

# Welcome!

If you know me from *A Cabin Full of Food*, then we're already old friends. It's great to see you again.

If you're new, please come and visit me at [justplainmarie.ca](http://justplainmarie.ca) or look me up on social media – I'm easy to find almost everywhere as Just Plain Marie.

This book is a labour of love, just as my cookbook was, and I hope it helps you feel at ease in the world of herbal remedies. The many ideas I list for ways in which people have historically used these herbs should give you a jumping-off point to do your own research.

Working with herbs is, in many ways, like cooking from scratch. You need to know your ingredients, understand the instructions, and, most importantly, trust yourself.

Oh, and have fun.

Marie

## ***Modern Life, Modern Problems***

Do you know what I like about problems and challenges? The lessons and good things that come from them.

We are beginning to recognize that conventional medication is lifesaving but it comes with complications and problems, especially when used incorrectly.

This is shaking up our way of thinking, challenging things that our grandparents took for granted, and getting people to ask questions.

Do we really need antibiotics for every sinus infection? Could a neti pot and some herbal remedies ease the pain and discomfort?

Must ear infections always be treated with antibiotics? Twenty years ago, doctors resoundingly said yes. Today when I take my child to have an ear infection diagnosed, I'm told to ease the pain with ear drops and other gentle treatments.

What about depression and anxiety? Could we try exercise and sunshine before handing out pills?

Allergies, fatigue, muscle weakness, headaches – are there herbs available to ease these?

And is there a root cause that must be dealt with instead of just masking symptoms?

This change in our thinking expands beyond medication.

When I was a child, my mother used powdered cleaners in the bathroom and harsh chemicals that today cause me chest pains and breathing problems. Too many people suffer allergic reactions and skin conditions from the chemicals used in body and hair products, but 'No scents makes perfect sense' was never seen in public places in my childhood. Today it is almost necessary because of allergies.

Poor eating habits from processed and fast foods, combined with emerging technology that allows a sedentary lifestyle, has led to an obesity problem. And when we gain too much weight for comfort, we turn to pills or to highly processed diet foods!

In reaction, many of us are turning to organic foods and natural products. Increased allergies, children entering puberty in grade two or three, and strange cancers – many of us are starting to question every product we pick up.

It is not so long ago that organic and natural products were almost unheard of and certainly not the norm. And don't point to our greatgrandparents time – as I learn from my father, and from old farming and gardening books, I'm shocked at the vast amount of arsenic, lead and other nasty items were used to grow their gardens, clean their homes and preserve their foods.

Today, though, these are the products that consumers are demanding. Even in the middle of recessions, we are now willing to spend more on a natural product than on one that is stuffed with harsh chemicals. Now that manufacturers are catching on, many are starting to redesign their labels and rethink their ingredients. Recently, walking through the cleaning section at the grocery store (which I do quickly because of the scents), I noticed a bottle that looked like clear white vinegar in a spray bottle. It turned out to be a natural cleaner without the dyes that we are so used to seeing – a welcome change!

From makeup to hair products to cleaners and the foods we eat, everyone is starting to ask 'What is in this? Where did it come from?

How will it benefit me and my family and the earth on which I live?"

This change in thinking has led us back to the herbal medications that our distant ancestors used.

# Growing Your Own Herbs

Learning that the herbal industry is largely unregulated can be unsettling for the people who trust their herbal products to someone else. Not that there aren't many notorious products out there that are highly regulated and yet are still questionable in their safety, but that at least gives us some level of comfort.

There's no doubt that herbs have some wonderful benefits for the human body, and at a minimum, they can be used to flavor foods and boost the health content of what we eat. If you're keen on taking herbs as part of your diet, the best solution may be growing your own plants.

Many households have herb gardens, both indoors and outdoors. These small gardens hold a wide range of herbs. Most gardeners stick to the tried and true basics, the ones like parsley, oregano and thyme that we all know. It's easy to add fresh herbs to your cooking when they are right there on hand. Basil isn't just basil when it's fresh and ready!

There are a lot of benefits to starting your own herb garden.

## ***Fresh Herbs are Always Available***

Tired of running to the supermarket every time you need a few groceries?

Or maybe you're simply leaving out key ingredients because you don't have those "extras" that are added to popular dishes, such as bay leaves, fresh parsley or a sprinkle of dill. When you have an herb garden, you can count on fresh ingredients every day of the week. Your dishes will taste better and have added health content and fresh flavors that can't be replicated from dried spices.

## ***Emerging Hobby***

Many of us envy the neighbor who has a green thumb, but we don't take the initiative to start our own garden.

Often, we're just worried that we will put in the time and have nothing to show for it, but this couldn't be farther from the truth.

Starting an herb garden is starting a new hobby. It may take time and practice to get things right, but that's the fun in learning. You can uncover unique uses for the herbs and expand your culinary palette.

For instance, did you know that there are over 30 different types of basil? Mint is another herb that has more varieties than you might think possible. My favorite, especially for tea, is chocolate mint.

Gardening is a healthy hobby that links us to nature, and you will finally have something in common with that neighbor of yours. Also take the opportunity to show your children or grandchildren the importance of gardening, spending time outdoors and eating healthy. Gardening is a teachable moment for young children, and they never mind digging in some dirt!

### ***Physical Exercise***

If you plant an herb garden outdoors, there's no doubt that you'll work in some physical exercise.

All that bending, digging, planting and watering takes physical energy, and while you won't be dropping pounds like at the gym, you will be toning your muscles and working your body.

The added time in the sun is also refreshing, so you can also enjoy a glowing tone as well.

### ***Improved Connection with Nature***

Some of the best therapy takes place outdoors and having an herb garden promotes this.

Planting herbs outdoors will improve your connection with nature because you'll be outside, listening to the birds and taking in the sights and smells of the season.

Yet even planting an herb garden indoors keeps you connected since you'll be learning about plants that are naturally grown in nature.

People are often surprised to see just how much they appreciate Mother Nature when they can work alongside her.

Having this greater relationship with the world we live in is rewarding even without the other benefits.

## ***Saves Money***

Have you ever noticed the price of herbs at the grocery store, especially fresh herbs? A thriving plant that produces an abundance all year long can be had for the price of a few leaves.

Don't forget that you're growing organic herbs, even if no one is going to come and certify your little garden, so you have fresh products at a fraction of what you would be paying at the store.

## ***Endless Health Benefits***

Of course, we can't discuss the benefits of growing your own herbs and not talk about health benefits. With your own garden, you know exactly where the herbs are coming from. You can be confident that they haven't been treated with pesticides or harmful chemicals. And that's above and beyond the health benefits from flavonoids, antioxidants, polyphenols, vitamins and minerals.

It seems incredible that adding delicious herbs – which also flavor our meals without adding unwanted calories – could help with health conditions, but it's true.

Our grandmothers were right when they gave us a big bowl of garlicky, spicy chicken broth when we were sick – the garlic and pepper gave an extra boost to the already healthy bone broth.

But how about easing a sore throat with a few slices of toast covered in cinnamon sugar or letting children sip a cup of lukewarm chamomile tea to help them drift off to sleep more easily?

## ***Curb Appeal***

One thing that is not always mentioned as a garden benefit is the curb appeal. Most of the herbs that we can grow outdoors have vibrant green colors, lush and pretty foliage, and some of them produce beautiful flowers. Plant a patch of chives and you can have gorgeous purple flowers all season.

Even if you don't have room for a separate herb garden, these pretty and useful plants can be placed between shrubs and other plants. They blend in very well. For

example, both Valerian and yarrow are hardy flowering herbs that add color and character to your front garden while also contributing to your herbal medicine chest.

Most herbs are hardy and easy to work with, so don't worry if you have a brown thumb. Once planted and established, they usually need minimum care to produce an abundance of herbs. In fact, herbs like mint need to be trimmed back and managed to prevent them from taking over the world. Some of these herbs are almost impossible to kill.

Of course, there's no worry if your plants are producing more than you can handle. Clip off the leaves and store them to use during the winter months.

# What are Essential Oils?

Essential oils are concentrated liquids from plants that contain volatile aroma compounds.

They are most commonly used in aromatherapy and consist entirely of botanical matter. Essential oils may also be referred to as volatile oils or ethereal oils. Like herbs, essential oils have many uses that include aromatherapy, pharmacology, food flavoring and perfumery.

Botanical oils should always be used with caution since they do carry potential dangers. Natural products are often healthy, but they must still be adequately dosed. Too much can be toxic. When experimenting with a new oil or trying essential oils for the first time, it's important to carefully follow the directions.

## ***How are Essential Oils Made?***

Essential oils are extracted from the plant by a process called distillation. The plant is cooked with steam so that it breaks down and releases the oils. The steam is cooled and then the water and oil are separated from each other. The oil is also filtered through to ensure its purity.

Distillation is the most popular use for extracting oils since it's easy and effective, but there are other methods that can be used as well.

Sometimes, essential oils can be extracted just by pressing on the plant. For instance, grapes, oranges and lemons have strong smelling juices that can be extracted by pressing on the fruits.

## ***Uses for Essential Oils***

Botanical oils have many uses! They are most commonly used in perfumes, cosmetics, cleaning products and soaps. They may also be added to foods and drinks for flavouring.

We've learned from historic textbooks that essential oils were used for medicinal purposes, primarily to treat skin conditions and certain diseases. In modern times, chemically based medicines have proven to be effective in treating these conditions, and evidence-based research shows no proof that essential oils are effective from a medical standpoint.

Still, essential oils have been drawing in more attention for their ability to act as an alternative medicine.

While we recognize that an essential oil wouldn't be effective at treating an infection or curing cancer, botanical oils may manage symptoms like anxiety and stress, lowering the risk of certain health conditions.

Additionally, essential oils used in massage and aromatherapy can have curative effects on the total health and wellbeing of our bodies.

Even though there may be some uncertainty regarding the healing effects of botanical oils, we can be certain that these oils are much better for our bodies than chemically based products. Using oil-based products may prevent certain cancers and health conditions, so in a way, they can be part of a preventative lifestyle.

For instance, traditional cleaning products contain harsh chemicals that have been linked to various health conditions and especially dangerous for those with allergies and asthma.

Thymol is an essential oil that is contained in all-natural cleaning products, and this ingredient (made from the thyme so many of us grow in our gardens) is safe yet provides the same disinfectant properties as harsher ingredients.

What would you choose for your own home?

In my household, we replaced all harsh cleaners – including our shampoo and dish soap – with natural, homemade products that do the job just as well. It made a tremendous difference in how we slept, our energy levels, our ability to breathe effectively, and even our immune response.

The bottom line is this: while we have yet to uncover all there is to know about essential oils, choosing products that are essential oil based rather than chemically based is a better choice for the environment, our health and our wellbeing.

### Essential Oils and Aromatherapy

Aromatherapy deserves its own spotlight since essential oils are the core of this alternative therapy.

Aromatherapy uses volatile plant materials to alter the person's mind, mood and health. It's true that there is limited research that supports essential oils from a medical

standpoint, but research does show that these oils may have benefits in a therapeutic setting.

People have stated that botanical oils reduce anxiety, enhance energy and aid in short-term memory. Others have attested to essential oils' ability to help with skin conditions, hair loss prevention and relaxation.

To the many people who are comforted, relaxed and perhaps even relieved of various symptoms, scientific research doesn't really matter. If the scientists haven't yet found out what makes these oils work, they will eventually. What matters is that something simple and natural can lead to improved health and cognitive functioning.

Still, we must wonder what it is about essential oils that gives them their healing effects, even if these effects can't be measured (yet) in scientific analyses.

# BURDOCK

Burdock, or the genus *Arctium*, is a biennial plant once popular in Europe as an ingredient in making beer before hops stole the show.

Today, burdock continues to thrive as part of the Japanese pilaf and other Asian dishes. A native of Europe and Northern Asia, burdock is now also found throughout North America.

Even if you think you are not familiar with the plant, chances are that you've encountered them before. Or, you may have seen the burrs of the burdock. Remember those tiny balls that cling to your pants after a walk out in the tall grass? Those are burrs, and they were the inspiration for Velcro.

## ***Cultivation of Burdock***

If you are not lucky enough to have it growing wild in your area, burdock is a fairly easy plant to grow. You are probably already aware of it, though, with its sticky little burrs that catch on your clothes as you walk in tall brush.

Here's how to grow your own:

Burdock is grown from seeds. Prepare some for propagation by soaking them in water overnight. This will enhance their germination rate.

Find an area large enough to grow burdock. In fertile soil, the plant can reach up to 6 feet in height and 3 feet in width, much larger than you will usually see growing wild. It is also better if the spot receives full sun, though burdock can grow in partial shade as well.

Burdock prefers rich and well-draining soil. If the soil doesn't seem rich enough, you can add some compost. You can also till the soil and get rid of stones and rocks that may hinder the growth of the roots. Since the plant may grow very high, tilling the soil up to two feet will help the roots grow longer and help stabilize the plant.

Plant the seeds 1/4 inch deep and at intervals of up to 3 inches. Each row of seeds should be separated by at least a foot. Cover them with seed starting soil up to 3/4 inch thick.

Though burdock is hardy and can grow on its own, you can help it out by watering regularly.

In one or two weeks, you will notice some seedlings. Make sure you weed frequently but carefully to prevent accidentally pulling them out. You also need to thin them out so that there is around 3 to 4 inches of space between the plants. Remove the ones with weak root systems.

As the plant grows, remove the young shoots that develop by simply pulling them out. These can be eaten, though harvesting is typically done at 10 weeks. You also need to prune the young leaves with clippers and prevent the flowers from setting seed by removing them.

### ***Tips on Growing Burdock***

You can use high-nitrogen fertilizer like composted animal manure to promote the plant's growth.

Burdock roots normally grow up to 4 feet long, but there are some varieties that grow up to 9 feet.

Wear a mask or any type of covering for your face to avoid inhaling the seeds' microscopic hairs, which can trigger allergic reactions.

Burdock is a biennial plant, so you can only enjoy its benefits for a couple of years. Roots are harvested during the first year while the seeds are gathered on the second year – yes, this means you need more than one plant since harvesting the roots will kill the plant and you will not get a second year.

### ***Medicinal Uses of Burdock***

Burdock has been used throughout history as an herbal medicine to treat many ailments. It is popular among herbalists as a natural blood cleaner, diaphoretic, and diuretic.

**Works wonder for digestion and elimination** - Burdock is a good source of inulin, which stimulates the appetite and the action of the stomach. It also helps the digestive system and treats stomach and digestive problems. Burdock also aids in cleansing the liver.

**Purifies the blood** - Burdock is one of the best-known bloodpurifying herbs, and has been used for thousands of years to flush waste and toxins out of the bloodstream.

**Say goodbye to skin problems** - Through its blood-cleansing ability, burdock also effectively flushes out the toxins that cause skin diseases like acne, psoriasis, and eczema.

**Fights cancer** - Scientific studies have shown that burdock, as main ingredient of some herbal formulas, can help stop the growth of tumors. Aside from stopping the development and shrinking the size of cancer growths, these herbal formulas also help relieve pain and enhance the body's immunity which cancer patients badly need.

### ***Burdock Leave-on Conditioner***

Burdock has medicinal qualities that are perfect for hair care. It helps strengthen the hair shaft and keeps hair strands moisturized. Burdock has also been found effective against hair loss. It contains mucilage, a gelatinous substance that has polysaccharides and protein, which accounts for its ability to strengthen and condition hair and prevent hair tangles. Mucilage has other medicinal benefits for the body including lowering cholesterol, preventing constipation, and inhibiting pathogenic bacteria from causing intestinal decomposition.

To make this conditioner, you will need three ingredients – **dried hibiscus flowers, dried burdock root and dried marshmallow root**. If you are not growing your own marshmallow and harvesting your own burdock root, you can find these at your local natural health store.

You need some water, too.

The tools you will need are a pot, some plastic wrap, a strainer, a squeeze bottle and a funnel.

Heat **1 cup water** on medium heat. When it starts to simmer, lower the heat and add **20 dried hibiscus flowers**. Let them simmer, with the heat on low, about five minutes. Don't let the water boil. Remove the pot from the heat and scoop out the flowers with a

slotted spoon. Add **3 tablespoons dried burdock root** and **3 tablespoons dried marshmallow root**. Stir so that they go below the surface of the water.

Use a fine mesh strainer to make sure all of the herbs are removed.

Pour the liquid into a plastic squeeze bottle.

After washing and towel drying your hair, squeeze some of this onto your hand and massage it into your hair. Use a comb to gently spread it. Do not wash out the conditioner – leave it in and let your hair dry naturally.

### ***Burdock Root Oil***

Now here is an essential oil that you are not likely to find at your health store, although they may stock dried burdock.

But if you deal with acne or itchy scalp, you will love having this on hand. Add it to face packs, shampoos and conditioners or just dab it directly on areas that need relief.

The only catch is that you will need to harvest your own burdock because it is made with fresh, not dried burdock. You will need **one or two fresh burdock roots** and **vegetable oil**.

Wash the roots in hot water, being sure to get all the dirt off them. You can then either peel and slice them into small pieces with a knife or pound them with a mortar and pestle. If you plan to smash them, give the roots a day to dry out afterwards.

Put the peeled and sliced, or smashed, roots into a glass canning jar and cover them with your favourite vegetable oil. Extra virgin olive oil is a common one to use, but feel free to use whatever you usually have on hand.

Seal the jar and place it in a dark place for 4-6 weeks to let the root infuse. At least once a week, open the lid to release any gas buildup, and then seal it again. When ready, strain out the root pieces and use for skin irritations and acne.

### ***Burdock Root Tea***

As we examined the back yard in our new home, I explained with delight that there was a large burdock patch growing in the back corner. My father looked at me in confusion when I said that it is a healthy and valuable herb. For most people it really is just an annoying weed.

In Japan and in other Asian countries, burdock is eaten as a vegetable and makes a popular tea. Burdock tea may be a bit strong in taste and aroma as compared to other more common herbal teas, but it is definitely healthy.

To make burdock tea, you will need either **2 tablespoons fresh burdock root or 1 tablespoon dried burdock root**, and **3 cups water**.

You will also need to plan ahead since it takes nearly an hour to prepare.

Chop the fresh root, or cut it into thin slivers, if you are using it. Place the fresh or dried root in a stainless steel pot with water. Bring to a boil. Lower the heat and simmer 30 minutes, then remove from the heat, cover and steep for another 20 minutes.

### ***Drying Burdock Root***

If your burdock root harvest has left you with more than you can use, slice it thinly and dry in the sun for about six hours, flipping the pieces over about every hour.

Or roast them in a heavy frying pan without oil on very low heat until dried out – this gives a different flavor from the unroasted root. It will take about ten minutes for the root to turn golden brown. Cool completely and store in an airtight glass jar.

Use this as you would commercially dried burdock root when making tea.