

Intro to Herbalism: A new way to look at old friends

Dandelion (*Taraxacum officinale*)

Tastes and qualities: Leaves and root are bitter, but root is also slightly sweet. Cooling and drying.

Parts used: Dandelion is a persistent perennial that can be found and utilized most of the year. Roots are best dug in early spring or after the frosts have returned. Leaves are best in the spring before flowering. The flowers should be harvested in full bloom.

The leaves and flowers are the most sought after parts of dandelion for culinary use. The leaves are wonderful additions to fresh green salads when they're young and cooked green when they're older. Try blending them into pesto too. The flowers are a treat eaten raw, fried up as fritters, or processed into dandelion wine. Search for dandelion flower jelly or syrup recipes (you'll be glad you did.) Roast the root and brew them in a fresh press for herbal coffee. Or cook up the fresh roots like carrots.

Chemistry and when to harvest: The flavors of dandelion vary greatly throughout the year. Remember that plants are the earth's chemists, constantly arranging and rearranging chemical constituents in response to environmental stimuli. Digging up the plant after the autumn's first frosts yields a sweeter root because the inulin has increased in response to the cold weather. The medicinal actions of dandelion root are also the most potent when dug in the cold weather months. In the warm weather months, the entire plant is more bitter (especially in the late spring).



Dandelion can be prepared and kept as you would burdock root (see other page). Dandelion contains inulin, fructose and other carbohydrates, potassium (in the green leaves). It is remarkably mineral rich and high in vitamins A and C.

Habitat: This is a plant that is well known over much of the planet. It grows anywhere and improves soil health by loosening compacted soil and aerating the ground. Dandelion restores mineral health to soils that are depleted.

Applications: As a healing herb, dandelion is indicated for sluggish digestion and fluid retention. It is specific for low-grade internalized heat or infectious conditions, especially if related to allergies. The bitter principles in dandelion are moving and supportive to the liver. The diuretic action of dandelion (especially the leaf, which conversely is also high in potassium) ultimately tonify the kidneys and entire urinary tract with careful and consistent use. Can be useful for urinary tract infections when combined with increased water intake and soothing herbs such as marshmallow root or cornsilk. The entire plant, but especially the root, act on the body as a mild laxative, moving sluggish bowels. It is a wonderful tonic during seasonal changes. It's regular use improves liver function significantly and can therefore have a profound and lasting effect on skin conditions, hormonal imbalances and even conditions as significant as Hepatitis. The powerful bitter flavor promotes bile secretion and soothes indigestion – particularly when the imbalance is caused by poor digestions and absorption of fats. Like burdock, dandelion root is very high in inulin (a complex sugar that nourishes the beneficial bacteria in our intestinal tract). The benefits of inulin are best extracted by simmering the root in water for a couple of hours. Combine dandelion, burdock and marshmallow roots for a earthy cup of root medicine.

Dose: 1 tsp of dried root per cup of water or 1 Tbsp dried leaf per cup of water. Fresh whole plant tincture, 1-60 drops (up to 2mL) 1-4x/day.

Contraindications: Physical contact with the fresh latex in dandelions can cause contact dermatitis in some. Not to be used by those with bile duct obstruction, acute gall bladder inflammation, acute gastrointestinal inflammation and intestinal blockage.

Elder (*Sambucus canadensis*)

Taste and quality: Floral and slightly sweet (flower), tart and astringent (berries), cooling and drying.

Parts used: Primarily the flowers and berries as well as topical preparation of the fresh leaves.

Habitat: This species of Elder bush covers a large area of North America east of the Rocky Mountains and south through eastern Mexico and Central America. It grows in average, medium to wet, well-drained soil in full sun to part shade. Prefers moist, humus rich soils. Spreads by root suckers to form colonies.

Harvesting: Elder is an abundant herbal remedy from which the leaves, flowers and berries all provide healing support. The leaf can be harvested at anytime during the growth cycle and used fresh (*external use only* as a poultice). The flowers are best harvested in the early flowering stage and used fresh or dried. And the berries are harvested at peak ripeness (when they're deep purple/black) and dried or extracted fresh into water or honey.

Actions: Flowers: expectorant, relaxing diaphoretic (promotes a healthy sweat), diuretic, alterative (supports the body's waste removal/detox process), soothing nervine (calming), mild laxative, anti-viral, immune-stimulating Berries: nutritive (high in flavonoids, a type of antioxidant and vitamin C), mild laxative, anti-inflammatory, immunosupportive, anti-viral.

Applications: Elder was traditionally known as "Nature's medicine chest." Modern research has also confirmed the usefulness of elderberries, in particular, for shortening the duration of the flu. The ripe, well-processed berries can be extracted into water or honey and taken as a preventative to viral infections as well. Consumptions of the unripe berries and seeds can produce gastro-intestinal upset (nausea, vomiting.) Care should be taken to remove the stems as well. Flowering tops are ideal for coughs, colds, and flu as it soothes and supports the removal of cellular waste from the immune battle that is raging. In states of high fever, the infusion can be used to bring on a mild perspiration. The flowering tops also tone the mucous linings of the nose and throat, increasing their resistance to infection. They are useful for chronic congestion, allergies and ear infections. The alterative action of elder flowers can also aid in the severity of some arthritic conditions. Elderberries are also used in the food industry as a flavoring and coloring agent.



Dose: Infusion, 1 Tbsp. dried flowers or fresh/dried berries per cup of water. Tincture of flower, take 10-60 drops, 1-4 times/day. Elderberry syrup, take 1 Tbsp 1-3 times/day to prevent virus or 3-5 times/day at onset of cold/flu.

Caution: all parts of the elderberry plant contain cyanogenic glycosides. The highest concentration is in the leaves and stems. The seeds also contain this glycoside, but it is denatured by heat (boiling it in water, etc.) The species most common in Nebraska is *Sambucus canadensis* and this species contains less cyanogenic glycoside than the more common species used in medicine and hence more discussed in terms of its chemistry, *S. nigra*. Cyanogenic glycoside is converted in our bodies to cyanide and this is where the issue of amount comes in. Most people can effectively detox a small amount of cyanide as this potentially toxic phyto-chemical is present in some common foods (apple seeds, bitter almonds etc). Too much can cause symptoms of nausea, vomiting, abdominal cramping and weakness.

References:

- [Herbal Medicine From the Heart of the Earth](#), Dr. Sharol Marie Tilgner
- [Herbal Vade Mecum](#), Gazmend Skenderi
- [Making Herbal Medicine](#), Richo Cech
- [Sambucus Monograph](#), American Herbalists Guild
- [Encyclopedia of Herbal Medicine](#), Andrew Chevallier