HERBAL

Healing for

WOMEN

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Simple Home Remedies for Women of All Ages

ROSEMARY GLADSTAR

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This book is lovingly dedicated to four wise elders
who brought me the magical gifts of wisdom and laughter:

Jasmine Karr, my mother, whose joy and laughter always helped me live in the lightness of being
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And to three open-hearted young women whom I've been blessed to know and who have allowed me to share the wisdom that was passed on to me:
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ONE

An Introduction to Herbalism

If it is the greatest and highest that you seek, the plant can direct you. Strive to become through your will what, without will, it is.

—Goethe

Honoring the Wisdom of Our Ancestors

In every culture throughout the world you will find a great body of folklore concerning the indigenous plants of that region and the wise women who used them. For thousands of years women collected plants from meadows and woodlands and used them to create healing medicines. They gathered herbs by the waning and waxing of the moon, artfully created preparations, and developed herbal formulas. Through an intuitive communication with the plants, women learned the healing powers of these green allies. Their wisdom developed over countless years as remedies were tried, proven, and passed on. The best of these remedies were added to the lore, and the wisdom was transferred from mother to daughter, from wise woman to apprentice for countless generations. This is the legacy we have inherited. Healers, wise women, simplers—these women were the center and source of medicine and healing for their communities. They understood the cycles of the seasons, the ebb and flow of the universe, the sun, the moon, the stars, and the natural rhythms of their bodies.

Herbalism, rooted in the earth and honored as a woman's healing art, survived the natural catastrophes of time. It wasn't until the fourteenth century, when a wave of witch-hunts began in Europe, that herbalism encountered its first great obstacle. The quiet influence of the wise women—their inner power and their healing skills—began to be feared by the largely patriarchal Roman Catholic Church, and for the next three hundred years women were burned at the stake and tortured to death simply for being healers. Just being a woman during these times was dangerous; using herbs was a sure invitation to be persecuted. Thousands of women were killed in Europe during the height of the witch-hunts.

In spite of recurrent waves of repression, herbalism flourished right up until the dawning of the twentieth century, when it encountered its second great challenge. With

the onslaught of the Industrial Revolution and the introduction of technology, a new tradition of medicine emerged, and herbalism's popularity began to wane. Through the influence of Newton and Descartes, Western culture entered a period wherein people believed they could understand and control nature by dissecting and quantifying it. The science of medicine was going to replace the art of healing. In the space of a century, allopathic or modern, Western technological medicine established itself as the number-one medical system in the Western world. Though it offered a remarkable technological and "heroic," or emergency-oriented, medicine, its monopoly on health care posed a serious problem: no one system of medicine could answer the needs of all people or every health situation. As a result, in spite of the technology and resources offered by allopathic medicine, we gradually became less healthy and—not unrelatedly—more disconnected from our feminine sources of healing.

For almost a century, the practice of herbalism, viewed as antiquated and outdated by the scientific community, became illegal in the United States. Women forgot the art of gathering plants and making their own medicines. Saddest of all, women lost both the knowledge and the initiative to heal themselves. We became totally dependent on doctors and doctors' "orders." No longer in touch with our own healing power, we came to rely on external sources for answers to our deeply personal health problems. A particularly insidious aspect of this situation was the way we began to downgrade and disregard our own intuitive powers. My grandmother used to tell me "tools not used are tools abused"—all too often, they also became "tools we lose." Out of neglect, we began to forget the inherent gifts of the Wise Woman, a tradition of healing that relies on the remarkable feminine powers of intuition, ancient wisdom, and herbal knowledge.

But the wheels of change are turning again. Dissatisfaction with Western medicine, coupled with a herbal renaissance in America, is reawakening the healing instincts that have lain dormant for so long. Women are rediscovering their relationship with medicinal plants and the satisfactions of healing.

Many women begin their herbal studies unsuspectingly in the safety of their gardens. They plant their herb gardens simply because gardens are enchanting and beautiful, full of life and spirit. Then something inexplicable begins to happen. As the women quietly weed, water, and work within the garden, the plants seem to instruct, teach, and guide them. Often, in spite of themselves, women develop a strong curiosity about the healing energies of the plants they're growing and, before they know it, they are reading medicinal herb books, signing up for classes, and treating their families with simple remedies when all they thought they wanted to do was grow some tasty culinaries.

For other women the path to discovering herbs is through their own illnesses. Though allopathic medicine offers an exceptional crisis- and emergency-oriented medicine, it does not offer women with recurring feminine health problems long-term solutions or remedies. Nor does Western medicine address the cause of these imbalances. Frequently problems treated with allopathic chemical drugs recur soon after the effects of the drugs wear off. Women are discovering that herbs offer a sane, safe, and effective alternative and/or complement to allopathic medication.

Some women simply seem to "remember" something deep within them—their age-old herbal legacy. They first remembered it as children, playing in the fields. For long

periods, perhaps, they forgot what they knew, but it was there nonetheless, ready to be rekindled by a special memory or circumstance. Because the knowledge of plants is an old knowledge and easily accessible, some women simply "remember" how to find it buried in the fertile soil of their hearts.

Herbalism is definitely flourishing today. Women are once more growing, gathering, and making their medicines. They are again cultivating their ancient healing traditions. Going back into the closets of our grandmothers to see what jewels of wisdom rest there, we are unearthing our heritage. Working with herbs, digging in the earth, making herbal preparations, and using them for health and healing is the best way possible to reestablish our connection to our Wise Woman tradition.

I had the good fortune to grow up with a woman who never forgot that tradition. My grandmother Mary was born in Armenia and came to this country during the Turkish invasion of her country. She and my grandfather escaped the death march and the almost complete annihilation of the Armenian people. She always credited the plants and her belief in God with saving her, and she passed her beliefs on to her children and grandchildren. We were instructed at an early age which plants were good for food and which for illnesses. Her teachings were without fuss, strong and powerful like herself. The lore she taught me in the garden of my childhood has stayed with me throughout my life.

A magical, intangible process, healing is an art, not a science. The same treatment regimen used on different patients for the same illness can sometimes cure, sometimes have no effect, and sometimes exacerbate a problem. If we are to heal the many levels of imbalance in the female world today we must make some overall changes in our attitudes and beliefs. We must first and foremost remember and accept that for countless generations we carried the wisdom and the magic of healing within ourselves. And we must find a way to reconnect with that ancient place of wisdom and power.

Working with herbs is one of the steps toward discovering that place of wisdom and reclaiming our tradition as wise women and healers. The plants do teach us. They take us to the heart and soul of Mother Earth. They offer a system of healing that is gentle, imbued with "soft power," and attuned to the feminine spirit. To relearn this tradition takes a certain commitment, but it is a wonderful, joyful process that often leads one into the fields and gardens of our gentlest memories. As herbalism resurges in the hearts of women, it is my hope that this book may serve as a guide to the healing way of herbs, providing not only remedies and recipes for women's health, but also opening the door that leads women to the ancient art and legacy of herbalism.

Herbalism and Western Medicine

Having been a practicing herbalist for over twenty years in an extremely diverse and colorful community, I've had an excellent opportunity to witness both alternative and orthodox systems of healing and their effects on our health. Though herbal medicine is

the system closest to my heart, I do not ignore or exclude other systems of medicine. Diet, exercise, shamanic healing, visualizations, allopathic medicine, acupuncture; all of these practices and many others have an intrinsic place in the organic wholeness of medicine. This book focuses primarily on herbs and dietary suggestions, not because I do not believe in the validity of other systems of medicine but because herbalism is the system of healing I know best. I believe in it, I know it deep in my heart, and I love to share it with others.

Allopathic medicine and herbalism are frequently seen as the antithesis of one another, and people assume that they are incompatible. On the contrary, the two systems of medicine can work very effectively together and do, in fact, complement one another. Representative of the female and male energies, both are needed for harmonious balance. And both have much to learn from one another. Unfortunately, there is a schism between these two systems of medicine. Herbalism is viewed as antiquated, old-fashioned, and ineffective. Allopathic medicine is viewed as mechanical and impersonal, treating symptoms rather than causes. One is right brain; the other left brain.

Working in concert, allopathic medicine and herbalism can enhance our possibilities for well-being. Though some of the most powerful herbs (these are indicated in herb books) should not be used with allopathic drugs, most herbs do not interfere with the action of chemical drugs and can be used to augment allopathic treatments. While chemical drugs are actively killing bacteria and viruses, herbal medicines build and restore the system. Chemical drugs generally have a specific agenda, while herbs, through a complex biochemical process, take the whole person into consideration and replenish the body on a cellular level. Herbs, when taken correctly, do not upset the body's innate sense of harmony, so there are little or no side effects. Using herbal therapy with chemical drugs often helps eliminate or lessen the side effects of drug therapies.

About 3000 years ago Asclepius of Thessaly, one of the great minds of ancient medicine, gave the following sequence for the use of therapeutic agents: "First the word. Then the plant. Lastly the knife." Several hundred years later, Dr. Rudolf Weiss, a highly respected medical herbalist from Germany and author of *Herbal Medicine,* expanded on Asclepius's theme by adding radiation and chemotherapy to the armamentarium of healing techniques: "First the word. Then the plant. Next the major synthetic chemotherapeutic agents. And finally the knife." What both of these wise physicians advised was a sequence of medical intervention beginning with least invasive substance and progressing only if necessary to the most invasive. Counseling first, then herbs. If neither of these work, then hospitals, doctors, and surgery should be considered.

Applying the sage words of these two physicians as guidelines, it becomes easier to determine when herbs may be most appropriate as a first-choice medicine.

- As preventive medicine, herbs are inimitable. They build and strengthen the body's natural immunity and defense mechanisms. They nourish the deep inner ecology of our systems on a cellular level. Our bodies are comfortable with herbs, recognize them, and efficiently utilize them.
- Herbs support our life force. They are effective when used over an extended period of time to strengthen the immune system. They may also be used to quickly perk up the

immune system when it is under attack by cold and flu viruses. Herbs are also powerful "adaptogens," increasing the body's ability to adapt to the ever-changing environment and increasing stresses of life.

- Most nonemergency medical situations also respond well to herbalism. Simple everyday problems such as bruises, swellings, sprains, cuts, wounds, colds, fevers, burns, and so forth are easily treated with herbs. If your grandma would have treated it at home, chances are that you can too. Herbs can also be an effective first-aid treatment for emergency situations when medical help is unavailable or is on its way.
- For treating serious illnesses such as AIDS, cancer, and autoimmune disorders, herbs serve as excellent secondary therapeutic agents. They provide necessary fundamental support for the body while it is undergoing more radical forms of treatment that may sap its life energy. Herbs and allopathic medicine can and do work compatibly in these critical situations, complementing and enhancing each other's effects.
- Herbs are a first-choice medicine for many women's health problems. For years I have talked to women who, tired of rounds of antibiotics and orthodox treatments, have tried alternative health remedies. They would use simple herbal remedies, often unaware that women had been using these remedies for centuries, and were amazed by the results. I think herbs act in a particularly impressive way on women's health because there's a natural affinity between women and the plant world. Plants spring from the heart of the earth; they are nourished by the seasons and whims of Mother Nature. Beautiful, strong, and powerful, herbs are in sympathy with women's spirit. They provide a deep source of nourishment and vitality to the female organs and have an innate ability to heal imbalances that have lodged in those deep, moist places of our female being. Herbs can also be used to support and nourish the female system when a woman chooses to use allopathic medicine. While allopathic medicine provides symptomatic relief, herbs often provide the impetus for lasting change. They seem to heal on a cellular level.

Herbs in the Test Tube

As herbs regain a place of recognition and honor in the healing community, they are also encountering skepticism and attack in the scientific community. Western science attempts to analyze herbs in the same deductive way it evaluates synthetic drugs. Technicians extract the chemicals in herbs and analyze them as single, separate components. These chemicals are frequently used in the horribly inhumane animal experimentation that still wracks our medical world in the name of "healing."

Much misinformation has been collected about herbs in this manner. Two classic examples of this laboratory technique, which time and again produces results at odds with centuries of empirical proof, are the recent tests conducted on sassafras and comfrey.

Sassafras, long valued as a "blood purifier" and "liver herb," is an important ingredient of many old-fashioned root-beer drinks. It contains safrole, a very potent plant chemical that is largely insoluble in water (in other words, you can't extract it when making tea). When safrole was isolated from the herb and injected in extremely high

doses into laboratory animals, it produced carcinogenic cells. Based on this information, sassafras was banned from use in all soft drinks. (Synthetic chemicals are now used instead.) It is interesting that the southern United States, where sassafras grows naturally and has been enjoyed as a beverage tea and a blood cleanser for generations, has the lowest rate of cancer in our country. It is even more interesting to note that there is not one recorded case of sassafras poisoning or of sassafras-related cancer.

The comfrey controversy is another case in point. For centuries comfrey has been valued throughout the world as a food and medicine. Rich in mucilage, allantoin (a cell proliferant), and vitamins and minerals, it's been recommended for treating stomach disorders, mending bones, and healing the lungs. Never in history has there been any question of comfrey's safety and efficacy as a healing plant.

Recently, pyrrolizidine alkaloids have been identified and isolated in the young leaves and roots of comfrey. When injected into laboratory rats in ridiculously high doses, these alkaloids have produced carcinogenic cells and liver toxicity (hepatic veno-occlusive disease). But Richard De Sylva states, in the *Canadian Journal of Herbalism,* "The original research [on the presence of pyrrolizidine alkaloids in comfrey] was seriously flawed. The laboratory rats that developed tumors on the liver were only six weeks old. At this age, quite a number of substances would be inappropriate for them to ingest. As well, the total amount of comfrey ingested formed 30–50 percent of their basic diet. This could be compared to human consumption of several platefuls of comfrey daily. This daily regimen did eventually cause tumors to grow on their livers and proved only one of the standing laws of science: that every substance or chemical is a poison if we consume enough of it." Or as Paracelsus said several years ago, "All things are poison and nothing is without poison. It is the dosage that makes a thing poisonous or not." Because of these laboratory findings, an attempt was made to locate cases of individuals who used comfrey and later developed liver toxicity. Of the thousands of people who use comfrey worldwide, only three somewhat questionable cases have been identified, none of which conclusively point to comfrey as the culprit.

The small amounts of pyrrolizide alkaloids found in comfrey are balanced by the abundance of allantoin, a cell proliferant, calcium salts, and mucilage it contains. All these components are very nutritious to the cells and serve to counteract the cell inhibiting action of the pyrrolizidine alkaloids. Though there is no concrete evidence of its toxicity after centuries of recorded use, comfrey has been banned in Canada and is awaiting its verdict in the United States. (For further information on comfrey, see its listing in the Materia Medica in Part VII of this book.)

It would be naive to believe all plants are safe to use. They absolutely are not. Some are incredibly potent and are not recommended for use by the unskilled or inexperienced healer. Some are so toxic they shouldn't be used at all. But these plants have been identified as such for centuries by herbalists. Such information has been handed down to us as part of our herbal tradition. What laboratory science has primarily proven is how accurate the intuitive wisdom of the ages has been. Scientists are now able to isolate certain chemicals from the herbs and turn them into "wonder drugs," using them for the same illnesses as have herbalists for countless generations.

Alchemy and magic are integral parts of herbalism and healing. It is essential to recall

when reading these test results that the whole is *always* greater than the sum of the parts. As more and more tests are conducted on herbs and their chemicals are isolated, it is important to be open-minded about the results—open-minded to the fact that science can be just as fallible as it can be infallible. If a plant has been found safe and effective for a thousand years of human use, it may be wise to question the validity and applicability of the scientific tests now being used. There is generally some unidentified magic in the plant in the form of another chemical or an innate natural wisdom that allows the medicine, when taken as a whole, to function in a safe and beneficial manner.

T W O

Beginning Your Herbal Studies

Come forth into the light of things, let nature be your teacher.
—William Wordsworth

Where to Begin?

How does one approach the vast study of herbs? Where does one begin? At first it may seem like an overwhelming project to learn about this subject from which we've become so culturally isolated. In previous decades, older women taught herbalism as naturally as they taught their daughters and granddaughters how to sew and cook. But without the teachings of the grandmothers, we must find new ways to learn this ancient tradition. Thankfully, it is a remarkably easy and joyful skill to learn. Rooted in common sense and natural laws, much of what there is to learn about herbalism comes simply and naturally. In fact, I've never met anyone who did not thoroughly enjoy the study of herbs. Herbalism seems to capture the heart and spirit of its students and guides them along. Primarily an intuitive art, much of the learning involves working directly with plants, gardening, making tea, using herbal remedies for health and healing, and allowing the herbs to teach us. In the process, we learn to awaken and trust our intuition.

The method I've found that works best when teaching herbalism is a mixture of the basic art of herbalism as taught by the old-time "simplers," peppered with a touch of science. Long ago herbalists were called "simplers" because they understood the basic laws of life and learned through common sense and life experience. Simplers used noncomplex remedies. They utilized the herbs that grew around them that were effective and nontoxic. Meanwhile, over the centuries, science was developing weights and measures and clinical studies to comprehend, measure, and explain the art of life. A tablespoon or two of this scientific knowledge is appropriate to the study of herbs and adds a touch of proficiency to the art. Combining the simpler's approach with research and study is the best way I know to blend the worlds of herbal wisdom and knowledge.

Being with the Plants

Though there are many marvelous herbal instructors, I think the best teachers of herbalism are the plants themselves. They may not be able to teach us about how much vitamins and minerals they contain, or what their chemical constituents are (though you can often tell this by tasting them), or what they are specifically used for, but they teach us about the magic and beauty of life, the life force inherent in the green world. When you sit with a plant, observing its color and scent, aware of the community of different plants it grows with, sensing its relationship to the world, you begin to develop a deep sense of peace, joy, and wisdom. Believe me, this happens for almost everybody who enters humbly into the world of "the green nations"—the plant world. Often this communication with plants develops into a keen relationship that helps one to awaken and trust one's own intuition.

Studying about herbs from some of the great books available and from actual herb teachers, who, more often than not, are lively characters, is a wonderful learning process. But I have watched people accumulate so much information about herbalism, yet know little about herbs. Often herbalists get so busy being herbalists they have almost no time to be with the subject that fills the wellspring of their heart and is the source of their inspiration. The best way to receive the deepest gratification from your herbal studies and to step into the wisdom of the plants is to spend time with them.

Spending time with herbs means stopping to "smell the flowers." When you're gardening, stop once in a while to listen to the plants. When you're on a walk, notice every living green thing around you. The very air we breathe is a gift from the plant world. Pause now and then and give thanks to our green allies for the air we breathe.

For many women, the opportunity to spend time with the plant world is limited, either because of time or location. If you live in the city, a walk often doesn't take you along an herb-bordered pathway. But there are many ways to spend time with plants. This morning when I was mixing my favorite tea (a mixture of rose hips, chamomile, and a pinch of stevia), it struck me how beautiful the herbs looked in their jars, and how joyful I felt standing there with them. When I held the warm cup of tea in my hands, I could feel the fusion of my world with that of the plants. Being with the herbs and learning from them means simply making time for them and using them in so many ways for health and healing. And even if you've no time or space for a garden it's always possible to have a few pots of herbs growing about your house.

There are several exercises I love to do with students to help them develop their intuitive skills with plants. I believe that this kind of information is as valuable, if not more so, than all the book learning and educating we do. One of my favorite exercises is very simple, but so profound. Go for a walk. Find a tree that beckons to you. Put your arms around it and hug tightly. Pull yourself close to the tree and allow yourself to smell it, feel it, hear its heartbeat. Trees have very strong energy and you will feel as if you are well supported, that you can surrender and let go. Often people feel they can tell the tree anything and it will hear them and help them. Trees also have strong voices and it is

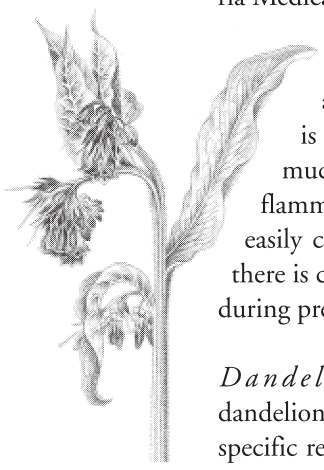
easy to hear them singing back to you. When you walk into a woods, have you ever thought you heard the trees talking? They probably were!

Creating Your Herbal Pantry

One of the first steps in learning herbalism is selecting a small group of herbs you wish to "be with" and learn about. These herbs will form the basis of your herbal work. There are so many herbs to choose from that the difficulty is limiting your choices. It is wiser to select just a few herbs and know them well than to have a large selection of herbs you know little about. If you will be using your herbs primarily for women's problems, you may wish to select herbs from the Materia Medica in Part VII of this book. If you prefer a more general list, the following are some of my favorite all-purpose herbs. These herbs are all commonly available in natural food and herb stores or you can order them from several of the sources listed in Appendix II. Many are easily grown in the garden.

Cayenne (Capsicum frutescens) Hot and fiery, cayenne is often used to improve poor circulation and sluggish bowels. Rich in vitamin K, a blood coagulant, cayenne will stop bleeding almost instantly. It will sting when applied externally. It is great for constipation, and is a good heart tonic, improving blood circulation to the heart and increasing overall body warmth and energy. It is easily cultivated in hot climates.

Chamomile (Matricaria chamomilla and related species) A gentle herb long valued for its ability to relieve stress and nervous tension. Even Peter Rabbit's mother knew of the value of this gentle stress-relieving plant. Camomile is served in hospitals throughout Europe to calm and relax the patients, a practice I would like to see established in our medical facilities. It is excellent for stomach tension, indigestion, and for inflammation. It is easily cultivated and makes a fragrant and lovely ground cover. (See the Materia Medica in Part VII for more information.)



comfrey

Comfrey (Symphytum officinale) A rich source of allantoin, calcium, iron, and vitamin A, comfrey is highly prized for its wound-healing properties and is used to help mend broken bones, torn ligaments, and injured tissue. Its high mucilage content makes it an excellent remedy for lung, stomach, and dermal inflammation and it is considered one of the best remedies for stomach ulcers. It is easily cultivated, though beware: comfrey can soon take over a garden. Please note: there is currently a controversy over the safety of comfrey and it is best to avoid using it during pregnancy. (See the Materia Medica in Part VII for more information.)

Dandelion (Taraxacum officinale) One of the most widely used herbs in the world, dandelion is highly respected, both for its preventive and for its remedial qualities. It is a specific remedy for the kidneys and liver. High in natural potassium, dandelion, unlike

pharmaceutical diuretics, does not deplete the body of this essential mineral. The root is used for the liver and liver-related problems. Because of its high concentration of vitamins and minerals, both the root and the leaf of dandelion are considered restorative and adaptogen aids to the body in building and restoring energy reserves. It is easily cultivated. (See the Materia Medica in Part VII for more information.)

Echinacea (Echinacea angustifolia, A. purpurea) The herb supreme for strengthening the immune system. Excellent for building resistance to colds, flu, and infections. A widely used herb, it has gained much respect throughout Europe for its immunological properties. Current research indicates that echinacea holds promise as an AIDS treatment. Easily cultivated, it is a beautiful garden perennial.

Garlic (Allium sativum) Called the "poor man's penicillin," garlic has long been valued for its antibiotic, antiviral properties. High concentrations of volatile oil, mucilage, and germanium make this one of the most effective antimicrobial plants available and one of the best remedies for colds, flu, bacterial, and viral infections. It is also used to lower high blood pressure. Easily cultivated.

Ginger (Zingiber officinale) This versatile and tasty herb is as useful to the medicinal herbalist as it is to the cook. Ginger has warming, stimulating, and antispasmodic properties. It is used frequently for stomach cramps, colds, poor circulation, motion and morning sickness, and for menstrual irregularities and discomfort. (See the Materia Medica in Part VII for more information.)

Goldenseal (Hydrastis canadensis) Indigenous to the eastern woodlands of the United States, goldenseal was a favorite remedy of the Native Americans and early colonists. It is still used in large quantities by pharmaceutical companies and is considered one of the most effective natural antibiotics and infection-fighting herbs. Unfortunately, due to its remedial value, goldenseal has been severely overharvested and is quickly approaching endangered-species status. Demand *only* cultivated goldenseal when purchasing it; do not use "wildcrafted" (grown-in-the-wild) plants because of the extinction threat. Goldenseal is difficult to cultivate.

Caution: goldenseal should only be used for short periods of time. Taken over an extended period, it builds up in the mucosa of the body, causing irritation and inflammation. A suggested dose would be two capsules three times daily for three weeks; stop for three weeks, then repeat dosage if necessary.

Goldenseal should be used during pregnancy with caution. Large doses stimulate the involuntary muscles of the uterus and may cause premature contractions. It can, however, be used in small amounts (one capsule three times daily) during pregnancy for morning sickness or to help fight infections and colds.

Nettle (Urtica dioica) One of the highest sources of digestible iron in plant form, rich in calcium and vitamin A, nettle strengthens and supports the whole body. Long valued as a food and medicine, it is used for anemia, fatigue, edema, menstrual difficulties, and

allergies and hay fever. Easily cultivated but not recommended as a garden plant unless you have a lot of space and privacy. The fresh leaves produce a painful form of dermatitis on contact. (See the Materia Medica in Part VII for more information.)

Peppermint (Mentha piperita) and *spearmint* (M. spicata) Both refreshing, energizing herbs, peppermint and spearmint are often used to enhance the flavor of other, less tasty medicinals. Excellent digestive aids, they are used frequently for upset stomachs, poor digestion, and for colds and fever. They are both extremely easy to cultivate.

Skullcap (Scutellaria lateriflora) Another of the powerful herbal nervines, skullcap revitalizes the entire central nervous system. It is one of the most widely used remedies for headaches and nervous stress. A member of the mint family, it is easily cultivated.

Valerian (Valeriana officinalis) Valerian has long been considered *the* herb supreme for nervous stress and tension. It is excellent for insomnia, headaches, and reducing pain. Though a powerfully effective herb, it is nonhabit-forming and nonaddictive. A small percentage of people who use it experience a stimulating rather than relaxing effect when they use it. Easily cultivated. (See the Materia Medica in Part VII for more information.)

Selecting the Best-Quality Herbs

The single most important factor when purchasing herbs is to recognize and obtain the best quality available. The results of your herbal remedies will depend on the quality of the herbs you are working with. In the past, women collected, dried, and prepared their own herbs, so were assured of quality. This is not always feasible or possible today. Herbalism is a big industry these days, and high quality cannot always be taken for granted.

In recent years consumer awareness has done more to improve the quality of herbs than anything else. If you had walked into an herb store years ago, you would most likely have found a variety of brown or yellow stalks in jars. Today, a stroll around an herb store reveals many jars with "wildcrafted" and/or "organic" labels on them, jars whose contents usually have greater color, vibrancy, and scent. The words "wildcrafted" or "organic" are synonymous with quality. They tell you that the herb has been grown and harvested with care and concern for both the quality of the herb and the integrity of the environment. They express a certain conscious responsibility to the environment and avoidance of chemical fertilizers and sprays. And they suggest that the herb was generally picked according to the seasons, at the right time of day, and dried in the best drying conditions.

By contrast, almost all commercial quality herbs that are imported into this country are channeled through a few tonnage warehouses. While in storage and awaiting FDA inspection, they are sprayed several times to kill insects. Most of these herbs were grown

in third world countries where the use of heavy dosages of toxic sprays is common practice. Many of the sprays used have been banned in the United States because of their toxicity, then sold to these countries for agricultural purposes.

These commercial-grade herbs are harvested en masse, dried in excessive, damaging heat, and then shipped to America via several ports, where they are usually sprayed again. Many of these herbs then sit in warehouses for several months or years awaiting distribution. People wonder why herbs treated this way don't work. I'm amazed that they work as well as they do. Somehow, despite all this stressful treatment, some of the life force of these herbs may manage to survive, but it pales beside the vitality of its wildcrafted and organically grown cousins.

The very best way to obtain your herbs is to grow or wildcraft your own. Herbs are amazingly easy and rewarding to grow, and they flourish even in limited space and poor soil; you don't need to be born with a green thumb to grow herbs! As for the availability of wild plants, you'd be amazed at the number you can find growing wild, even in the heart of a city (though you wouldn't want to wildcraft them in cities because of heavy traffic and pollutants). When I mention this to city dwellers, they often express disbelief. But the next time you're walking past a deserted city block, check out the wild plants growing there—generally a beautiful, vibrant, and tenacious sampling of plants. Or look at the median along the highway. Some of my favorite little weeds grow happily in that wasteland. Herbs are very cosmopolitan, love to travel, and are carefree wanderers. Discovering wild plants is one of the great joys of herbalism. However, it is neither the purpose of this book nor within its scope to expound on the identification of wild plants. So you'll have to look elsewhere for training. Many herbalists offer herb walks and there are several good books on wild plant identification. (See Appendix I.)

Whether you grow your own herbs, collect them in the wild, or order them from an herb supplier, it's important to have on hand those herbs you are drawn to work with. Procure about two to four ounces of each herb in its dried form and store it in an airtight glass container. Buy herbs from local sources whenever possible, but if you don't have a local supplier, you can obtain them from mail-order herb companies. I have included the names of several companies that are respected for the quality of the herbs they supply. (See Appendix II.)

How to Tell Good-Quality Herbs

Whenever possible, use your herbs fresh. It always makes me smile when innocent beginners ask how they should dry their peppermint so they can make tea with it. It's like asking how to dry lettuce to make salad. Herbs are dried for convenience, storage, and commercial purposes. Good quality dried herbs are acceptable if fresh ones are not available. How do you tell if dried herbs are of good quality? They should look, taste, and smell almost exactly as they do when they are fresh. And they should be effective. Here are the four guidelines for determining good quality herbs.

❧ **Color** Dried herbs should remain almost the same color as they are when fresh. If you

are buying green leaves, such as peppermint or spearmint, they should be vivid, bright, and alive. If you are buying blossoms, they should be bright and colorful. For instance, calendula (marigold) should be a bright orange or yellow. Roots, though generally subtle in color to begin with, should remain true to their original shades. Goldenseal should be a bright golden green; echinacea, a silver brown; yellow dock root, a yellowish brown. In the beginning, you may not always know what the correct color of a plant should be, but look for aliveness, vibrancy, deep strong colors. You will soon develop a knack for knowing.

- **Scent** Herbs have distinctive odors that offer an effective means of determining quality. They should smell strong, not necessarily "good." Not all herbs smell good. The scent of valerian, for instance, has been compared to that of dirty socks. Good-quality valerian should smell like *really* dirty socks. Good-quality peppermint will make your nose tingle and your eyes water. Some herbs, like alfalfa, just smell "green." But in that green odor is a freshness and unmistakable vitality. Beautiful, exotic, fragile, sometimes offensive, the scents of herbs vary widely, but they are all distinctive and pronounced.
- **Taste** Herbs should have a distinctive, fresh flavor. Do not judge them on taste by expecting them to taste "good." You will quickly learn that not all medicinal herbs taste good by any stretch of the imagination! So judge taste on potency rather than flavor. Do they taste fresh? Strong? Vital? Distinctive? Do they arouse a distinctive response from your taste buds?
- **Effect** The herb must work effectively. Herbal remedies made from fine quality herbs and used properly are remarkably effective. If the herbs you are using are not working as well as you would expect them to, inspect the quality of the herb first. It may, in fact, not be working for several other reasons (such as being the wrong herbal remedy for the problem) but before checking anything else scrutinize the herb for quality first.

How to Store Your Herbs

Light, heat, air, and age are the villains that destroy the essence of herbs. Insects can also be a problem. Store your herbs in glass jars with tight-fitting lids away from direct light and heat. I find it baffling that good cooks still store their fancy herbs and spices directly above the kitchen stove exposed to bright light and excess heat. The flavors of most culinarys deteriorate rapidly in these conditions. A cool dark kitchen closet or pantry is excellent for storing herbs. Herbs stored this way will last for several months or even years. If you suspect an herb is losing its potency, give it the quality-control test outlined above. And if it doesn't meet the requisites, offer it up to the compost goddess.

Your Medicinal Herb Library

Though it's important to balance your herbal studies with actual experience with plants, the information you gain through researching and gathering data on the herbs