good olive oil. The bitterness on the tongue is itself the medicine, it triggers bile release and digestive secretion before the first bite of food arrives in the stomach.

YOUR DAILY BLEND: THE WOMEN'S TONIC INFUSION

Make this in bulk. Keep it in a jar on the counter. This is your daily practice, the foundation everything else in this guide builds on top of.

DAILY WOMEN'S TONIC BLEND ✓

INGREDIENTS

- 2 parts dried nettle leaf — mineral foundation
- 2 parts dried oat straw — nervous system restoration
- 1 part dried red raspberry leaf — uterine tone and minerals
- 1 part dried tulsi (holy basil) — adaptogen, stress modulation
- 1/2 part dried rose petals — heart and Liver qi
- 1/2 part dried rose hips — vitamin C, adrenal support
- Optional: 1/4 part dried lemon balm — digestive calm

METHOD

1. Combine all herbs in a large glass jar and shake to mix. Label with the date and herb list.
2. To brew: use 2 heaping tablespoons per quart of just-boiled water.
3. For full mineral extraction: steep 4 to 8 hours in a sealed jar. For an everyday tea: steep 15 minutes.
4. Drink 2 to 4 cups daily. The blend keeps dried for up to one year away from light and heat.
5. Source herbs in bulk from Mountain Rose Herbs, Starwest Botanicals, or a trusted local apothecary.

Yield: One batch of 2 oz of each herb makes approximately 3 to 4 months of daily use.

Herbs for Hormones and your Cycle

Western and Chinese botanicals for
your whole cycle

03 — HERBS FOR HORMONES AND YOUR CYCLE

Western and Chinese botanicals for the whole arc of the menstrual cycle

For most of human history, women's cycles were understood as a vital sign, a window into the health of the whole body. Traditional Chinese medicine considers the menstrual cycle so diagnostically rich that a skilled TCM practitioner can read the state of the Liver, Kidneys, Spleen, and Heart from the color, consistency, timing, and symptoms of a woman's period alone. Ayurvedic medicine mapped the cycle onto the rhythms of the moon and taught women to move through the month in alignment with their shifting energies. Even European folk medicine, less systematized than Eastern traditions, had a robust working knowledge of which plants regulated, eased, and supported the female body through its monthly rhythm.

What we call PMS, irregular cycles, painful periods, and hormonal imbalance were not epidemics in traditional cultures, not because women were constitutionally different, but because their lives were. They ate mineral-rich whole foods, moved their bodies, slept with the darkness, and used plants daily as food and medicine. This chapter gives you the tools to bring that knowledge back into your own body.

THE FOUR PHASES: WHAT YOUR CYCLE IS TELLING YOU

PHASE	DAYS	DOMINANT HORMONES	WHAT YOUR BODY NEEDS
Menstruation	Day 1 to 5	Low estrogen, low progesterone	Rest, iron, warmth, blood-moving herbs
Follicular	Day 6 to 13	Estrogen rising	Nourishment, liver support, building herbs
Ovulation	Day 14±	LH surge, estrogen peak	Circulation, adaptogens, rose, movement
Luteal	Day 15 to 28	Progesterone dominant	Nervines, magnesium, liver clearing, vitex

HERBS FOR HORMONAL HEALTH

Vitex (Chaste Tree Berry)

Vitex agnus-castus | Western / Pituitary regulator, Progesterogenic ! Ⓢ

The chaste tree berry takes its name from its historical use in European monasteries, where monks chewed the berries to suppress libido during periods of fasting and prayer. The irony is that vitex works through the pituitary gland, not the reproductive organs directly, and that same pituitary action makes it one of the most important hormone-regulating herbs for women in modern herbal practice. It was listed in Hippocrates' writings and has been used by European women for menstrual irregularity since at least the ancient Greek period.

Vitex works by increasing luteinizing hormone (LH) production and supporting progesterone in the luteal phase, making it specific for low progesterone patterns: short luteal phases, PMS with breast tenderness and irritability, irregular or long cycles, secondary amenorrhea, and the transition off hormonal contraceptives. It works through dopamine receptors, which is why it should be taken in the morning (when dopamine activity is naturally higher) and why it requires three to six months of consistent use before full effect. It does not work overnight. It rebuilds hormonal signaling from the top of the axis down. If you are trying to conceive and pregnancy is confirmed, most practitioners recommend stopping vitex, and it should not be combined with hormonal contraceptives or dopamine-modulating psychiatric medications without a practitioner's guidance.

PREPARATION: Tincture is the most practical form: 2 to 4 ml in the morning in a small amount of water, every day, for at least 3 months before assessing results. Capsules of standardized extract are also effective (look for 20mg agnuside content per dose). Do not combine with hormonal contraceptives. Do not use with dopamine-modulating psychiatric medications without practitioner guidance. Take throughout the full cycle, not just the luteal phase.

Dong Quai (Dang Gui)

Angelica sinensis | TCM / Blood tonic, Emmenagogue, Uterine regulator ! Ⓟ R

Dang Gui is called the female ginseng in Chinese medicine. It is arguably the most important women's herb in the entire TCM pharmacopoeia and has been in continuous use for at least two thousand years. Classical texts describe it as warming the womb, nourishing the blood, and regulating the menses, language that maps precisely onto modern understanding of its actions. It was traditionally prepared as part of the formula Si Wu Tang (Four Substance Decoction), a combination that has been prescribed for women's blood deficiency in China since the Tang dynasty and is still one of the most commonly prescribed formulas in TCM clinics worldwide.

Dang Gui tonifies and moves Blood in the TCM sense, it builds blood volume and improves circulation simultaneously, which is why it works for both deficient (pale, scanty, delayed) and stagnant (dark, clotty, painful) menstrual patterns. It is moistening, warming, and deeply nourishing, used for painful periods, irregular cycles, amenorrhea, postpartum recovery, menopausal dryness, and any condition where the blood is thin and circulation is poor. It is almost always used in formula, rarely alone, because it is so broadly acting that TCM practitioners tailor its companions to the specific pattern. Because it can increase bleeding, it is avoided during active menstrual flow and in pregnancy, and is best used with guidance from a TCM practitioner who can match it to your pattern.

PREPARATION: Dang Gui is best used as part of a decoction with other herbs. The classical Si Wu Tang: equal parts Dang Gui, Bai Shao (white peony), Shu Di Huang (prepared rehmannia), and Chuan Xiong (lovage root), simmer 20g of each in 4 cups water for 30 minutes, reduce to 2 cups, drink daily in the follicular and early luteal phase. Avoid during active menstrual flow (it can increase bleeding) and during pregnancy. Tinctures and capsules are widely available as a single herb but work best in formula, ideally chosen with a qualified TCM practitioner.

White Peony Root (Bai Shao)

Paeonia lactiflora | TCM / Liver Blood tonic, Antispasmodic, Androgen modulating R

White peony root is one of the most studied Chinese herbs in modern pharmacological research, particularly for its effects on androgen metabolism. Japanese studies in the 1990s found that paeoniflorin, its primary active compound, inhibits testosterone production in the ovaries, a finding that has made Bai Shao one of the most important herbs in the herbal treatment of PCOS. But its traditional use predates this research by two thousand years: it was used in classical TCM to nourish Liver Yin, soften Liver qi stagnation, and relieve cramping, exactly the clinical presentations where modern research confirms its efficacy.

Bai Shao is cooling and softening, it is most indicated for women who run hot, who have heavy or painful periods, PMS with irritability and anger, breast distension, elevated androgens, or the tight, tense body that comes with chronic Liver qi stagnation. It relieves menstrual cramping through antispasmodic action on smooth muscle and reduces androgen-driven symptoms like acne and excess hair growth. It is always balanced with warming herbs in women who run cold.

PREPARATION: Decoction is traditional: 9 to 15g dried root simmered in 3 cups water for 30 minutes, taken twice daily. More practically, use as part of a formula, Bai Shao is the core of many classical women's formulas including Xiao Yao San (Free and Easy Wanderer) for PMS and Liver qi stagnation, and Gui Zhi Fu Ling Wan for uterine fibroids and blood stagnation. These classical formulas are available as patent pills from Chinese medicine suppliers and work most reliably when a practitioner has matched the formula to your pattern.

Maca Root

Lepidium meyenii | South American / Endocrine tonic, Adaptogen ✓

Maca has been cultivated in the Peruvian Andes at altitudes above 13,000 feet for at least two thousand years. The Inca considered it sacred and restricted its use to royalty. When the Spanish colonized Peru, they found their livestock was failing to reproduce in the harsh highland climate. Indigenous Andeans advised them to feed the animals maca. The livestock recovered their fertility. The Spanish began using it themselves, sending it back to Europe where it was received as a fertility tonic from the New World. This story captures maca's essential quality: it is food as medicine at altitude, deeply nourishing, deeply regulating.

Unlike most hormonal herbs, maca does not contain phytoestrogens or directly modulate sex hormones. It works on the hypothalamus and pituitary, the master regulators of hormonal communication, improving the brain's ability to orchestrate the hormonal conversation rather than adding hormonal load to the conversation itself. It supports libido, energy, mood, and adrenal function. Different colors of maca have different affinities: black maca for energy and cognitive function, red maca for bone density and estrogen balance, yellow maca for general hormonal support and is the most widely studied.

PREPARATION: Gelatinized maca is significantly easier to digest than raw maca powder and is more bioavailable. Start with 1 tsp daily and work up to 1 to 2 tsp. Mix into smoothies, oatmeal, warm cacao, or golden milk. Maca has a distinct earthy, slightly butterscotch flavor that blends well with cacao and warming spices. It can also be taken in capsule form, though food-form preparations are more traditional and generally preferred for long-term tonic use.

Cramp Bark

Viburnum opulus | Western / Antispasmodic, Uterine relaxant

Cramp bark was one of the most important herbs in the Eclectics, the American medical movement of the nineteenth century that integrated botanical medicine into clinical practice. Eclectic physicians used it specifically for the kind of menstrual pain that comes in waves, grips the lower abdomen and back, and is driven by uterine spasm. Native American women had long used it for exactly this purpose, and the Eclectics learned its use from them. It appeared in the United States Pharmacopoeia as a legitimate medicine until the pharmaceutical industry's consolidation in the early twentieth century pushed botanical medicines out.

Cramp bark works by relaxing smooth muscle, specifically the smooth muscle of the uterus, but also of the bowel, ureter, and blood vessel walls. It is not a hormone-modulating herb; it acts directly on the tissue causing the pain. This makes it fast-acting and appropriate for acute use during menstruation rather than as a long-term tonic. Research comparing cramp bark tincture to ibuprofen for menstrual pain has found them comparable in efficacy, with cramp bark superior in women who also experience digestive cramping alongside menstrual pain.

PREPARATION: For acute menstrual pain, tincture works fastest: 5 to 8 ml of cramp bark tincture in water at the first sign of cramping, repeated every 2 to 4 hours as needed. Combine with ginger tincture

(equal parts) for even stronger effect on cold, congestive menstrual pain. A decoction can also be used: simmer 2 tsp dried bark in 2 cups water for 20 minutes. This is acute medicine, use it when you need it, not daily.

Red Clover

Trifolium pratense | Western / Phytoestrogen, Lymphatic, Alterative ✓

Red clover was a staple food plant and meadow herb across Europe and Asia for thousands of years before it became medically interesting. Farmers noticed that cattle grazing on red clover showed reproductive effects, sometimes enhanced fertility, sometimes disrupted cycles at very high intakes, and this observation led researchers in the mid-twentieth century to investigate its isoflavone content. What they found was a plant that could gently interact with estrogen receptors without adding pharmaceutical hormonal load, essentially reading the body's needs and responding accordingly.

Red clover's isoflavones act as selective estrogen receptor modulators, they bind to estrogen receptors and can either mildly activate or block them depending on the tissue and the body's hormonal state. In estrogen deficiency (perimenopause, menopause), they provide gentle estrogenic support, reducing hot flashes, vaginal dryness, and bone loss. In estrogen excess, they compete at receptor sites without adding load. They are also a significant lymphatic herb, improving the clearance of metabolic waste through the lymphatic system, making red clover useful for the breast tenderness, swelling, and lymphatic congestion that often accompanies hormonal imbalance.

PREPARATION: Red clover is best taken as a long nourishing infusion (1/4 oz dried blossoms per quart, steep 4 hours) or as part of the daily women's tonic blend. The blossoms have a sweet, mild flavor. Tincture is also effective for a more concentrated dose: 3 to 5 ml three times daily. For perimenopause and menopause, use consistently for at least 3 months before assessing results, phytoestrogen effects build gradually.

Lady's Mantle

Alchemilla vulgaris | Western / Uterine tonic, Astringent, Wound healer

Lady's mantle received its name from the shape of its pleated leaves, said to resemble the mantle of the Virgin Mary. Medieval alchemists collected the dew that gathered in its folded leaves, believing it possessed magical properties, hence its genus name Alchemilla, from alchemy. This reverence was not mere superstition: the plant contains potent tannins and salicylic acid-like compounds that make it one of the most effective astringent herbs in Western practice. It has been used by European women for heavy periods, prolapse support, and postpartum recovery for at least a thousand years.

Lady's mantle tonifies and tightens pelvic floor tissue and uterine muscle. It is specifically indicated for heavy, flooding menstrual bleeding, it reduces flow without stopping it, making it far safer than herbs that simply suppress bleeding. It is also used for uterine prolapse support, intermenstrual spotting, and the heavy perimenopausal bleeding that many women experience as estrogen begins to fluctuate. Its astringency also makes it useful topically for wounds, skin laxity, and as a vaginal steam for pelvic floor toning.

PREPARATION: Strong infusion: 2 tbsp dried herb per cup, steep 15 minutes covered. Drink 2 to 3 cups daily throughout the cycle, or specifically in the week before menstruation if heavy flow is the primary concern. As a vaginal steam (yoni steam): steep a generous handful of dried lady's mantle in a bowl of hot water, sit carefully over the steam for 10 to 15 minutes. This can also be combined with rose petals and calendula for a postpartum recovery steam.

HERBS THROUGH THE CYCLE

A traditional guide to herbs commonly used during different phases

Matching herbal support to where you are in your cycle is a practice with centuries of precedent in both Western and Chinese herbalism. What follows are options, not a regimen. You do not need something in every phase, and you certainly do not need all of these herbs at once. Choose the one or two that speak to what your body is asking for right now, let them become familiar, and build from there when you are ready. That is truer to how plant medicine has always been learned than any stack could be.

TRADITIONAL OPTIONS BY PHASE

PHASE	DAYS	TRADITIONAL OPTIONS TO EXPLORE
Menstruation	Day 1 to 5	Cramp bark tincture if cramping, ginger for warmth, nettle infusion to help replenish iron
Follicular	Day 6 to 13	The daily tonic infusion, milk thistle seed, maca, or dandelion root before meals
Ovulation	Day 14±	Rose petal tea, tulsi, red clover, or maca, traditionally favored for circulation and vitality
Luteal	Day 15 to 28	Vitex, ashwagandha, chamomile, or lady's mantle if flow tends to run heavy

A FEW NOTES ON USING THIS WELL

1. Start with one herb, not the whole list. Notice how your body responds before adding another, exactly as this guide's opening note suggests.
2. If you choose vitex, it works best taken consistently across the whole cycle rather than only in the luteal phase, and needs three to six months before you can fairly assess it. Do not combine it with hormonal contraceptives without talking to a practitioner.
3. Hormonal herbs work on hormonal timescales. Give any single herb at least a few full cycles before deciding whether it is helping.
4. The daily women's tonic blend from Chapter 2 is a good foundation to build on, however you choose to use the rest of this chapter.
5. If you are pregnant, trying to conceive, or on any medication, check the safety notes in Chapter 9 before adding something new here.

This is a starting map, not a prescription. The most traditional way to learn plant medicine is still one herb at a time.

Herbs for Fertility and Preconception

Nourishing the body before and
during conception

04 — HERBS FOR FERTILITY AND PRECONCEPTION

Nourishing the vessel deeply before and during conception

In Ayurvedic medicine there is a practice called Garbha Sanskar, the preparation of the womb before conception, beginning months before any attempt to conceive. The principle is that the quality of the child depends on the quality of the soil. Traditional Chinese medicine has an equivalent understanding: preconception care focuses on building Jing (constitutional essence), nourishing Blood, and ensuring the Kidney energy that governs reproduction is abundant and stable. Indigenous cultures across the world fed specific nourishing foods to women preparing for pregnancy, bone broths, organ meats, egg yolks, fermented foods, and specific medicinal plants. None of this was incidental.

The eggs maturing for ovulation today began their development three months ago. The nutritional environment in which they develop determines their quality. This is why preconception care in herbal medicine begins three to six months before conception, and why the herbs in this chapter are nourishing tonics, not fertility treatments. They create the conditions. The body does the rest.

A note on modern fertility medicine: herbs for preconception are most appropriate for women who are generally healthy and building their nutritional foundation before trying to conceive. If you are experiencing diagnosed infertility, PCOS, endometriosis, or recurrent pregnancy loss, work with both a reproductive specialist and a trained herbalist or naturopath who can integrate care appropriately.

Shatavari

Asparagus racemosus | Ayurvedic / Female trophorestorative, Galactagogue ✓

Shatavari means she who possesses a hundred husbands in Sanskrit, not a reference to quantity but to the quality of vitality and reproductive abundance the plant was said to confer. It is the primary female reproductive tonic in Ayurveda, mentioned in the Charaka Samhita as a rasayana specifically for women, a rejuvenating tonic used across the full arc of reproductive life from menarche through menopause. In Indian households it was traditionally prepared as a sweet milk preparation (shatavari kalpa) given to women recovering from childbirth and during breastfeeding.

Shatavari is deeply demulcent and cooling, it moistens dry tissue throughout the body, supports healthy cervical mucus production (essential for sperm viability), nourishes the uterine lining, and provides the phytoestrogenic and hormonal modulatory effects needed to support cycle regularity. It is the herb for the depleted, dry, and depleted woman, the one who has been running on stress hormones and whose body shows the signs of constitutional depletion: thin hair, dry skin, anxious nervous system, light or absent periods. It is also the foundational herb for milk production postpartum and for supporting the body through hormonal transitions at every stage.

PREPARATION: The traditional preparation is milk decoction. Simmer 1 tsp shatavari root powder in 1 cup whole milk for 5 minutes. Add 1 tsp raw honey, 1/4 tsp cardamom, and a small pinch of saffron if available. Drink once or twice daily. This preparation is considered more bioavailable than capsules by Ayurvedic physicians because the fat in the milk carries the fat-soluble saponins more efficiently. High-quality shatavari powder has a mild, slightly sweet taste and blends easily into warm drinks.

He Shou Wu (Fo-Ti, Prepared)

Polygonum multiflorum (Zhi He Shou Wu) | TCM / Liver and Kidney tonic, Jing restorative ! R

The legend of He Shou Wu is one of the most famous stories in Chinese herbal medicine. A sickly, prematurely aged man named Mr. He, unable to father children, wandered into the forest and fell asleep near two intertwined plants. He dreamed they spoke to him. He dug the roots and ate them, and over the following months his hair turned black again, his vitality returned, and he fathered children. Whether the story is literal or not, it accurately describes the herb's clinical action: it is one of the deepest Kidney and Liver tonics in all of Chinese medicine, associated with longevity, reproductive vitality, and the restoration of constitutional essence.

In TCM terms, He Shou Wu nourishes Liver Blood and Kidney Jing, the foundational essence associated with reproductive vitality, egg quality, hormonal reserve, and constitutional strength. It is used for premature aging, thinning hair, scanty or absent periods, poor egg quality, and the kind of deep depletion that modern women are increasingly experiencing in their thirties and forties. Crucially, only the prepared form (Zhi He Shou Wu, processed with black bean) is appropriate for long-term use, raw He Shou Wu contains compounds that can stress the liver. This distinction is non-negotiable, and this herb is best used under the guidance of a TCM practitioner, especially with any regular use.

PREPARATION: Use only the prepared form (Zhi He Shou Wu). As a decoction: simmer 9 to 12g in 3 cups water for 30 minutes, drink daily. More practically, use as part of a classical Kidney tonic formula with Shu Di Huang, Gou Qi Zi, and Tu Si Zi, formulas available as patent pills from reputable Chinese herbal pharmacies. For preconception, use for 3 to 6 months before trying to conceive. Work with a TCM practitioner for individualized dosing and pattern-specific formulation.

Goji Berry (Gou Qi Zi)

Lycium barbarum | TCM / Liver and Kidney yin tonic, Blood nourisher ✓

Goji berries have been used in Chinese medicine for over two thousand years. The Shennong Ben Cao Jing, the classical Chinese herbal text attributed to the Divine Farmer and compiled around 200 CE, lists Gou Qi Zi as a superior herb, one taken for long-term health enhancement rather than acute treatment. In Chinese medical tradition, superior herbs were taken as food: added to soups, congee, and tea as daily nourishment rather than prescribed medicine. The fact that goji berries are now sold in Western supermarkets as a superfood is, for once, a wellness trend that got something right.

Gou Qi Zi nourishes Liver and Kidney yin, brightens vision, enriches Blood, and supports the Jing that governs reproductive vitality. Modern research confirms significant content of zeaxanthin (critical for eye health and associated with egg quality), betaine (which supports methylation and folate metabolism, both essential for preconception), polysaccharides that modulate immune function, and antioxidants that protect developing eggs from oxidative damage. They are also simply delicious, sweet, slightly tart, and easy to incorporate into any diet.

PREPARATION: As food: add 1 to 2 tablespoons of dried goji berries to morning oatmeal, congee, bone broth, yogurt, or smoothies. They rehydrate beautifully in warm liquids. As a tea: steep 1 tablespoon in hot water for 10 minutes, the water turns a beautiful amber. In Chinese cooking, they are traditionally added to soups and stews in the last 15 minutes of cooking. For preconception, aim for daily use for at least 3 months.

Red Raspberry Leaf and Nettle

Rubus idaeus and Urtica dioica | Western / Uterine tonic and Mineral foundation ⑥

These two herbs together form the absolute foundation of preconception herbal care in Western practice. Their combination as a daily nourishing infusion was taught by herbalists like Susun Weed, who spent decades working with women in preconception care, and whose observation that nourishing herbal infusions are the most important thing a woman can do for her fertility has been

echoed by midwives and herbal practitioners across the country. It is not dramatic medicine. It is foundational nourishment, and it works precisely because the body's ability to conceive and sustain a pregnancy depends on nutritional depth that most modern diets do not provide.

Raspberry leaf provides fragarine for uterine tone, magnesium for implantation support, and iron for blood quality, though as noted in Chapter 2, human research on raspberry leaf remains limited and it is worth discussing timing with your prenatal provider. Nettle provides the full mineral spectrum, iron, calcium, magnesium, potassium, silica, along with chlorophyll, which supports blood building, and quercetin, which reduces inflammation. Nettle is widely considered safe to continue throughout pregnancy. Together, drunk daily as a long infusion for three to six months before conception, they create a nutritional foundation that supports every stage from egg maturation through implantation.

PREPARATION: 1 oz nettle leaf plus 1 oz red raspberry leaf per quart of just-boiled water, steeped in a sealed mason jar for 4 to 8 hours. This is a good daily practice to build toward conception. Once pregnant, nettle is generally considered safe to continue, and many women continue raspberry leaf as well, but bring the question of timing and amount to your prenatal provider rather than assuming, especially in the first trimester. Add a quarter ounce of oat straw to the blend for additional nervous system and mineral support.

Schisandra Berry (Wu Wei Zi)

Schisandra chinensis | TCM / Five-flavor adaptogen, Kidney and Heart tonic ✓

Schisandra is called the five-flavor fruit in Chinese because it simultaneously expresses all five flavors recognized in TCM: sour, bitter, sweet, pungent, and salty. According to classical theory, an herb that contains all five flavors nourishes all five organ systems. It has been used in Chinese medicine for over two thousand years as a longevity tonic and adaptogen, and appears in the list of superior herbs in the Shennong Ben Cao Jing. Russian cosmonauts were studied using schisandra in the 1960s as part of the Soviet adaptogen research program, the research that introduced the concept of adaptogens to Western science.

For preconception, schisandra's key actions are liver protection, adrenal support, and nervous system calming. It improves the liver's ability to process hormones and clear environmental toxins, increasingly important in a world saturated with endocrine disruptors. It also significantly improves the body's stress response, reducing cortisol's interference with reproductive hormones. Elevated cortisol suppresses LH, reduces progesterone, and disrupts the timing of ovulation, schisandra addresses this at the root by rebuilding stress resilience rather than simply masking symptoms.

PREPARATION: As a tea: simmer 1 tsp dried berries in 2 cups water for 15 minutes. The taste is complex and initially surprising, sour, bitter, and slightly sweet simultaneously. It blends well with goji, rose hips, and ginger. As a tincture: 3 to 4 ml twice daily. Schisandra is also widely available in capsule form. For liver support specifically, take before meals. For adrenal and nervous system support, take in the morning.

Maca Root

Lepidium meyenii | South American / Endocrine tonic, Fertility support ✓

In the high altitude communities where maca originates, women consumed it throughout their reproductive years as a staple food, not as a supplement, but as a daily nourishing carbohydrate alongside other highland crops. The tradition of treating it as a fertility food was so embedded in Andean culture that Spanish colonial administrators specifically noted it in their records when documenting indigenous agricultural practices. The dose they were consuming was far higher than

modern supplement recommendations, often several tablespoons per day, roasted and mixed with other foods.

For fertility specifically, maca supports healthy LH surge (required for ovulation), improves mitochondrial function in the cells that produce progesterone, and addresses the adrenal component of fertility disruption. The adrenal glands produce a precursor hormone (DHEA) that is the raw material for both cortisol and sex hormones, when stress is chronically high, the body prioritizes cortisol production and fertility suffers. Maca supports adrenal resilience without being a stimulant, gently improving the hormonal raw material available for reproduction.

PREPARATION: Gelatinized maca (pre-cooked) is more digestible than raw. Start with 1 tsp daily and work up to 2 tsp if tolerated. Mix into warm cacao, oatmeal, smoothies, or golden milk. The earthy, slightly butterscotch flavor pairs well with vanilla and cinnamon. Take consistently for at least 6 weeks before assessing results.

SIX-MONTH PRECONCEPTION NOURISHING PROTOCOL

INGREDIENTS

- Daily foundation: 1 oz nettle + 1 oz red raspberry leaf infused overnight, drink 3 to 4 cups
- Morning tonic: 1 tsp shatavari powder in warm whole milk with honey and cardamom
- Daily food: 1 to 2 tbsp goji berries in oatmeal, broth, or tea
- Liver support: 1 tbsp freshly ground milk thistle seed in food
- Adaptogen: 1 tsp gelatinized maca in morning smoothie or oatmeal
- Cycle support (if needed): 2 ml vitex tincture each morning, taken consistently and stopped once pregnancy is confirmed
- Optional: schisandra tincture 3 ml twice daily for liver and adrenal support

METHOD

1. Begin this practice at least 3 months before trying to conceive, 6 months is ideal.
2. Eat generously and ancestrally: liver once weekly, eggs daily, bone broth regularly, full-fat dairy if tolerated.
3. Once pregnancy is confirmed, stop vitex and bring nettle, raspberry leaf, shatavari, and goji to your prenatal provider before continuing.
4. Reduce alcohol to zero, even moderate drinking impairs egg quality, folate metabolism, and liver function.
5. Track your basal body temperature daily to confirm ovulation and assess luteal phase length.
6. Address sleep as a priority equal to herbs, growth hormone released during deep sleep is essential for egg quality.

This is a starting framework, not a fixed program. Share it with your midwife or care provider and adjust it together, many are supportive of integrative approaches when communicated clearly.



Herbs for the Nervous System

Adaptogens, nervines and the art of calming down

05 — HERBS FOR THE NERVOUS SYSTEM

Adaptogens, nervines, and the ancestral art of calming down

The human nervous system was designed for a world of episodic, acute stress followed by long periods of rest and recovery. The predator comes; the body responds with everything it has; the predator leaves; the nervous system returns to baseline. This is not what modern life asks of the nervous system. Modern life asks for a low-grade, continuous stress response, the constant hum of financial anxiety, relational strain, sleep deprivation, inflammatory food, electromagnetic noise, and existential uncertainty, sustained without adequate recovery for months or years at a time.

The result is what ancient medical traditions independently recognized: a pattern of deep exhaustion masked by surface hyperarousal. You cannot sleep, but you are not truly awake. You are anxious without a specific cause. Your body has lost its ability to return to baseline. The herbs in this chapter do not sedate this pattern. They rebuild the architecture beneath it, slowly, at the root, over months. That is how they have always been used.

Ashwagandha Root

Withania somnifera | Ayurvedic and TCM / Adaptogen, Kidney yang tonic ✓ !

See Chapter 2 for the full history and profile. Ashwagandha is repeated here because its primary clinical application in modern herbal practice is nervous system restoration, specifically the pattern of anxious exhaustion, cold constitution, poor sleep, and depleted adrenal reserve. It is the most researched adaptogen for cortisol reduction and the most consistently effective herb for the specific combination of anxiety and fatigue.

Multiple clinical trials confirm that ashwagandha root extract reduces cortisol by 20 to 30 percent, improves subjective stress scores significantly compared to placebo, enhances deep sleep stages, and improves thyroid hormone conversion, all within 8 to 12 weeks of consistent use. In TCM, it warms and rebuilds Kidney yang, the constitutional fire that chronic stress depletes. It is the herb for the woman who is chronically cold, chronically tired, and chronically anxious, whose system has been running on cortisol and adrenaline so long that it has forgotten how to rest.

PREPARATION: Moon milk before bed is the most effective preparation for sleep and nervous system restoration. Simmer 1 tsp ashwagandha powder in 1 cup whole milk or oat milk for 5 minutes. Add honey, cardamom, nutmeg, and optionally a pinch of saffron. The warming spices enhance both absorption and the deeply calming effect. Drink slowly, away from screens, 30 to 60 minutes before bed. This one practice, done consistently for 8 weeks, will produce measurable changes in sleep quality and morning cortisol.

Skullcap

Scutellaria lateriflora | Western / Nervine trophorestorative !

Skullcap was used extensively by Eclectic physicians in nineteenth-century America, they called it one of the most important nervines in the materia medica and prescribed it for nervous exhaustion, hysteria (a historical catch-all for female nervous system dysfunction), and the tremors and spasms of chronic stress. They made their own fresh plant tinctures from wildcrafted herb, which is the most potent form. The dried herb that fills most commercial capsules today has lost much of its medicinal quality, this is one of the herbs where fresh plant tincture is not optional but essential for the full therapeutic effect.

Skullcap is a nervine trophorestorative, it feeds and rebuilds the nervous system structurally rather than simply calming it acutely. It is indicated for nervous exhaustion, muscle tension and spasm driven by stress, restless legs, the kind of anxiety that makes the whole body tight, and the mind that cannot stop

running its loops even when the body is exhausted. It does not sedate, women often report that skullcap makes them feel quietly clearer, more spacious, and less reactive, rather than drowsy. In TCM thinking, it functions as a Heart and Liver yin tonic, calming the Shen (spirit) that cannot settle. Because it can add to the effect of pharmaceutical sedatives, alcohol, or sleep medications, use it thoughtfully alongside those and mention it to your prescriber.

PREPARATION: Fresh plant tincture is the standard. Look for tinctures made from fresh *Scutellaria lateriflora* (not the Chinese species *Scutellaria baicalensis*, which has different actions) from a reputable small-batch herbalist. Dose: 3 to 5 ml in a small amount of water in the evening, or 2 to 3 ml as needed for acute anxiety and tension. It combines powerfully with passionflower and valerian for a sleep formula, and with lemon balm for daytime anxiety with overthinking.

Passionflower

Passiflora incarnata | Western / Nervine, Antispasmodic, GABA modulator !

Passionflower was named by Spanish missionaries in South America in the sixteenth century, they saw in its complex flower a representation of the Passion of Christ, with the corona representing the crown of thorns and the ten petals representing the apostles. Indigenous peoples of the Americas had been using it for centuries before European contact: Cherokee and other nations used it for anxiety, insomnia, and nervous exhaustion. The Eclectics adopted it enthusiastically in the nineteenth century, and it appeared in the US National Formulary as a sedative until 1936.

Passionflower acts on GABA receptors in the brain, the same pathway as benzodiazepine medications, but through a different mechanism and generally without the tolerance, dependency, or withdrawal effects associated with pharmaceutical sedatives. A 2011 clinical trial found it comparable to low-dose oxazepam for generalized anxiety disorder with fewer cognitive side effects. It is specifically indicated for the kind of anxiety that lives in the mind, the racing thoughts that begin at bedtime, the mental loop that cannot find its exit, the woman who is tired but whose mind simply will not stop. It also relieves smooth muscle tension, making it useful alongside menstrual cramping. Because it works on the same receptors as sedative medications, it should be used thoughtfully, and not combined with benzodiazepines, sleep medications, or alcohol without your provider's input.

PREPARATION: Tea: 1 to 2 tsp dried herb per cup, steep 15 minutes covered, drink 30 to 60 minutes before bed. The taste is mild and slightly grassy. Tincture is more concentrated and faster-acting: 3 to 5 ml in water. For acute anxiety during the day, 2 to 3 ml can be repeated once after 30 minutes if needed, up to about three doses in a day, rather than dosed continuously. If you find yourself needing it that often for more than a few days, that is worth a conversation with a practitioner rather than simply repeating the dose. For sleep, combine with valerian root tincture (equal parts) and take 45 minutes before bed.

Lemon Balm

Melissa officinalis | Western / Nervine, Antiviral, Carminative (P) R

Lemon balm has been cultivated in monastery gardens across Europe since at least the Middle Ages. The Arab physician Avicenna wrote in the eleventh century that it causeth the mind and heart to become merry and strengtheneth the vital spirits. It appears in virtually every monastic and cottage herb garden in the historical record, it was grown for bee-keeping (bees love it, which is why its genus name *Melissa* means bee in Greek), for cooking, and for the family medicine chest. Carmelite Water, a distillation of lemon balm with other aromatic herbs, was sold by French nuns as a digestive tonic and nervous tonic from the seventeenth century onward.

Lemon balm works through GABA transaminase inhibition, it blocks the enzyme that breaks down GABA, effectively extending the calming neurotransmitter's action in the brain without the direct

receptor binding of benzodiazepines. This makes it gentle and non-sedating at ordinary tea doses, and a favorite for daytime use. It is the herb for the nervous stomach, anxiety that lives in the gut, the woman who loses her appetite when stressed, the digestive cramping driven by the sympathetic nervous system. It also has significant antiviral activity against herpes simplex and other lipid-enveloped viruses, making it useful during immune challenge. Lemon balm has a long folk history of gentle, everyday use in tea form, but self-dosing it for children or during pregnancy, or using concentrated tinctures or extracts regularly, is better done with guidance from a qualified practitioner than assumed to be safe at any amount.

PREPARATION: Fresh lemon balm is dramatically more aromatic and potent than dried. If you grow nothing else, grow lemon balm. It thrives in containers and nearly any soil. Fresh plant tea: steep 8 to 10 fresh leaves in just-boiled water for 10 minutes, covered. The volatile oils that are its medicine evaporate in heat, covering is not optional. Dried herb tea: 2 tsp per cup, steep 10 minutes covered. Combine with chamomile and passionflower for an evening calm-down blend. A lemon balm glycerite is a gentler form sometimes used for children, ask a pediatric-informed herbalist or your child's provider about an appropriate dose rather than dosing by feel.

Reishi Mushroom

Ganoderma lucidum | TCM / Shen tonic, Adaptogen, Immunomodulator ✓

Reishi is called *Ling Zhi* in Chinese, the mushroom of immortality, or spirit plant. It has been depicted in Chinese art and described in Chinese medical texts for over two thousand years. The *Shennong Ben Cao Jing* lists six types of *Ling Zhi*, all classified as superior herbs to be taken long-term for health enhancement rather than acute treatment. In Daoist tradition, *Ling Zhi* was associated with immortality, spiritual clarity, and the calming of the spirit, the same TCM concept of *Shen* (spirit or consciousness) that encompasses what we might call mental health and emotional equilibrium.

Reishi works on the nervous system through a different mechanism than most nervines: its triterpenes modulate the HPA axis and reduce inflammatory cytokines that drive neuroinflammation, while its beta-glucan polysaccharides improve immune regulation and reduce the inflammatory burden on the nervous system. Multiple clinical trials show it improves sleep quality and depth, reduces nighttime waking, and has significant anxiolytic effects, but these effects build over weeks and months of daily use. It is quintessentially slow medicine. It is also one of the most powerful immune modulators available, making it particularly valuable for women whose nervous system depletion is accompanied by frequent illness.

PREPARATION: Reishi requires long extraction to release its medicine. Decoction: simmer 1 to 2 tsp dried reishi powder or broken dried mushroom pieces in 3 cups water for 45 minutes. Drink 1 cup in the evening, the taste is bitter and earthy and improves significantly with a little honey and ginger. Dual extraction tincture (alcohol followed by hot water extraction) is the most complete form and widely available from quality herbal producers. Add reishi powder to bone broth, cacao, or mushroom coffee for daily use. This is a 3 to 6 month practice, not a weekend fix.

Valerian Root

Valeriana officinalis | Western / Nervine sedative, Antispasmodic !

Valerian's use as a sleep herb extends back at least to ancient Greece, Hippocrates described its properties. The name comes from the Latin *valere*, to be in health. In medieval Europe it was called *All-Heal* and was so widely used for nervous conditions that it became one of the most commonly cultivated medicinal plants. During World War II it was given to civilians in England to treat anxiety

from the stress of bombing raids. Its distinctive earthy, pungent smell, often described as dirty socks by those unfamiliar with it, is caused by isovaleric acid, one of its active sedative compounds.

Valerian works through multiple mechanisms including GABA A receptor modulation, serotonin receptor interaction, and adenosine receptor activity. It is a true sedative, it produces drowsiness and should be used specifically at night or for sleep. Unlike passionflower and lemon balm, it is not appropriate for daytime anxiety. It is most effective for difficulty falling asleep (sleep onset insomnia) rather than nighttime waking, and it works better with consistent nightly use than taken occasionally. A small percentage of people experience a paradoxical stimulating effect, if this occurs, valerian is not appropriate for you. Because it is a true sedative, do not combine it with pharmaceutical sedatives or alcohol.

PREPARATION: Tincture is the most effective form: 4 to 6 ml in a small amount of water 45 minutes before bed. Combine with passionflower (3 ml) and skullcap (3 ml) for a complete sleep formula. The smell of valerian tincture is distinctly strong, mix into juice or strongly flavored herbal tea if the taste is difficult. Capsules work but less reliably than tincture for most people. Do not combine with pharmaceutical sedatives or alcohol.

Milky Oats (Fresh Avena)

Avena sativa (milky stage) | Western / Nervine trophorestorative ✓

Milky oats is distinguished from oat straw (Chapter 2) by the specific stage of harvest: when the grain is in the milky stage, squeezable between the fingers to produce a white latex, the plant is at peak concentration of the compounds most specific to nervous system restoration. This harvest window lasts only days and can only be captured by fresh plant tincture made immediately after picking. This is the form that nineteenth-century Eclectic physicians like William Boericke were describing when they wrote about *Avena sativa* as their primary tonic for nervous exhaustion and sexual neurasthenia.

Milky oats is not a sedative and does not produce any immediate calming effect that you would notice in the moment. It is nutrition for a depleted nervous system, it feeds the myelin sheaths of nerves, supports neurotransmitter precursor availability, and over months of consistent use rebuilds the structural integrity of a nervous system that has been worn thin. It is the herb for the woman who is past the acute phase of anxiety and into the long recovery, who is slowly finding her way back to equanimity and needs something that rebuilds rather than calms.

PREPARATION: Fresh plant tincture only, dried milky oats loses most of its specific action. Seek out reputable small-batch herbalists who make fresh plant tinctures in-season (typically June through August in North America). Dose: 5 to 8 ml three times daily for chronic nervous system restoration. This is a long-term tonic, use it for 3 to 6 months consistently. It combines beautifully with ashwagandha tincture and skullcap fresh plant tincture for a complete nervous system rebuilding protocol.

DEEP SLEEP AND NERVOUS SYSTEM RESTORATION PROTOCOL

INGREDIENTS

- Nightly moon milk: 1 tsp ashwagandha powder in warm milk, honey, cardamom, nutmeg
- Sleep tincture formula: 4 ml valerian + 3 ml passionflower + 3 ml skullcap, take 45 min before bed
- Daily tonic: 5 ml milky oats tincture three times daily throughout the day
- Evening tea: chamomile and lemon balm (2 tbsp each per quart, steep 15 min), drink freely after dinner

- Weekly decoction: reishi simmered 45 min, 1 cup each evening, a long-term commitment

METHOD

1. Begin with the moon milk and evening tea for the first 2 weeks before adding tinctures.
2. Set a consistent sleep time and wake time, no herb compensates for an irregular sleep schedule.
3. Remove screens from the bedroom and dim lights by 8pm. Light is more disruptive to sleep architecture than most people realize.
4. Practice this protocol for 8 weeks minimum. Sleep architecture changes slowly; measure results in weeks, not nights.
5. If anxiety is the primary issue rather than sleep, use the daytime nervine blend (lemon balm, passionflower) throughout the day instead, and check with a provider before combining the sleep tincture with any prescribed sedative.

This protocol works best alongside reducing caffeine after noon, eating a mineral-rich evening meal, and addressing the life stressors that are driving the depletion in the first place.

Herbs for Digestion and Gut Health

Bitter roots, carminatives, and gut-
healing formulas

06 — HERBS FOR DIGESTION AND GUT HEALTH

Bitter roots, carminatives, and the ancient art of feeding the gut

In 400 BCE, Hippocrates wrote that all disease begins in the gut. In the second century CE, the Chinese physician Zhang Zhongjing built an entire system of medicine around the strength of the Spleen and Stomach, what he called the middle jiao, the center of the body's transformative capacity. In Ayurveda, digestive fire (Agni) is considered the foundation of all health: when it burns cleanly, everything else functions; when it is weak or disturbed, every other system suffers downstream. Three medical traditions separated by thousands of miles and thousands of years arrived at the same conclusion through independent observation. Modern gastroenterology is now confirming all of it.

The gut-brain axis, the gut-hormone axis, the gut-immune axis: these are not metaphors but measurable physiological realities. Eighty percent of the immune system lives in the gut wall. Ninety percent of the body's serotonin is produced in the gut. Estrogen is metabolized and recycled (or properly eliminated) through the gut. When digestion is compromised, everything downstream is compromised. This chapter gives you the tools to address it from both traditions.

Marshmallow Root

Althaea officinalis | Western / Demulcent, Anti-inflammatory, Wound healer ✓

The name marshmallow candy comes from this plant, the original marshmallow confection was made from the root's thick mucilage mixed with sugar and egg whites. The candy dates back to ancient Egypt, where Althaea root was used medicinally and as a sweet treat for royalty. The mucilage in the root (primarily pectin and arabinogalactans) was recognized as medicinal across every culture that encountered the plant: Dioscorides prescribed it for inflammation of the digestive tract; Arab physicians used it extensively; European folk medicine maintained the tradition through the medieval period.

Marshmallow root's mucilaginous polysaccharides coat the entire length of the digestive tract from esophagus to colon. They soothe inflamed tissue, reduce intestinal permeability, protect the gut wall from further damage, and feed beneficial bacteria (the polysaccharides act as a prebiotic). It is the primary herb for leaky gut, gastritis, acid reflux, IBS with burning and dryness, and any condition where the gut wall is irritated. A critical preparation note: heat destroys the mucilage. Marshmallow root must be prepared as a cold infusion to preserve what makes it medicinal.

PREPARATION: Cold infusion is non-negotiable. Place 1 oz dried root in 1 quart of room-temperature filtered water in a sealed jar. Leave overnight or for at least 4 hours at room temperature (not refrigerated, cold slows extraction). The water will become thick and slightly viscous, this is the mucilage. Strain and drink throughout the day on an empty stomach (so the mucilage can coat the gut wall before food arrives). For active gut inflammation, drink 3 to 4 cups daily for at least 4 to 6 weeks.

Dandelion Root

Taraxacum officinale | Western and TCM (Pu Gong Ying) / Bitter tonic, Hepatic ✓

See Chapter 2 for the full history. Dandelion root deserves special attention in the context of digestion because the bitter taste that so many people instinctively dislike is precisely where its digestive medicine lives. The taste of bitterness on the tongue triggers a cascade of digestive secretion, bile from the gallbladder, hydrochloric acid from the stomach, digestive enzymes from the pancreas, before a single molecule of dandelion reaches the intestine. This cephalic phase of digestion, triggered by taste, is one of the most powerful and most neglected aspects of digestive health. Modern processed food has essentially eliminated bitterness from the diet, and our digestion has suffered accordingly.

Dandelion root stimulates bile production and flow, improving fat digestion and absorption of fat-soluble vitamins. It contains inulin, a prebiotic fiber that feeds *Bifidobacterium* and *Lactobacillus* species. It supports liver detoxification and clearance of excess estrogen through the gut. It reduces bloating and constipation driven by sluggish bile flow. In TCM, Pu Gong Ying clears Liver and Stomach heat, the pattern associated with acid reflux, bitter taste in the mouth, and the hot, inflamed type of digestive disorder.

PREPARATION: Pre-meal bitters is the most traditional and effective use. Decoct 1 tsp dried root in 1 cup water for 15 minutes, drink 15 to 20 minutes before meals. Or make a concentrated bitters tincture: equal parts dandelion root, gentian root, and fennel seed macerated in 40% alcohol for 6 weeks. Add 20 to 30 drops to a small amount of water before meals. Roasted dandelion root makes an excellent coffee substitute with genuine digestive benefit. Fresh dandelion leaves as a salad green (dressed with olive oil and lemon) give you the same bitter digestive stimulus in food form.

Ginger Root

Zingiber officinale | Western and TCM / Warming digestive, Carminative, Antiemetic ✓ !

See Chapter 2 for the full history. Ginger is highlighted again here because it is arguably the most important digestive herb in existence, used across virtually every food culture on earth, in every traditional medicine system that encountered it, specifically for its ability to warm and move the digestive system. The Ayurvedic tradition has a saying: nagara (dried ginger) is the universal medicine. It appears in more classical herbal formulas from more traditions than any other single plant in the apothecary.

As a digestive herb, ginger's primary actions are: prokinetic (it speeds gastric emptying, helping food move through the stomach efficiently and reducing bloating), antiemetic (reduces nausea through 5-HT₃ receptor antagonism and prostaglandin inhibition), carminative (reduces gas and intestinal cramping), and anti-inflammatory (reduces inflammatory cytokines in the gut wall). Dried ginger is more specific to the Spleen and Stomach in TCM terms, for the cold, sluggish digestive pattern with loose stools, undigested food in stool, fatigue after meals, and cold abdomen. Fresh ginger is more dispersing and warming at the surface.

PREPARATION: For digestive sluggishness and nausea: decoct 1 inch fresh ginger (or 1/2 tsp dried powder) in 2 cups water for 15 minutes. Drink before or after meals. Ginger syrup (simmered with honey until thick) keeps for months in the refrigerator and dissolves into hot or sparkling water for an immediate digestive aid. Ginger-infused apple cider vinegar (slice fresh ginger into ACV, steep 2 weeks, strain) makes a powerful pre-meal digestive tonic. For morning sickness: crystallized ginger, ginger tea, or ginger capsules taken at the first sign of nausea are all clinically supported. If you take a prescription blood thinner, mention regular medicinal-dose ginger to your provider.

Slippery Elm Bark

Ulmus rubra | Western / Demulcent, Nutritive, Prebiotic ✓

Slippery elm bark was one of the most important medicines of Indigenous peoples across eastern North America. Cherokee, Ojibwe, Chippewa, and many other nations used it for digestive inflammation, wounds, childbirth, and as a survival food in times of scarcity, the inner bark ground into flour was nutritious enough to sustain life. During the American Civil War it was used extensively in field hospitals as both a wound dressing and a food for soldiers too ill to eat normally. It was official in the United States Pharmacopoeia from 1820 until 1960.

Slippery elm contains large amounts of mucilaginous polysaccharides that, when mixed with water, form a thick, nutritive gel. This gel coats and protects inflamed digestive tissue, reduces acid irritation,

provides a food source for beneficial bacteria (acting as a prebiotic), and, importantly, provides easily absorbable nutrition during periods of digestive illness when nothing else can be tolerated. It is indicated for gastritis, GERD, Crohn's disease, IBS with dryness and burning, and as a gentle recovery food after acute digestive illness.

PREPARATION: Gruel (the most traditional form): mix 1 to 2 tablespoons of slippery elm powder with a small amount of cold water to form a smooth paste. Add warm water or warm milk gradually while stirring to form a thin porridge. Season with honey and cinnamon. Eat slowly on an empty stomach. This is both medicine and food, it can help sustain someone through acute digestive illness when little else is tolerated. As a powder addition: stir 1 tsp into smoothies, yogurt, or applesauce. It thickens any liquid it is added to.

Fennel Seed

Foeniculum vulgare | Western and TCM / Carminative, Antispasmodic, Warming ✓

Fennel has been a digestive herb since antiquity. The ancient Greeks called it *marathon*, a name still given to the site of the famous battle because the plain was covered with wild fennel. Hippocrates recommended it for nursing mothers to increase milk and ease infant colic. The Romans ate fennel seed after meals, a tradition still practiced in Indian restaurants today where a small bowl of fennel seeds arrives with the check. In the Middle Ages, fennel seeds were carried to church and eaten during long services to stave off hunger and prevent the rumbling and discomfort of an empty stomach, they were called *meeting seeds*.

Fennel relaxes the smooth muscle of the gut wall through its volatile oils (primarily anethole), relieving spasm, gas, and intestinal cramping. In TCM, fennel seed (Xiao Hui Xiang) warms the lower abdominal region, disperses cold qi stagnation, and is used for menstrual pain of the cold type alongside its digestive applications. It improves the downward movement of digestive contents (reducing bloating and constipation), stimulates digestive enzyme secretion, and has mild estrogenic activity from its anethole content that makes it one of the traditional galactagogues for nursing mothers.

PREPARATION: Post-meal fennel tea: lightly crush 1 tsp fennel seeds in a mortar (crushing releases more volatile oil than using whole seeds), steep in just-boiled water covered for 10 minutes. Drink after meals. For infant colic: make a very weak fennel tea (1/4 tsp seeds per cup), cool, and have the nursing mother drink 2 cups daily rather than giving tea directly to an infant, and check with your pediatrician before giving anything by mouth to a baby. Chewing a pinch of raw seeds after eating is the simplest and most portable form, ancestrally appropriate and immediately effective.

Gentian Root

Gentiana lutea | Western / Bitter tonic, Digestive stimulant !

Gentian root is named for *Gentius*, the second-century BCE king of Illyria who is credited with discovering its medicinal properties during a plague. It has been a foundational digestive bitter in European herbal medicine since ancient times and remains one of the most bitter substances found in nature, it is detectable by the human palate at a dilution of one part in 12,000. This extreme bitterness is precisely the source of its medicine: the more bitter, the more powerfully it stimulates digestive secretion through the tongue's bitter taste receptors.

Gentian root is the strongest digestive bitter in the Western materia medica. It stimulates production of stomach acid (critical for protein digestion and mineral absorption), triggers bile release, increases pancreatic enzyme secretion, and improves peristalsis. It is indicated for hypochlorhydria (low stomach acid, far more common than high acid despite what antacid marketing suggests), poor fat digestion, nutritional deficiencies driven by malabsorption, and the full range of digestive complaints that arise

from insufficient digestive fire. It is contraindicated in active peptic ulcer, wait until the acute inflammation is resolved before using bitters.

PREPARATION: *Gentian is almost always used in combination with other herbs in a bitters formula rather than alone, its bitterness is intense enough to be unpleasant undiluted. Classic digestive bitters tincture: equal parts gentian root, dandelion root, fennel seed, and orange peel in 40% alcohol, macerated 6 weeks. Take 20 to 30 drops in a small amount of water 15 to 20 minutes before meals. This is one of the most useful formulas you can make for daily digestive health and long-term nutritional absorption.*

Licorice Root (DGL)

Glycyrrhiza glabra | Western and TCM (Gan Cao) / Demulcent, Anti-inflammatory, Harmonizer ✓ !

Licorice root is one of the most widely used herbs in the world. In TCM, Gan Cao (honey-fried licorice root) appears in more classical formulas than almost any other single herb, it is called the great harmonizer, the herb that smooths and balances the actions of the other herbs in a formula and reduces their potential for side effects. Egyptian tombs dating to 1350 BCE contained licorice root. Alexander the Great is said to have had his soldiers carry it to sustain energy on long marches. In European folk medicine it was so ubiquitous that it was simply called the sweet root.

For digestive use, deglycyrrhized licorice (DGL) is the most practical form: the glycyrrhizin compound responsible for licorice's blood-pressure-raising and aldosterone-mimicking effects has been removed, leaving the demulcent and anti-inflammatory compounds intact. DGL has been studied extensively for gastric ulcer healing and GERD management, and has been found comparable to antacid medications for mucosal protection without their side effects. In whole-root form, licorice is an important adrenal tonic and anti-inflammatory, but should not be used long-term by women with high blood pressure or fluid retention, and whole-root use is worth mentioning to your provider if you take blood pressure medication.

PREPARATION: *For gut healing, use DGL (deglycyrrhized) chewable tablets: chew 1 to 2 tablets 20 minutes before meals and at bedtime for 4 to 8 weeks. The chewing and mixing with saliva is part of the mechanism, swallowing intact capsules is less effective. Whole licorice root decoction: simmer 3 to 5g in 2 cups water for 15 minutes, use short-term and not if you have hypertension. In TCM, honey-fried licorice (Zhi Gan Cao) is added to virtually every formula in small amounts as a harmonizing and palatability ingredient.*

GUT REPAIR AND DIGESTIVE RESTORATION PROTOCOL ✓

INGREDIENTS

- Morning on empty stomach: 1 cup cold marshmallow root infusion (steeped overnight)
- Before meals (2x daily): 20 drops digestive bitters tincture or 1/2 cup dandelion root decoction
- With or after meals: fennel seed tea or chew a small pinch of raw fennel seeds
- Daily food: 1 tbsp slippery elm powder in oatmeal, smoothie, or warm water
- Evening: chamomile infusion (2 tbsp per cup, steep 15 min) for gut wall inflammation
- If GERD/gastritis is present: DGL chewable tablets before meals and at bedtime

METHOD

1. Remove processed seed oils, refined sugar, gluten (temporarily), and alcohol for the first 6 to 8 weeks.
2. Add 1 to 2 tablespoons of raw sauerkraut or kefir with meals daily to rebuild gut flora.

3. Eat slowly and in a parasympathetic state, the nervous system governs digestion; eating while stressed is counterproductive.
4. Cook all vegetables during the healing phase, raw food requires more digestive fire than a compromised gut can produce.
5. Assess after 6 to 8 weeks: improvements in bloating, regularity, food tolerance, skin clarity, and energy after meals.
6. Transition to maintaining with daily bitters before meals, the daily tonic infusion, and fermented foods long-term.

Yield: Pair with the Living Nourished guide for the full ancestral gut protocol including bone broth, fermentation, and the gut-hormone connection.



Herbs for Immunity and Seasons

Seasonal protocols from East and West

07 — HERBS FOR IMMUNITY AND SEASONS

Seasonal protocols from East and West for a resilient immune system

Traditional medicine never treated immunity as a single switch to be turned on or off. It understood immunity as a dynamic, seasonal, relational capacity, something built over time through daily nourishment, adequate rest, reduced toxic burden, and strategic use of specific plants. In TCM, defensive energy (Wei Qi) circulates at the surface of the body and repels pathogenic influence before it can penetrate deeper. A strong Wei Qi means you move through cold and flu season untouched. A depleted Wei Qi means you catch everything that comes within range. And Wei Qi, like all vital energies in TCM, is built in the spaces between illness, not by treating illness after it arrives.

The key distinction in herbal immunology: immune stimulants (echinacea, elderberry) are used short-term during active infection. Immune modulators and tonics (astragalus, reishi, medicinal mushrooms) are used daily, long-term, to build baseline resilience. Using stimulating herbs every day reduces their effectiveness and can overstimulate immune pathways in susceptible people, including those with autoimmune conditions. Build your immunity in the spaces between illness.

Astragalus Root

Astragalus membranaceus | TCM (Huang Qi) / Wei Qi tonic, Adaptogen, Immunomodulator ✓

Huang Qi has been a cornerstone of Chinese medicine for over two thousand years. Its name means yellow leader, yellow for the color of the dried root slices and leader for its position among tonic herbs. The classical texts describe it as building the defensive surface of the body, strengthening the Spleen's ability to produce Qi, and raising what TCM calls the yang, the active, warming, protective energy of the body. It was traditionally added to soups and broths as a daily food medicine, the long dried root sticks simmered alongside bones and vegetables and then removed before serving.

Modern research on astragalus has confirmed extraordinary immunological activity. It upregulates natural killer cells, enhances T-cell proliferation and activity, increases interferon production, has significant anti-tumor properties, and, in a remarkable finding, has been shown to extend telomere length in immune cells, suggesting anti-aging activity at the cellular level. TA-65, a commercial compound derived from astragalus, is sold specifically for this telomere-lengthening effect. But the whole herb, taken daily as a broth or decoction, provides this benefit along with dozens of other synergistic compounds that isolated extracts cannot replicate.

PREPARATION: *The ancestral method is best. Add 2 to 3 whole dried astragalus root sticks to every pot of bone broth or soup you make. Simmer at least 30 minutes. Remove the woody sticks before serving. This integrates the herb seamlessly into daily nourishment rather than making it a supplemental obligation. As a decoction: simmer 15g dried root in 4 cups water for 30 to 45 minutes, drink 2 cups daily through fall and winter. Begin in September, build your immunity before the season demands it.*

Echinacea

Echinacea purpurea and angustifolia | Western / Immune stimulant, Lymphatic R

Echinacea was the most widely used medicinal plant among the Plains Indigenous peoples of North America. The Lakota, Cheyenne, and dozens of other nations used it for wounds, infections, snake bites, and tooth pain, essentially as a broad-spectrum antimicrobial and immune stimulant before those concepts existed in Western medicine. The Eclectic physicians of the nineteenth century learned its use from Indigenous people and incorporated it extensively into clinical practice. By the early

twentieth century it was one of the most prescribed herbs in the US. The pharmaceutical consolidation that pushed herbs out of conventional medicine drove echinacea to Europe, where it has been in continuous research and clinical use ever since.

The root, especially *E. angustifolia*, is significantly more potent than the aerial parts. Fresh plant tincture produces noticeably stronger immune stimulation than dried preparations, the characteristic tingling and numbing on the tongue is a marker of quality. Echinacea works by activating macrophages, increasing interferon production, and stimulating natural killer cell activity. Used correctly, high dose at first sign of illness, for the duration of the acute phase, it reduces both severity and duration of upper respiratory infections significantly. Used daily as prevention it loses efficacy and may overstimulate immune pathways, which is a particular concern for women with autoimmune conditions, who should check with a practitioner before using it at all.

PREPARATION: Acute protocol at first sign of illness: 5 to 8 ml of root tincture every 2 to 3 hours for the first 24 hours. Then 3 to 5 ml three times daily until symptoms resolve. Maximum continuous use: 10 days. Then stop. Do not use for more than 10 consecutive days or daily as a preventive. For children: use glycerite form at weight-adjusted dose, ideally with pediatric guidance. Quality marker: you should feel a distinct tingling and slight numbing on the tongue from a good echinacea tincture, if you feel nothing, the preparation is likely poor quality.

Elderberry

Sambucus nigra | Western / Antiviral, Immune modulating ✓

Elder has been called the medicine chest of the country people across Europe, virtually every part of the plant (flowers, berries, leaves, bark, and roots) has traditional medicinal use, though the berries are now the most widely used. Hippocrates called the elder tree his medicine chest. In European folk medicine it was so revered that it was considered disrespectful to cut an elder tree without first asking permission of the elder spirit said to inhabit it. During the 1995 Panama flu epidemic, a group of people who consumed elderberry syrup from locally made preparations had markedly lower illness rates than those who did not, an observation that prompted the first of what are now multiple clinical trials on elderberry's antiviral properties.

Elderberry flavonoids, particularly cyanidin-3-glucoside and cyanidin-3-sambubioside, bind to influenza virus surface proteins and prevent the virus from entering host cells. Multiple randomized controlled trials show elderberry syrup reduces flu duration by an average of 4 days and severity by significant margins. It also reduces the duration and severity of the common cold. Importantly, the berries must be cooked, raw elderberries contain sambunigrin, a compound that causes nausea and vomiting. The syrup preparation, made with raw honey and spices, is the most traditional and effective preparation.

PREPARATION: Elderberry syrup: simmer 1 cup dried elderberries in 3 cups water with 1 cinnamon stick, 6 whole cloves, 1 inch fresh ginger, and 1 star anise for 45 minutes until liquid reduces by roughly half. Cool to room temperature. Strain and press berries thoroughly. Add 1 cup raw honey (raw honey retains its antimicrobial properties, pasteurized honey does not). Bottle and refrigerate. Preventive dose: 1 tablespoon daily. At first sign of illness: 1 tablespoon every 3 to 4 hours. Keeps refrigerated for 2 to 3 months. Never eat raw elderberries or use raw uncooked preparations.

Reishi Mushroom

Ganoderma lucidum | TCM / Immune modulator, Shen tonic ✓ R

See Chapter 5 for the full historical context. Reishi's immune-modulating actions are worth addressing separately from its nervous system effects because they operate through different mechanisms and

serve different populations. For women with autoimmune conditions, Hashimoto's, lupus, rheumatoid arthritis, immune stimulation (echinacea, high-dose vitamin C) can be counterproductive. What they need is immune modulation: intelligent regulation of an immune system that has lost its self-referential clarity. This is precisely where reishi excels, though it is still worth introducing alongside your specialist's care rather than in place of it.

Reishi's beta-glucan polysaccharides enhance natural killer cell activity against pathogens and tumor cells while simultaneously regulating T-regulatory cell function, the immune cells that prevent the immune system from attacking self. This dual action is extraordinary and makes reishi uniquely appropriate to discuss for autoimmune conditions where most immune herbs are contraindicated. Its triterpenes also reduce the inflammatory cytokine signaling that drives autoimmune damage. Long-term daily use is associated with reduced autoimmune flare frequency in clinical observations from TCM practice, though this is an area to explore together with your rheumatologist or specialist rather than alone.

PREPARATION: See Chapter 5 for preparation details. For immune-specific use, a dual-extraction preparation (both hot water and alcohol extraction) captures the full spectrum of immune-active compounds. Hot water extracts the beta-glucans; alcohol extracts the triterpenes. Dual extract tinctures or powders are widely available from quality mushroom suppliers. Add to bone broth, cacao, or coffee daily. For autoimmune conditions, use consistently for 3 to 6 months before assessing results, in coordination with your specialist.

Thyme

Thymus vulgaris | Western / Antimicrobial, Expectorant, Antiviral ✓

Thyme was burned as incense in ancient Greek temples, its name comes from the Greek *thumon*, to fumigate, reflecting its use as a purifying smoke for sacred spaces. The Egyptians used thyme oil in the mummification process, an ancient recognition of its antimicrobial properties. In medieval Europe, thyme was a symbol of courage: ladies embroidered sprigs of it on scarves given to knights before battle, and soldiers carried it believing it would protect them from disease in the field. These were not mere superstitions, thyme oil is one of the most potent natural antimicrobials known, with clinical activity against a broad spectrum of bacteria, fungi, and viruses.

Thymol and carvacrol, thyme's primary essential oil components, have demonstrated activity in vitro against *Streptococcus*, *Staphylococcus*, *E. coli*, *Candida albicans*, influenza, and RSV among many others. As an expectorant, thyme relaxes bronchial smooth muscle (making it easier to breathe) and stimulates cilia to move mucus out of the respiratory tract. It is the first herb to reach for with any upper respiratory infection, cough, congestion, sore throat, or bronchitis. A properly prepared thyme infusion is comparable in effect to many over-the-counter cough remedies at ordinary tea and steam-inhalation doses.

PREPARATION: Strong respiratory tea: pour 2 cups just-boiled water over 4 to 5 fresh thyme sprigs or 2 tsp dried thyme. Cover immediately and steep 15 minutes. Add honey and lemon. Drink 3 to 4 cups daily when ill. Steam inhalation: add 5 to 6 drops thyme essential oil to a bowl of just-boiled water, tent head with a towel, and inhale for 5 to 10 minutes. This delivers the volatile antimicrobials directly to the respiratory mucosa. Thyme oxymel (thyme infused in equal parts raw honey and apple cider vinegar for 4 weeks): take 1 tablespoon every few hours for cough and congestion.

Cat's Claw

Uncaria tomentosa | South American / Immune modulator, Anti-inflammatory ! Ⓟ R

Cat's claw is a woody vine from the Amazon rainforest, named for the curved hook-like thorns that allow it to climb trees. It has been used by indigenous peoples of the Peruvian Amazon for at least two thousand years, primarily for inflammatory conditions, infection, and what traditional healers describe as cleansing the blood. The Ashaninka people of Peru consider it one of their most sacred healing plants and have used it for joint inflammation, stomach conditions, and immune weakness. It came to the attention of Western research in the 1970s and has since been the subject of hundreds of studies.

Cat's claw contains oxindole alkaloids that modulate immune function, specifically enhancing phagocytic activity (the immune system's ability to engulf and destroy pathogens) while reducing the inflammatory cytokines associated with autoimmune damage and chronic infection. It has been studied specifically for chronic Lyme disease, chronic viral infection, and inflammatory arthritis with meaningful results. It also has significant antiviral activity and DNA repair stimulation. It is appropriate for chronic immune dysfunction, the person who is always partly ill, who never fully recovers from infections, whose immune system seems to be perpetually engaged without resolution, ideally as part of a plan with a knowledgeable practitioner.

PREPARATION: Bark decoction: simmer 1 to 2 tsp dried bark in 3 cups water for 30 to 45 minutes. Drink 2 cups daily for chronic immune support. Tincture: 3 to 5 ml twice daily. Cat's claw has blood-thinning properties and should be avoided in pregnancy and before surgery. It should not be combined with pharmaceutical immunosuppressants without practitioner guidance. For chronic conditions, work with a practitioner who can monitor response over the 3 to 6 month protocol period.

YEAR-ROUND IMMUNE RESILIENCE PROTOCOL

INGREDIENTS

- Daily year-round: reishi decoction or dual-extract powder in bone broth or cacao
- Daily year-round: astragalus root sticks in every pot of broth
- September through March: elderberry syrup 1 tbsp daily (make in September, keep in fridge)
- September through March: astragalus tincture 3 ml twice daily alongside the broth
- At first sign of illness: echinacea root tincture every 2 to 3 hours, elderberry every 3 hours, thyme tea throughout the day
- For chronic immune weakness or autoimmune conditions, in coordination with your specialist: consider cat's claw decoction daily for 3 to 6 months

METHOD

1. The most important immune action you can take is building in September, not waiting until December.
2. Make a double batch of elderberry syrup in early September, it keeps 2 to 3 months refrigerated.
3. Sleep is the most powerful immune intervention available. Chronic sleep deprivation reduces natural killer cell activity by over 70 percent.
4. Reduce sugar during the immune-building season, it directly impairs neutrophil function for hours after consumption.
5. Vitamin D from sunlight, egg yolks, sardines, and liver is foundational immune nutrition that no herb replaces.

Yield: The elderberry syrup recipe above makes approximately 2 cups. Double the batch in fall for the full season.

How to Use Them

Teas, tinctures, infusions, oxymels, and food

08 — HOW TO USE THEM

Teas, tinctures, infusions, oxymels, decoctions, infused oils, and food

The most common mistake in herbal medicine is treating preparation as a detail rather than the medicine itself. How you prepare an herb determines which of its hundreds of compounds you extract, in what concentration, and whether your body can actually absorb them. A chamomile tea bag steeped for two minutes and a properly prepared chamomile infusion steeped covered for fifteen minutes are not the same medicine. A nettle capsule and a quart of overnight nettle infusion are not the same medicine. This chapter explains the why behind every preparation method in this guide so that you can apply the principle to any herb you encounter, not just the ones listed here.

Return to the triangle from Chapter 1: every preparation is defined by the herb you choose, the menstruum (the liquid that extracts and carries the medicine), and the time you allow. Change any corner and you change the medicine. This chapter maps those corners in full.

THE COMPLETE PREPARATION GUIDE

Nourishing Infusion

Primary herbs: Urtica dioica, Avena sativa, Rubus idaeus, Trifolium pratense — mineral-rich herbs

The nourishing infusion was popularized in its current form by herbalist Susun Weed, who taught it as one of the most important practices in women's herbal medicine. It differs from a standard tea in two ways: the quantity of herb used (1 oz per quart versus 1 tsp per cup) and the duration of steeping (4 to 8 hours versus 5 to 15 minutes). These are not incremental differences, they produce a fundamentally different medicine. The long steep at high herb-to-water ratio extracts the minerals that are bound to plant cellular structures and require sustained heat and time to release.

- Herb to water ratio: 1 oz (28g) dried herb per 1 quart (950ml) just-boiled water
- Container: quart-sized mason jar with a tight-fitting lid, the seal is important
- Time: 4 hours minimum; 8 hours or overnight is standard
- Method: place herb in jar, pour just-boiled water to the top, lid tightly, steep
- Strain: press the herb thoroughly through cheesecloth or a nut milk bag
- Storage: refrigerate; drink within 48 hours
- Dose: 2 to 4 cups daily for weeks to months
- Best herbs: nettle, oat straw, red raspberry leaf, red clover, comfrey leaf

Standard Tea (Short Infusion)

Primary herbs: Matricaria chamomilla, Melissa officinalis, Ocimum tenuiflorum — aromatic herbs

The short infusion is appropriate for aromatic and delicate herbs whose medicine lies in volatile oils that evaporate with prolonged heat. The covering of the cup is not optional, it keeps the steam (which carries the volatile oils) in contact with the infusion rather than dispersing into the air. This is why covered chamomile is measurably more sedative than uncovered chamomile tea.

- Herb to water ratio: 1 to 2 heaping teaspoons per cup
- Water temperature: just-boiled (remove from heat, wait 30 seconds if using very delicate flowers)
- Time: 5 to 15 minutes depending on herb
- Cover: always, use a small plate, a pot lid, or a dedicated tea cover
- Dose: 2 to 4 cups as needed or daily
- Best herbs: chamomile, tulsi, lemon balm, peppermint, rose petals, elderflower
- Do not use for: roots, bark, seeds, these require decoction

Decoction

Primary herbs: Taraxacum officinale, Zingiber officinale, Valeriana officinalis — roots and bark

Decoction is the preparation for hard, woody plant material that requires sustained heat to release its medicine. Roots, bark, seeds, and dried mushrooms contain compounds bound in cellular structures that a simple pour-over cannot access. The simmering water breaks down cell walls and extracts water-soluble compounds that remain inaccessible at lower temperatures or shorter times. This is the preparation used for most TCM classical formulas.

- Herb to water ratio: 1 tsp per cup for single herbs; classical formulas specify gram weights
- Temperature: gentle simmer (barely bubbling), do not boil vigorously
- Time: 20 to 45 minutes for most roots; up to 2 hours for very hard material like reishi
- Method: start herbs in cold water, bring to gentle simmer, maintain covered
- Classical TCM method: start with 4 cups water, reduce to 2 cups, drink in 2 portions
- Dose: 1 to 3 cups daily as a course
- Best herbs: dandelion root, ginger, astragalus, reishi, ashwagandha, licorice, he shou wu

Cold Infusion

Primary herbs: Althaea officinalis, Ulmus rubra — mucilaginous herbs

Cold infusion is a niche but essential preparation for the mucilaginous herbs, marshmallow root and comfrey leaf primarily, whose medicinal mucilage is destroyed by heat. The overnight cold steep extracts exactly the compounds you need while leaving behind some of the bitter tannins that hot water would extract, producing a gentler and more specifically targeted medicine. This is one of the most overlooked preparation distinctions in herbal medicine.

- Herb to water ratio: 1 oz per quart, or 1 tbsp per cup
- Temperature: room temperature or cold, never use hot water
- Time: 4 to 12 hours
- Method: combine herb and water in a sealed container, leave at room temperature overnight
- Note: the liquid will be thick and slightly viscous, this is correct and desired
- Dose: drink throughout the day on an empty stomach for gut healing
- Best herbs: marshmallow root, comfrey leaf (external use only for comfrey)

Alcohol Tincture

Primary herbs: Most herbs — especially resins, alkaloids, and non-water-soluble compounds

Tincturing is the extraction of plant constituents in alcohol, the method that concentrates plant medicine, preserves it for years, and captures compounds that water cannot dissolve. Resinous compounds, alkaloids, and many essential oil components are not water-soluble and can only be extracted effectively in alcohol. This is why echinacea tincture is measurably more effective than echinacea tea. Fresh plant tinctures, made from freshly harvested herb before any drying occurs, are significantly more potent than tinctures of dried herb for some plants, this is especially true for skullcap, milky oats, and lemon balm.

- Menstruum: 40 to 60% alcohol, 80-proof vodka for 40%, grain alcohol diluted for higher
- Ratio: 1 part herb by weight to 5 parts menstruum by volume for dried herb (1:5)
- Fresh plant tincture ratio: 1 part herb by weight to 2 parts menstruum (1:2)
- Method: fill jar with herb, cover completely with alcohol (herb must be fully submerged)
- Time: 4 to 6 weeks, shaking vigorously every day
- Strain: press through cheesecloth in a potato ricer or herb press for maximum yield

- Storage: dark glass bottles away from heat and light; shelf life 3 to 5 years
- Dose: 2 to 5 ml two to three times daily depending on the herb and indication

Glycerite

Primary herbs: Child-friendly herbs, alcohol-free protocols — similar herbs to tinctures

Glycerites use vegetable glycerin as the menstruum. Glycerin is sweet (which makes glycerites palatable for children and those sensitive to alcohol taste), non-intoxicating, and preserves herbs reasonably well, though less effectively than alcohol for most compounds. It does not extract resins and some alkaloids as effectively as alcohol. For the majority of herbs used in women's health, nervines, nutritive herbs, gentle adaptogens, glycerites are a reasonable alternative to alcohol tinctures. Because glycerites are often reached for with children, check appropriate dosing with a pediatric-informed practitioner rather than guessing from an adult tincture dose.

- Menstruum: vegetable glycerin mixed with water, typically 60% glycerin, 40% water
- Ratio: same 1:5 as dried herb tincture
- Time: 4 to 6 weeks, shaking daily
- Shelf life: 1 to 2 years (shorter than alcohol tinctures)
- Dose: slightly higher than alcohol tincture, 5 to 8 ml due to lower extraction efficiency
- Best herbs: lemon balm, chamomile, tulsi, red raspberry leaf, elderberry
- Note: glycerin does not extract resins, volatile oils effectively, or fat-soluble compounds

Oxymel

Primary herbs: Thyme, elder, ginger, garlic, hyssop — respiratory and warming herbs

Oxymel means acid-honey in Greek, a preparation of vinegar and honey used since ancient Greece as a medicinal vehicle. Hippocrates prescribed oxymels. Galen wrote about them extensively. The combination of raw apple cider vinegar and raw honey creates a menstruum that extracts mineral salts and some alkaloids that neither water nor alcohol captures as effectively, while the honey adds its own antimicrobial and wound-healing properties. Oxymels are particularly suited to respiratory herbs, warming, expectorating, and soothing simultaneously.

- Menstruum: equal parts raw apple cider vinegar and raw honey, warmed gently to combine
- Method: pack herb loosely in a jar, pour oxymel menstruum to fully cover, seal
- Time: 4 to 6 weeks, shaking daily
- Strain: press through cheesecloth; the honey makes this thick, take your time
- Dose: 1 tablespoon in hot water or taken straight, as needed
- Shelf life: 1 year at room temperature (the acidity and sugar preserve it well)
- Best herbs: thyme, hyssop, elecampane, elderberry, garlic, ginger, rosemary

Infused Oil and Salve

Primary herbs: Calendula, comfrey, lavender, plantain — topical herbs

Infusing herbs in oil extracts fat-soluble compounds, essential oils, fat-soluble vitamins, and lipophilic anti-inflammatory compounds, that water cannot touch. Infused oils are the foundation of topical herbal medicine: apply them directly to skin, or combine with beeswax to make a salve.

Calendula-infused oil is one of the most effective and safe topical preparations for skin inflammation, wound healing, and sensitive skin in any herbalist's practice. Comfrey is safe used topically in oils and salves; keep comfrey to occasional topical use and avoid regular internal use of the leaf, and avoid the root internally altogether.

- Menstruum: olive oil (most traditional), jojoba, or coconut oil, all have long shelf lives
- Critical requirement: herb must be completely dry, any moisture causes mold and rancidity
- Cold infusion method: fill jar loosely with dried herb, cover with oil, seal, place in a warm sunny spot, shake daily for 4 to 6 weeks
- Heat infusion method: gentle double boiler at low heat (never above 110°F/43°C) for 4 to 6 hours
- Strain: press thoroughly through cheesecloth; oil is dark and fragrant when complete
- Shelf life: 1 year, add a few drops vitamin E oil to extend
- To make a salve: gently melt 1 oz beeswax per cup of infused oil, pour into tins, allow to cool
- Best herbs: calendula, comfrey (leaf, topical only), plantain, lavender, rose petals

EQUIPMENT YOU ACTUALLY NEED: Quart mason jars (for infusions and tinctures). A kitchen scale (essential for accurate ratios). Fine mesh strainer plus cheesecloth or a nut milk bag (for pressing tinctures). Dark glass dropper bottles (for storing tinctures). A mortar and pestle or spice grinder (for seeds and dried roots). A double boiler or slow cooker (for infused oils). That is genuinely it. The apothecary does not require specialty equipment. It requires attention and time.

YOUR FIRST HOME TINCTURE — ASHWAGANDHA ROOT ℞

INGREDIENTS

- 2 oz (56g) dried ashwagandha root, cut and sifted (not powder)
- 10 oz (300ml) 80-proof vodka (40% alcohol), enough to fully submerge the herb
- 1 clean quart mason jar with lid
- Kitchen scale for accurate measurement
- Cheesecloth and a fine mesh strainer for pressing
- Dark glass dropper bottles for storage

METHOD

1. Weigh 2 oz of dried ashwagandha root on your kitchen scale. Place in the clean quart mason jar.
2. Pour 10 oz vodka over the herb, ensuring all root is submerged with at least 1 inch of liquid above the herb. If not covered, add more vodka.
3. Seal the jar tightly. Label with: herb name, menstruum, ratio (1:5), date started, and expected completion date (6 weeks from today).
4. Store in a cool, dark cabinet. Shake vigorously once every day, set a daily reminder if needed. Daily shaking significantly improves extraction.
5. After 6 weeks, strain through a fine mesh strainer lined with cheesecloth. Press the spent herb very firmly, the liquid in the herb is the most concentrated part.
6. Pour into dark glass dropper bottles. Label with herb, completion date, and dose (3 to 5 ml before bed in warm milk).
7. This tincture is now your nightly nervous system medicine. Shelf life: 3 to 5 years stored in a cool dark location.

Yield: Makes approximately 10 oz finished tincture. Standard dose: 3 to 5 ml in warm milk or water before bed. This is the 1:5 ratio, the most appropriate strength for a first home tincture.

09 — SAFETY, SOURCING, AND WHAT TO AVOID

How to buy well, grow your own, and use herbs with wisdom and integrity

The assumption that natural means safe is one of the most dangerous ideas in contemporary wellness culture. Hemlock is natural. Belladonna is natural. Comfrey root taken internally in large quantities over long periods can cause liver disease. Herbs interact with medications in clinically significant ways. Some are strongly contraindicated in pregnancy. The herbalists of previous centuries were not cavalier about this, they understood clearly that plants are powerful, that power requires knowledge, and that knowledge requires study. The democratization of herbal information in the internet era has made more information available than ever before, but more information is not the same as more wisdom.

This chapter is not meant to frighten you away from herbal medicine, it is meant to help you practice it well. The overwhelming majority of the herbs in this guide are deeply safe at reasonable doses for most healthy women. The cautions below apply to specific situations and are worth knowing precisely because knowing them allows you to use herbs with confidence rather than anxiety.

HERBS TO USE WITH CAUTION OR PROFESSIONAL GUIDANCE

HERB	CAUTION	NOTES
Dong Quai (Dang Gui)	Avoid during active menstrual flow and pregnancy	Increases bleeding; safe in TCM formula between periods
Vitex (Chaste Tree)	Do not combine with hormonal contraceptives	Also avoid with dopamine-modifying psychiatric medications
He Shou Wu (raw)	Liver toxicity risk in unprepared form	Use only prepared (Zhi) form; monitor liver enzymes long-term
Blue Cohosh	Uterine stimulant; avoid in pregnancy	Skilled midwife guidance only; not appropriate for self-prescribing
Pennyroyal	Toxic in high doses; abortifacient	Avoid entirely except as a mild tea; never use essential oil internally
Comfrey (internal)	Pyrolizidine alkaloids; liver toxicity	Safe topically; restrict internal use to short courses of leaf only, not root
St. John's Wort	Significant CYP3A4 drug interactions	Reduces effectiveness of contraceptives, antiretrovirals, antidepressants, warfarin
Licorice (whole root)	Raises blood pressure with prolonged use	Avoid with hypertension or edema; DGL form removes this concern
Kava	Potential liver stress, especially with alcohol	Use root preparations only; avoid with medications; periodic liver breaks recommended
Cat's Claw	Blood-thinning; avoid before surgery	Avoid with immunosuppressant medications; not for pregnancy
Valerian	Paradoxical stimulation in some people	Do not combine with pharmaceutical sedatives or alcohol

GENERAL HERB-DRUG INTERACTION PRINCIPLES

Most herb-drug interactions follow predictable pharmacological logic. Understanding the basic principles protects you without requiring you to memorize every possible combination.

CYP450 enzyme induction and inhibition

Many herbs affect liver enzymes that process medications. St. John's Wort speeds up enzyme activity (reduces drug levels). Grapefruit and some herbs slow it (increases drug levels, potentially to toxic levels). If you take any pharmaceutical medication, discuss herbs with your prescriber or pharmacist.

Blood thinning herbs

Garlic, ginger, turmeric, ginkgo, and cat's claw can add to the anticoagulant effects of warfarin and aspirin. Not necessarily a reason to avoid them, but a reason to monitor and inform your prescriber.

Sedative herbs and sedative medications

Valerian, passionflower, skullcap, and kava can potentiate the effects of benzodiazepines, sleep medications, and alcohol. Use with caution and never without disclosing to your prescriber.

Uterine-stimulating herbs in pregnancy

Emmenagogues (herbs that stimulate menstrual flow), blue cohosh, pennyroyal, high-dose dong quai, mugwort, tansy, are contraindicated in pregnancy. Herbs in this guide most commonly considered compatible with pregnancy, always in consultation with your prenatal provider, include nettle, oat straw, ginger (in food amounts), chamomile, and rose. Raspberry leaf and lemon balm are traditionally used in pregnancy as well, but bring both the timing and the amount to your provider rather than assuming, as covered in their individual profiles.

Thyroid medications

Ashwagandha, bugleweed, and motherwort can affect thyroid hormone levels. If you are on thyroid medication, work with a practitioner who can monitor labs while you use these herbs.

HOW TO SOURCE HERBS WELL

The quality of the herb is the quality of the medicine. Oxidized, irradiated, improperly stored, or adulterated herbs produce little to no therapeutic effect. The supplement industry's quality problem is real and well-documented: a 2015 investigation by the New York Attorney General found that four major supplement brands sold products that did not contain the herbs listed on the label. This is not universal, there are excellent producers, but it underscores the importance of sourcing from suppliers you can trust.

Mountain Rose Herbs (mountainroseherbs.com)

The most reliable bulk herb source for home practitioners in the US. Certified organic, third-party tested, transparent about sourcing and harvest dates. Prices are fair for quality. Order in bulk quantities, it is significantly cheaper and the quality difference between bulk and small retail bags is negligible.

Starwest Botanicals (starwest-botanicals.com)

Another strong bulk herb supplier with organic certification and reliable quality. Good selection of cut and sifted herbs ideal for infusions and decoctions.

Pacific Botanicals (pacificbotanicals.com)

Wholesale supplier used by professional herbalists. Exceptionally high quality, often the freshest dried herbs available. Minimum orders apply but prices are excellent at volume.

Local farmers markets and herb farms

Fresh-dried herb from a local organic grower is often the highest quality available, shorter supply chain, known growing conditions, no irradiation (which is applied to imported herbs). Build a relationship with a local herb grower if one exists in your region.

Your own garden

The most radical act of herbal self-sufficiency. Chamomile, tulsi, lemon balm, calendula, red clover, nettle, fennel, and rosemary all grow readily in most temperate climates. Fresh plant tinctures made from your own herb are the finest preparations you can make.

What to avoid

Unbranded or unlabeled herbs from discount online marketplaces. Supplements in opaque capsules with no third-party testing documentation. Proprietary blends that do not disclose individual herb doses. Chinese-sourced herbs without Certificates of Analysis for heavy metals and pesticide residue, contamination is a real and documented issue with unvetted supply chains.

QUALITY MARKERS TO KNOW

MARKER	WHAT IT MEANS AND WHY IT MATTERS
Certified Organic	No synthetic pesticides, herbicides, or irradiation. Non-negotiable for herbs you will use medicinally every day.
Harvest Date	Dried herbs degrade with time, the volatile oils that drive most therapeutic effects oxidize within 1 to 2 years. A good supplier states it.
Third-Party Tested	Independent laboratory testing for heavy metals, pesticide residue, microbial contamination, and correct species identification.
Fresh Plant Tincture	Made from freshly harvested herb before any drying. Significantly more potent for specific herbs: skullcap, milky oats, lemon balm.
1:2 vs 1:5 Ratio	The ratio of herb weight to menstruum volume in tinctures. A 1:2 tincture is more concentrated than a 1:5. Both can be appropriate.
Wildcrafted	Harvested from wild populations, can be superior quality, but raises sustainability questions. Ask whether the supplier harvests responsibly.

A CLOSING WORD

The most important thing this guide can leave you with is not a formula or a sourcing recommendation. It is a restored relationship with the plant world, a recognition that you are not separate from nature but continuous with it, and that your body was designed to exist in relationship with specific plants across specific seasons in specific ways. That relationship has been largely severed in the modern world, and the severing has costs we are only beginning to measure.

The herbs in this library were here before pharmaceutical medicine. Most of them will be here long after it. They have sustained human health across every culture and every era, in every climate, under conditions far harsher than most of us face. They are waiting for you to remember them.

Start with one thing. Make the nettle infusion tonight. Find tulsi at your farmers market. Put ginger in every meal this week. Let one plant become genuinely familiar before you reach for the next. That slow, attentive, rooted approach, one herb at a time, learned deeply, is both the philosophy of ancestral health and the way the tradition was always meant to be transmitted. Not from a shelf, but from a practice.

with love and deep roots,

Larissa

DISCLAIMER: This guide is for educational purposes only and does not constitute medical advice. Always consult a qualified healthcare practitioner before beginning any herbal protocol, especially if you are pregnant, nursing, taking medications, or managing a diagnosed health condition. The information here reflects traditional and contemporary herbal knowledge and does not replace individualized medical care.