

THE HERB COTTAGE  
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### Tea Time

One winter, a friend gave me a luscious blend of herbal tea she harvested in Alaska's Chilkat Valley. As I opened the small bag, the amazing fragrance and colors of rosehips, berries and spruce tips carried me away to a rich Alaskan summer's day.

Sipping the tea, I thought of my friend searching the Alaskan valley for these marvelous herbs, and I appreciated being able to share a taste of her experience.

Experiences are what herbal teas are all about. They evoke thoughts of places and times, while soothing or invigorating us along the way. Herbal teas also can nourish, detoxify, cleanse, calm and strengthen our weary bodies.

Herbal teas, or tisanes, are made from plants other than the well-known tea plant (*Camellia sinensis*), from which green, black and oolong teas are made. Leaves, flowers, buds, fruits, seeds, shoot tips, barks or roots might be used, depending on the plant. The teas receive minimal processing—other than washing, chopping, drying and sometimes brief roasting—prior to brewing.

### Tea Techniques

Infusion and decoction are the two main brewing techniques for tea. With infusions, herbs are steeped in hot (boiled) water. Infusions are suitable for delicate plant parts, such as leaves, flowers and succulent shoot tips. Tougher elements like woody bark, stems, seeds, hard berries and roots usually are prepared by decoction, which involves simmering the herbs for about 10 minutes or longer. For either method, 1 to 2 teaspoons of dried herbs (or 1 tablespoon fresh) can be used per cup of water. To avoid any unpleasant tastes, use nonreactive pots and crockery, such as ceramic, glass, porcelain or stainless steel.

### Hibiscus: Fight High Blood Pressure with a Nourishing, Brightly Colored Tea

We've long admired hibiscus flowers (*Hibiscus sabdariffa*) for their exotic beauty. A tart and tasty brew comes from the seedpods of the tropical variety known as 'roselle'. After the petals have fallen, the seedpod develops within a fleshy red calyx from the flower's base. These red pods are rich in vitamin C, calcium, niacin, riboflavin and iron, and also in certain anthocyanins whose antioxidant strength rivals that of quercetin and vitamin E. Hibiscus extracts have long been used to lower blood pressure in individuals with mild hypertension.

Hibiscus relaxes the walls of blood vessels and acts as a diuretic, but unlike most diuretic drugs, it does not deplete the body of potassium.

Hibiscus tea is good either hot or cold. In the Middle East, this brew was a favorite of the Egyptian pharaohs, and today it is a preferred beverage at weddings. In the Caribbean, a cold Christmas drink called sorrel is made by boiling hibiscus seedpods and then adding sweetener.

Packaged hibiscus tea is widely available in North America and comes in convenient bags for steeping. You even can purchase whole dried pods at specialty grocers. To prepare the pods, wash well and place into four times the volume of water; simmer for 5 minutes, remove from heat and let stand 10 minutes, then strain and sweeten with a little honey or stevia—you'll have a ruby-red gem of a tea.

Hibiscus blends well with rosehips or peppermint leaves. You also can create an aromatic hibiscus-spice tea by adding a cinnamon stick, a few cloves and a bit of orange peel to your tea while simmering.

## Mint: A Treat for Your Tummy

Light and invigorating, peppermint (*Mentha* °—*piperita*) tea is one of my favorite afternoon pick-me-up teas. The digestive properties of peppermint are legendary—it relaxes the gastrointestinal tract, settles a colicky stomach and dispels gas. Peppermint also stimulates the brain and clears the mind. Its leaves contain a variety of medicinal ingredients, such as rosmarinic acid; the flavonoids eriocitrin, luteolin and hesperidin; and the essential oils menthol and menthone. These ingredients provide digestive, antioxidant, neuroprotective and pain-relieving benefits, to name just a few.

I grow peppermint beneath a thicket of evergreen trees in my yard—it's happy in the shade. At the end of summer, I dry handfuls in small brown paper bags so I can sip mint tea all winter. A sprig of 3 or 4 leaves infused for about 3 minutes is perfect. There are more than 30 varieties of mint nowadays, so you can experiment with various ones in your tea, but I can't promise they'll be as helpful as peppermint.

## Lavender, Chamomile and Lemon Balm: A Relaxing Trio

**Lavender tea** sounds inviting, doesn't it? The flowers and leaves of *Lavandula angustifolia* are so aromatic that they are an old-time favorite in scented products. Aromatherapists use lavender as an inhalation therapy for headaches, nervous disorders and exhaustion, and research confirms its calming and sedative effects. The flowers are approved in Germany as a tea for insomnia, restlessness and nervous stomach irritations. To brew lavender tea, steep 1 teaspoon of the dried flowers (or 2 teaspoons fresh) in a cup of hot water for about 3 to 5 minutes, or 10 minutes for a more medicinal effect.

**Chamomile** has two popular types—German chamomile (*Matricaria recutita*), and Roman or English chamomile (*Chamaemelum nobile*). Flowers from either can be used to soothe frayed nerves or relieve nervous digestive cramps. Animal studies have validated German chamomile's antispasmodic and sedative qualities. Low doses are calming, while higher doses promote sleep. For tea, pour 1 cup of boiling water over 1 tablespoon of the dried herb (double if using fresh), and steep 5 minutes—or up to 15 minutes for a more medicinal tea. Pregnant women and individuals suffering from asthma, as well as people with ragweed allergies, should avoid chamomile.

**Lemon balm (*Melissa officinalis*)** was used even before the Middle Ages to reduce stress and anxiety, and to promote sleep. Today, it often is combined with other relaxing herbs, such as valerian (*Valeriana officinalis*), chamomile and hops (*Humulus lupulus*). Research shows it gently and mildly uplifts, calms and makes us more alert.

This member of the mint family produces a tart lemon-flavored tea that can be made by steeping up to a full teaspoon of the dried herb in hot water for about 5 minutes. This herb shouldn't be used by pregnant or breastfeeding women.

## What's Not to Like?

As delightful as herbal teas may be, keep in mind that there are some precautions. Many herbal teas are high in tannins, which can bind to iron, zinc and copper, thus making these essential nutrients less available to the body, so drink these teas about two hours before or after meals. High-tannin teas include raspberry leaf, oregano, fruit teas and many bark and root teas. Also be mindful that some teas (especially berry and citrus teas) are acidic and might erode tooth enamel if consumed in large quantities. A cup or two is fine, as saliva replaces lost minerals and neutralizes acids, but if you drink several cups a day, it might be a good idea to rinse your mouth with water after each cup.

## Blend Your Own Herbal Teas

One of the joys of herbal teas is concocting your own personal blends. Many common garden plants make wonderful teas, and the great thing is you're not restricted to outdoor summer gardens. Try creating an indoor winter "teapot"—a wide planter pot seeded with assorted tea plants, such as mint, thyme (*Thymus* spp.), rosemary (*Rosmarinus officinalis*), lemon balm and lavender. You can snip a little for tea any time.

Winter or summer, blend your own teas by following a few simple guidelines:

- Use only three or four herbs in each blend.
- Include herbs that use the same brewing method, e.g., decoction or infusion.
- Use herbs that complement each other, such as a peppermint leaf with young dandelion (*Taraxacum officinale*) leaf—both are digestives and mild detoxifiers, but the mint adds flavor and fragrance to offset dandelion's blandness.
- Add flavorful or fragrant herbs, such as strawberry fruit, rosehips, blackberry, lemon balm, anise hyssop, chamomile, mint, fennel, cinnamon or clove.
- To dry herbs, hang branches upside down in a cool, dark, dry place until brittle; or spread small flowers or clippings on a tray or in paper bags to dry.
- Blending your own tea is a fun way to explore herbs and it makes a great gift for friends and family to enjoy.

## Tea Recipes

### Tonic Tea

Makes 1 cup

A cleansing, strengthening brew

1/2 teaspoon dried peppermint  
1/4 teaspoon fresh gingerroot, sliced  
1 teaspoon dried wolfberries  
1/2 teaspoon dried oregano

Steep herbs in 1 cup boiling water for 5 minutes; strain.

### What Makes a Tea Fragrant?

That enticing aroma from your cup of mint, rose petal or lavender tea comes from essential oils—fragrant volatile molecules that readily leap from the cup to your nostrils as the tea steeps. And while it's not safe to ingest concentrated essential oils, the little that you swallow or inhale from common herbal teas usually is safe and might even be beneficial. Always cover your tea while brewing, so you don't lose these oils to the air.

## Medicinal Tea Plants

- Cardiovascular support: Hawthorn, hibiscus, juniper berry, raspberry fruit, yarrow
- Colds and flu: Agrimony, angelica, elderberry, ginger, marshmallow
- Detoxifiers: Dandelion, juniper, oregano, rosemary, thyme, yarrow
- Digestive aids: Blackberry, cinnamon, clove, dandelion, ginger, peppermint, raspberry, violet, watercress
- Mental clarifiers: Ginkgo, ginseng, lemon balm, lemon verbena, peppermint, rosemary
- Pain relievers: Black currant, blueberry, chamomile, cinnamon, clove, evening primrose, ginger, juniper, lavender, licorice root, rose petal, willow
- Relaxers: Catnip, chamomile, clove, juniper, lavender, lemon balm, St. John's wort, valerian, yarrow

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