

## HEAVENLY, HOLY HERBS

For centuries, herbs have been used and valued by mankind. Loosely defined, herbs are plants that serve and delight us, offering us a closer rapport with nature. Through the centuries, the definition of this word has changed according to man's relationship with the plant kingdom. With the advent of science and technology, the word has come to have a more limited concept than in earlier history. Today, many people consider herbs to be only a few plants used in the kitchen for seasoning.

Although many of today's botanicals were known and used by our pre-Christian ancestors, it was the Church that preserved much Greek and Latin herbal knowledge as scholars in monasteries transcribed ancient documents. In the gardens of these same monasteries, this knowledge was used and given a Christian orientation. The treatment of human illness became an extension of Church teaching, and Christian healers followed the example of St. Basil, Bishop of Caesarea, in providing care and shelter for the sick.

In the eighth century Charlemagne, King of the Franks and the First Holy Roman Emperor, designated a group of useful plants to be grown in his domain. In the ninth century, the patriarch of Jerusalem sent prescriptions from the East to Alfred the Great, king of the West Saxons.

These cures were written in books called "herbals." Hildegard of Bingen, a twelfth-century German abbess, wrote the *Book of Healing Herbs*, which described a wide range of plants

and their uses. Called the "Sybil of the Rhine" for her powers as seeress and prophetess, this flamboyant Benedictine was one of the most remarkable women of the Middle Ages. She also wrote a book on the human body and its ailments.

As missionaries spread across Europe, they converted plants as well as people, often using them as teaching tools. The largely illiterate population could not read, but as farmers were familiar with the native plants. Remember St. Patrick's famous example of the shamrock as a symbol of the trinity? Plants were even used as calendars. Those who could not read a calendar could remember that Michaelmas daisies flowered near the time for the feast of St. Michael. The wood sorrell was nicknamed "alleluia" because it bloomed when the Gospel response was "alleluia," between Easter and Whitsuntide.

St. John's Wort was so named because it bloomed near the feast of John the Baptist. Dedicating it to the saint, Christians continued to hang the plant in doorways to repel evil spirits, just as they did in previous pagan times.

In recent years there has been a resurgence of interest in botanicals and studies in aromatherapy, naturopathy, and herbal medicine, so you may enjoy planning an herb garden. It can be as simple as a few pots of herbs on a sunny windowsill or a formal garden plot in a sunny spot of your yard. Your public library and your local garden store have books on the subject for further reference. Plant, harvest, and use some of God's most bountiful gifts — herbs.

### Basic Growing Tips

Most herbs prefer a sunny, well-drained location. Soil need not be rich. Many herbs will take over all available space if you don't control them. An easy way to do this is to plant the herbs in large plastic pots with the bottom removed. Sink pots in the ground until only about one inch remains above the soil line.

### Harvesting

Herbs can be used fresh or harvested and dried for later use. Cut herbs for drying in the early morning, bunching the stems. Rinse with cool water. Tie twine around the stems and hang the bunch upside down away from strong light. We hang them over our kitchen counter, where they impart a wonderful scent to the room as they dry. When herbs are crispy, work over waxed paper to remove the leaves from the stems. Seal leaves in airtight jars; stems can be chopped and added to potpourri or thrown back in the garden to compost.

### Uses

Many fresh herbs can be used in cooking. Herbal pillows or sachets, herb butter, and herbal vinegars are three other easy ways to use surplus herbs for yourself or for gifts.

### Herbal Vinegars

Herbal vinegars are tasty when sprinkled over salads, alone or mixed with oil. Mix with water to marinate meat, or sprinkle lightly on fish to add flavor.

To make herbal vinegar, rinse fresh herbs well and pick off any less-than-perfect leaves. Push herbs, stems down, into clean bottles. The more herbs you use, the stronger the flavor.

Use a funnel to fill bottle with vinegar (plain or apple cider) that has been brought to a boil. A pinch of salt may be added if you like. Cap or cork the bottle and let stand for at least a week before use.

Experiment with different combinations of herbs. One or two hot peppers will spice up your vinegar, and of course you can add peeled cloves of garlic. We have two favorites: dill with thinly sliced lemon peel (minus the white), and garlic with a mixture of purple basil and oregano.

Here are some suggested combinations.

- 1 clove garlic, peeled
- 5 1" x 1/8" slices of lemon peel
- 3 or 4 sprigs of dill weed

or

- 1 clove garlic, peeled
- 1 sprig rosemary
- 2 or 3 sprigs of oregano

or

- 1 small bay leaf
- 2 or 3 sprigs oregano
- 3 to 5 tiny red or green ornamental peppers

All herbs used in the above combinations are easy to grow in most climates. Flavored vinegars make a nice gift from your garden.

### Herb "Butter"

Another easy way to use your homegrown herbs is to make herb "butter." Let a tub of butter or margarine warm to room temperature. Chop your favorite herbs, stir them in, and refrigerate for several hours to get the full flavor. You can experiment with different combinations to create the flavor you like best. Serve on crackers or bread.

### Pillows or Sachets

You can use herbs to make sachets and herbal pillows. Herbal sachets impart a pleasant odor to closets and drawers, and some herbs also repel insects and other household pests. Herbal pillows can help you relax, achieve a restful sleep, or, placed under the pillows of a favorite chair, can help keep your room smelling fresh. These sachets and pillows make inexpensive and welcome gifts.



To make the pillows, sew a bag from leftover lightweight fabric. A 9" square is a good size.

Place a cup or two of your favorite herbal blend in the pillow and sew the fourth side shut. This forms a thin, limp pillow you can slide between your regular bed pillow and the case. As you sleep, your head movements on the pillow cause the scent to be released anew.

Sachets are simply small pillows. They are often made of scraps of fancy materials and decorated with small dried flowers or ribbons. A glue gun is an invaluable tool in attaching the tiny decorations, or you can get exotic and sew on sequins and beads.

The filling for herbal pillows and sachets, like any potpourri, needs a fixative and benefits from the addition of a few drops of essential oil. The most common fixative is powdered orrisroot; use a teaspoon or more per cup of dried herbs. Sweet orange and lemon are two of the less expensive and more easily available essential oils. You can

purchase these items at an herbal shop, or order them by mail or online.

In a large bowl, mix two or more of your dried herbs with the orrisroot. Add a few drops of the oil and stir thoroughly. Place the mix in a large zipper-locked plastic bag, shake to distribute the oil, and store in a dark place for about a week. Test to see if the odor pleases you. You can add more oil and re-close for a few more days if your mixture was not strong enough the first time.

When the odor pleases you, stuff your sachets. Sachets containing pennyroyal, lavender, and the mints repel many household pests as well as scent your closets. One recipe we like calls for equal amounts of spearmint, oregano, and lemon balm. Add 1 tsp. orrisroot and three drops of lemon oil per cup of herbs.

Your sachets and pillows will keep their scent for a long time. Pillows can be stored in zipper-locked plastic bags during the day to extend their life. When they have lost their odor, you can refresh them by adding a few drops of oil directly on the fabric. Another way to refresh the scent is to mix the oils with a few tablespoons of Everclear or vodka in a small glass and sprinkle the mixture liberally over the pillow or sachets. Either way, seal them in a plastic bag for a few days before use to allow them to re-cure.

Here are recipes for some of our favorite sachets and herbal pillows. Remember, however, that your own preferences can determine the aromas most pleasing to you.

### ***Sleepytime Pillow***

*You will need:*

- 9 tbsp. chamomile flowers
- 9 tbsp. lemon-balm leaves
- 3 tbsp. lavender flower
- 3 tbsp. pennyroyal
- 1 tbsp. powdered orrisroot
- 5 drops rose oil (synthetic)
- 2 drops tea-tree oil

- 10 drops lemon oil
- 5 drops lavender-flower oil

This recipe provides a combination that is soothing and sleep-inducing to many people. Measure dried herbs in heaping tablespoons; measure oil in drops. Mix in a glass or ceramic bowl. Seal in a plastic bag and store in a dark place for one week, shaking daily to mix. Slip loosely stuffed pillow under the regular pillowcase.

### ***Vibrancy Power-Nap Pillow***

*You will need:*

- 1 tbsp. lemon-balm leaves
- 10 tbsp. pennyroyal
- 5 tbsp. lavender flower
- 1 tbsp. peppermint
- 6 tbsp. catnip
- 1 tbsp. powdered orrisroot

- 13 drops sweet-orange oil
- 12 drops lemon oil
- 3 drops lavender-flower oil
- 3 drops ylang-ylang oil

This recipe can add "oomph" to a power nap. Follow the instructions in the above recipe using the ingredients listed on this page.

### ***Bug-Be-Gone Sachet***

*You will need:*

- 5 tbsp. lavender flower
- 5 tbsp. pennyroyal
- 10 tbsp. spearmint
- 1 tbsp. powdered or ground orrisroot
- 12 drops lemon oil
- 10 drops lavender flower-oil

This sachet imparts a pleasant odor in drawers and closets and may just help keep them bug free as an added benefit. As above measure in heaping tablespoons and drops, mix in non-metal container, and cure in a plastic bag, shaking daily to distribute ingredients. Stuff in small cloth pillows about 2" or 3" square, or purchase ready-made small drawstring bags.

### ***Herbal Pot Holder***

Make an herbal pot holder which will softly scent your kitchen each time you use it and in between times, too.

*You will need:*

- cotton-print fabric
- sewing machine and thread
- scissors
- cotton batting or pillow stuffing
- dried spices such as:  
stick cinnamon

whole allspice  
star anise  
whole cloves  
bay leaves  
pickle spice mix

Sew a pillow about 8" square. Crumble some of your dried spices in a small bowl. Experiment until you have a blend that pleases you. Stuff your pillow with batting and add one to two tbsp. of the dried spice mix. If you like, you can use a long running stitch to quilt across your pot holder.

### ***Herbal Shoe Stuffers***

You can make a refreshing blend of deodorizing herbs and spices and make shoe stuffers to keep your shoes smelling sweet.

*You will need:*

- 3 c. cedar chips
- ½ cup lavender flowers
- 2 tbsp. whole cloves
- 20 drops sweet orange oil (or substitute lemon oil)

In a large bowl, stir together the ingredients listed.

Make sachet bags 2½" wide by 6" long of light-weight cotton cloth. Stuff them tightly with the above mix. Place one sachet inside each shoe.

**Hint: you can purchase cedar chips at the pet store; they are often used for bedding for small animals.**