



ALI ENGLISH
WILD MEDICINE

Summer

WILD MEDICINE

Summer

Other books in the series

Wild Medicine: Autumn and Winter

Wild Medicine: Spring

WILD MEDICINE

Summer



Ali English

Aeon Books

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About the Author

Herbalist Ali English has been passionate about herbs from a young age and went on to study herbal medicine at Lincoln University, graduating in 2010 with a BSc (Hons). Since then, she has set up a practice in Lincolnshire that focuses on offering herb walks, workshops and a variety of related services, in which she tries to convey her love of our native herbs and wildflowers to anyone who will listen. *Wild Medicine: Summer* is her first book, with many more to follow.

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For Matt, for his constant unswerving support and love, and for his patience with my ongoing plant obsession. Here's to many, many more years together, my Viking!

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For my workshop attendees, and those who have come to my various herb talks and walks – thank you for the constant belief, encouragement and enthusiasm which continuously encourages me to keep learning and growing.

And for my family – who have put up with my babbling about plants for a very long time now, and generally without too many martyred expressions of patience!

Thank you all – I am where I am now because of you all, and I'm beyond grateful.

Preface

Welcome to *Wild Medicine: Summer*. It is my hope that this series of seasonal books will provide a source of information and kindle a keen delight in the glories of our native plants, both those growing in the hedgerows and those weedy adventurers tucked into nooks and crannies in our own gardens.

Plants have long been a passion of mine, ever since a bespectacled girl child of 13 asked for a garden and was given a small, round plot with four herbs and a sundial in it, plus a copy of *Culpeper's Herbal*. Three years later, that small plot boasted more than 40 herbs, and I was badgering my mother for more space.

The obsession went on from there, and many years later I graduated from university and began building myself a career working with the plants that have delighted, inspired and enchanted me for so long. It is difficult to ever feel alone in the world if you cultivate a friendship with the local wild plants – everywhere you look, you will see them eking out a living for themselves, from the wily and determined dandelion tucking itself into cracks between paving slabs, to the tall, elegant willow and balsam poplar by the river in my home city of Lincoln, hawthorn in hedgerows and poppies in brilliant red swathes across farmland in late summer. Plants are all around us, and over time

they have become a true need for me, like water and food, air and freedom. Indeed, they are deeply entwined in my very blood and body, as they are for all of us – we inhale as they exhale, and we exchange breaths with plants constantly, sharing the same air.

It is my aim that these books will provide hedgerow travel books to tuck into a pocket and take along with you in the warmer seasons and perhaps to inspire and console you through the winter. May they give you many years of enjoyment and help you towards your own deepening friendship with the plants that surround us and give us so much.

North Lincolnshire, 2019

Summer



Introduction: foraging and medicine making

Foraging

The subject of foraging can be a tricky and somewhat thorny one in this day and age, as so many people are rediscovering the joys of gathering their own food and medicines. This is, by necessity, a brief introduction to the topic, as well as a commentary on my own thoughts about it.

We live in a world that relies on increasing amounts of chemicals to get crops growing – so, unless you happen to live on or have access to organic farmland, I recommend that you don't gather from field margins, as there is no telling what the farmers may have sprayed on their crops. Many of our native medicines used to grow merrily in among the wheat and corn. Sadly, most of these are becoming increasingly rare in the wild, so I suggest that if you have a small bit of land, or even a yard and some pots, try growing some of them for yourselves. Cornflowers, chamomile and red poppies, in particular, make a merry display sown in tubs that can be freely moved around the yard or garden.

If you are gathering from the wild, try to pick from areas that are free from pollution, be it airborne or animal-borne – dog

wee, for example, doesn't make good seasoning! Gather above dog height if at all possible, and if you are aiming to dry your herbs, gather them on a dry day, once the dew has evaporated. Pick only healthy plants, with no spots, fungus or withered bits – look for good, green foliage, and pick only a third of what is there. As a rule of thumb, if you can see where you have been, you have almost certainly gathered too much! I have seen elders, for example, stripped bare of flowers and fruit: this sort of behaviour is to be frowned upon, as is the arrogant assumption that the plants were put here for our benefit. They were not. We are all essentially equal, and it is a symbiotic relationship that we should all be working towards. Stripping the land of a particular plant is not neighbourly behaviour, after all! This is true even more in any heavily farmed counties or areas, where native wild flowers will be a rarer sight.

Drying and storing herbs

When you have gleefully lugged your harvest home, the next task is to bundle them up. To dry herbs, I recommend that you tie them in bunches of up to 12 stems, then hang them in a cool, well-ventilated room that doesn't get too much direct sunlight. This is especially true of aromatic plants, as those dried in hot temperatures will lose much of the volatile oils that make them smell and taste so good. Smaller bits of plants, leaves and flowers can be dried in baskets and are easy enough to turn over every day, either by hand or by giving the basket a gentle shake. Plants are dry when they break reasonably easily: they should still look like their fresh versions, just smaller and more desiccated. If, when you have finished, a plant looks grey or brown and doesn't smell of much or actively smells bad, it hasn't dried properly and should be composted.

These days I tend to recommend bunching herbs up using elastic bands – not as pretty as using garden twine, but, as plants dry, they shrink. It can be rather vexing coming downstairs in the morning and discovering that your carefully bunched herbs have all dropped out of their twine and are now happily mingled on the kitchen floor! While providing an excellent test for your budding skills in identifying plants by scent and look even while half-dried, it can be a frustrating enterprise trying to bunch them all up correctly again. Don't be afraid to experiment with finding the best room to dry your herbs in – if you have three possible rooms that might work, hang small bunches of herbs in each and monitor which gives you the best results. Remember that if it doesn't work the first time, you can always compost your plants and try again.

Seeds can be gathered from plants once they are going brown, or earlier if you prefer, while they are still green but fully formed. I tend to bunch them up with a paper bag tied over the heads and hang them upside down from the airer. The seeds will dry and gradually drop off, into the bag, after which they can be stored. Some can be used for the following year, others can be tinctured or used in teas or cooking. Remember to check whether the seed you want to work with is better used fresh. Also, if you want to grow some herbs from your own seed, check which of these will do better planted directly from the parent plant and which need to be stored before sowing. Angelica, for example, doesn't store well, so if you want to propagate your angelica plants, you will need to plant the seeds as soon as you gather them.

To store your herbs, clean, dry glass jars work well – a little time spent on labelling can make the resulting jars look beautiful. Chop the herbs using kitchen scissors, and pack them into jars, labelling them carefully with their English and Latin names and the date. Bear in mind that the smaller your herbs have been chopped, the larger the surface area exposed to air, which means

they may not last quite as long. I tend to store my herbs in larger pieces and chop them later, according to need. It does make for more work, but the herbs store better and for longer. Dried herbs should be stored out of direct sunlight: mine are on a shelf in a shady kitchen that rarely gets direct sunlight, a situation that works well. Dried herbs will usually last up to two years, though it does vary fairly widely between herbs – I have had some that are perfectly good after three years, and others that lose their virtue in one. Go by eye, scent and taste – if it looks and smells good and still has a strong, vibrant flavour, it will almost certainly still be absolutely fine to use. If it has faded and doesn't taste or smell of much, compost it.

Root and bark, which are best dried in a dehydrator or low oven, are more commonly gathered in spring and in autumn, so more on this subject can be found in the other two books in the series.

Medicine making

Medicine making can be quite an art in and of itself. There is a plethora of superb books on the subject, some of which I have included in the bibliography. I do a lot of medicine making, and I feel that there is a huge overlap between medicine and food – so this book contains medicines, yes, but also wild-food recipes where appropriate. I encourage you to have a go at making your own medicines and wild foods – the enterprise can be time-consuming sometimes, but ultimately it is extremely rewarding. There is nothing like using your own hand-made creams to ease sunburn or bites and stings, or enjoying your own herbal teas from the garden! Better yet, you have full control over exactly what ingredients you use, so you can be sure that your hand-made products are all completely natural.

Equipment

There are a few pieces of equipment I strongly recommend you try to obtain if you plan to do much medicine making.

Kilner-type jars with a rubber seal are a must for tincture making, as is a mezzaluna – a semi-circular chopping knife; these little blades can make short work of a pile of herbs and are very satisfying to use. A double boiler is another must-have piece of kit for making infused oils and balms. Try, if possible, to have a set of wooden spoons and pans just for medicine making. Don't use aluminium pans, as aluminium tends to leech into the medicines: go, instead, for stainless steel, ceramic or toughened glass.

A measuring jug and a set of measuring spoons are also handy. Spoons that go up in increments of $\frac{1}{4}$ – $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoons are most useful, as these also make very good dosage cups. Keeping a metre or so of medium-weave cheesecloth in the cupboard is another trick I highly recommend – this will come in handy for all kinds of straining and can also be used for plaisters. If you have old tea towels that are towards the end of their useful life, save a few for plaisters and poultices.

Lastly, a rough-sided mortar and pestle is a must. Smooth-sided sets are great for certain jobs, but for really pulverising herbs and seeds a good, heavy, rough-sided set is invaluable. Most of this equipment can be found in second-hand shops if you keep an eye out, or in good kitchen hardware stores.

Teas and decoctions

Teas, or tisanes, are essentially an infusion, in hot water, of one or more herbs, either dried or fresh. Most herb teas and tisanes can be drunk up to three times a day, and they are very simple to make. If you are using fresh herbs, allow 1–2 heaped teaspoons of the fresh herb, chopped, to a cup of hot water. If you are

using dried herbs, one gently heaped teaspoon is usually enough. Remember that fresh herbs have a much higher water content, which makes them more bulky. If you are brewing aromatic herbs, remember to cover the pot as the tea brews, otherwise the essential oils will evaporate; this is rather a shame, as it is these compounds that make the tea taste good and also provide a lot of the medicinal virtues.

Teas can be drunk as is, sweetened with honey and sliced fruit, or used as a skin wash or bath. They don't tend to keep well, so I recommend making and drinking your tea over the course of a day. You can make teas in cups or jugs, cafetieres or teapots, or you can make your own small muslin tea sacks to infuse the herbs in.

Cold infusions are effectively just cold water poured over chopped herbs in a Kilner jar, which is then stored in the fridge overnight while the herbs infuse. This suits very well herbs with a high mucilage content, as this is usually destroyed by heat and doesn't extract very well in alcohol. In my experience, this method is best for fresh herbs, such as marshmallow leaf or root. Nettle leaf also makes a lovely cold infusion.

Decoctions are a little more complicated, but not overly so: these consist basically of herbs that have been boiled in water until the water content has reduced by around one third of its total volume. The method lends itself well to fruit, bark, seeds and woody bits of the herbs, as the water will have more time to extract the properties of the herb and, as the water molecules are driven with much more force against the sides of the plant matter, it will do a better job of extracting useful properties. Decoctions can be either short: boiled for a fairly brief amount of time, but with the result that they will only keep for a shorter time in the fridge, or long: boiled for a number of hours with regular water top-ups, and therefore able to be kept for much a longer time if kept refrigerated.

Decoctions can be used in much the same way as teas, but with much lower dosages: about 50 ml (1¾ fl oz), two to three

times a day, usually works well, though this is highly dependent on the herbs used.

Syrups and honeys

Syrups are the product of an infusion or decoction mixed with sugar as a preservative. These lend themselves well to fruit such as elderberries, or combinations such as thyme and liquorice as a cough syrup; they can be a much more palatable way to get herbs into children and more fussy adults. Syrups require a large quantity of sugar to really preserve them and can sometimes go mouldy. Unfortunately they do need actual sugar, as it acts as a preservative, so honey will not suffice. If you really don't want much or any sugar, I recommend making up a decoction or infusion sweetened as you choose, then freezing it in ice-cube trays. When you need the herbs, take out a cube, pop it into a glass of water, then drink.

Herbal honeys can be made by finely chopping fresh herbs and stirring them into a jar of honey. Local honey is best, if you can find it, as you can never be too sure what has gone into most of the honeys found on supermarket shelves. Herbal honeys have the advantage that a teaspoon contains the herb as well as the honey, giving them a wide variety of applications – topical for wounds, grazes and stings, or as part of the diet, stirred into herbal teas, used to make drinks at the weekend – the possibilities are extensive! They will usually keep for at least a year, provided the herbs are surface dry when you chop them, so that you have not introduced too much extra water into the blend.

Tinctures, elixirs and honegars

These are all made in similar ways and usually involve either alcohol or vinegar – I usually recommend unpasteurised cider

vinegar. They have the advantage that they will often preserve the herbs for much longer periods, and only a small dose is needed to be medicinally effective. A teaspoon of a vile-tasting tincture may, after all, be a more palatable option than a whole cupful of an equally foul-tasting tea. It also has the advantage of speed for those with a busy lifestyle. I do recommend where possible trying to keep both tea and tincture in the cupboard – in this busy modern world we all live far too fast, and slowing down enough to take the time to make and drink a cup of healing tea is as much a part of the medicine as the herbs themselves.

Tinctures and elixirs are basically herbs chopped and infused in alcohol. In the case of an elixir, a form of sweetener has been added, usually honey, but I have also used maple syrup perfectly well. To make a cottage tincture, just chop plenty of the fresh or dried herb, pack it into a jar and pour over the alcohol, allowing an extra 1.25 cm ($\frac{1}{2}$ in.) of liquid on top of the herb. Let the whole lot steep for at least a fortnight, then strain and bottle, labelling carefully with the English and Latin names and the date of bottling. Be aware that the stronger the alcohol, the longer the tincture will last. Also, if you use fresh herbs, remember that the extra water content in the herbs will dilute the tincture. For a stronger tincture, wilt the herbs for a few days beforehand, or dry them entirely. If you are making an elixir, just add honey along with the herbs.

Honegars are made in much the same way, but using unpasteurised cider vinegar instead of alcohol, also with herbs and honey.

Throughout this book, I have included many recipes for tinctures, elixirs and honegars, each of which will, hopefully, clearly explain the process in detail for those of you who fancy having a go. Specific instructions are provided for individual plants. Some instructions may seem repeated from herb to herb – this is to remove the need to flip back and forth in the book.

Infused oils, creams and salves

Infused oils can be made with a huge range of leaves and flowers from the hedgerow or herb garden; there are two main ways of going about this.

Sun-infused oils are effectively just the flowers, picked on a dry day and packed into a glass jar, with organic seed oil poured over. A piece of cloth or kitchen roll is tied onto the top to allow water to evaporate and to stop beasties from getting in. The whole jar is then placed in the sun to infuse until the oil has changed colour. This can be rather exciting to watch, and a whole range of gorgeous coloured oils is possible, from calendula's vivid orange to St John's wort's rich red.

Hob-infused oils are usually made in a double boiler or a slow cooker, or in a bain marie in the oven. These, too, are simple to make: it involves placing the chopped herbs and the oil either into a double boiler or a slow cooker (I recommend having one especially for the purpose) or sealing them in a tin in a water bath in the oven. Over time, the oil gently heats and extracts the properties from the plant. Historically, infused oils were made by literally frying the herbs in the fat; however, having tried this with coconut oil and herbs, I'm not convinced this actually extracts and preserves the medicinal properties of the plant, as the higher level of heat tends to break down some of the more delicate plant constituents. Using the slower methods mentioned throughout this book certainly gives a surer result.

To avoid your oils going rancid, make sure the plants you use are completely dry to the touch, and if your oil looks rather murky once you've finished infusing it, just pop it into a clean, dry glass jar or jug and leave it for a day or two. The murky content will usually sink to the bottom of the jug, allowing you to pour off the clear oil. Do not bottle murky oil – it may go rancid and create a stench, which I recommend you avoid if at all possible!

Salves and ointments are made by adding beeswax in various proportions to the finished oil; creams are made by adding aromatic water as well as beeswax. I have included recipes for all three throughout the book, so I won't go into detail about them here.

Summer herbs for the medicine garden

Growing your own herbs is a pleasure and a delight that I highly recommend to anyone with just a small amount of space. You don't even really need a garden – a corner of a yard, a space outside your front door, a balcony or even window boxes will give you the scope to grow a plethora of fantastically useful plants.

Below are listed a few of the plants that I most recommend; they are mentioned in more detail in the book, along with a few notes on growing and caring for them, in the hope that it will encourage you to have a go at growing your own. I've grown all of these plants in a variety of different circumstances, from pots to tiny yards to full-sized gardens, and I can attest to their versatility and ease to grow.

First on the list would have to be **agrimony** (*Agrimonia eupatoria*), simply because it has such a wide range of useful properties, as well as being an exceptionally pretty wild plant in its own right. I've easily grown agrimony in pots, though it does do better in poor soil with a little benign neglect.

Next would have to be **calendula** (*Calendula officinalis*), which pretty much anyone can grow and which makes gloriously sunny displays of orange and yellow flowers all through the summer. The odd-shaped seeds can be sown from March through to June; once they have put on a bit of growth, they will reward you with a plethora of flowers for medicine for months on end. If you have a mild winter, you may find that you have flowers right the

way through to December; they absolutely thrive in pots and are happy in most kinds of soil.

Elder (*Sambucus nigra*) is another noteworthy plant – often decried as a weed, this wonderfully useful shrub really deserves a place in every garden, even if it is the only tree you grow. Ignore the neighbours carping about it – with flowers, fruits, leaves and bark that can all be gathered for medicine, this is a shrub worth far more love than we give it. It will grow happily in large pots, as well as in the ground.

Next on the list: **honeysuckle** (*Lonicera periclymenum*). A beautiful, fragrant plant, which really does double duty as a stunning addition to the garden as well as providing medicine, this climbing plant can be scrambled up the sides of buildings, where it will provide a scented glory of flowers throughout the summer. Equally happy in shade as well as sun, honeysuckle is rampant in one of our local woods, where branches can often be found with the characteristic spiral groove running up it where honeysuckle has clung on. I used to have honeysuckle growing outside my bedroom window every summer, where in the evenings it would make each breath a perfumed delight.

Lady's mantle (*Alchemilla mollis / vulgaris*) produces tidy hummocks of leaves dewed with silver each morning, giving rise later on to lacy displays of pale-green flowers; with its medicinal purposes as well, it makes for a wonderful addition to the medicine garden. As easy to grow in pots as it is in the ground, this can be moved around the yard or will look beautiful flanking the front door in window boxes.

Meadowsweet (*Filipendula ulmaria*), with its stomach-settling properties, produces beautifully shaped leaves and, later in the season, plumes of creamy, highly scented flowers, which can be used in cooking as well as providing great medicine. This lovely plant likes to keep its feet wet if possible, so don't forget to water it regularly, especially if it is in a pot.

Self heal (*Prunella vulgaris*), a low-growing perennial, provides unobtrusive ground cover and, later in the summer, purple flowers much beloved by bees. Why not grow it underneath your elder tree? It can also be tucked into window boxes to provide an intriguing foil to larger plants, or around the base of larger plants growing in tubs.

St John's wort (*Hypericum perforatum*) will readily self-seed everywhere if given half a chance, and what better reason to make sure you make full use of those sunny yellow flowers in the summer? Thriving happily in pots or in the ground, this beautiful plant provides a striking feature set against walls, especially in late summer, when the leaves begin to take on red tones.

This is the barest introduction to herbs for a fledgling wild medicine garden – there are more in the other books in the series: *Wild Medicine: Autumn and Winter* and *Wild Medicine: Spring*.

Now, without further ado, let me introduce a few of the herbs, those fascinating denizens of hedgerow and garden, myth and dream. Bear in mind that most of them can be obtained from specialist garden centres or herb nurseries and will often grow very happily in a garden, so if you are concerned about gathering from the wild, this need not deter you from growing your own and gathering from an environment you know and are certain about.