

# Joyful herbs for the darker days

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All of us feel the loss of daylight to a certain extent. For some, it may be occasional sluggishness, less motivation to get outside and exercise, or less of a desire to spend time with friends and family. Others may feel even deeper withdrawal, or experience less control over anxiety and the sometimes overwhelming responsibilities of daily life. To a certain extent, the culture has tried to address this by consistently packing in times of remembrance, celebration, and family during the darkest months of the year – but by the time it's all over (or even during the often stressful holidays), there are still many months of darker days left and it is usually at this time that folks express the desire for more fun, more joy, more light.

Aside from creating internal tension by working the same schedule regardless of season every single week of the year, darkness literally affects our mood, in a pattern that has been fairly well characterized and is known as *seasonal affective disorder*, or SAD. This pattern can carry a significant depression along with it, though most often it is a period of withdrawal, sadness, and perhaps increased anxiety whose chief feature is that it occurs as the daylight wanes.

So what can be done? Naturally, being outside is extremely important. Feeling sunlight directly on the skin, for even 30 minutes a day, can have substantial benefits! Some choose to install and operate full-spectrum lighting in their homes. As an extension of this, folks also supplement with between 1,000 and 4,000 IUs of vitamin D daily. This important nutrient is essential for those who suffer from a seasonal sadness pattern. But there are some specific medicinal plants that can reinforce these sun-seeking impulses, while at the same time buffering the symptoms of sluggishness, sadness, anxiety and withdrawal. All of this put together helps us not only feel better during the winter months, but also perform better at work, play, and family gatherings.

## Pulling out of the “hole”: stronger botanicals for SAD

**St. Johnswort** (*Hypericum perforatum*) has a well-deserved reputation as a good herb for mild to moderate depression, and clinical research has confirmed its effectiveness for this condition. SAD, usually a moderate case, responds extremely well to this plant, which not coincidentally has a long history of solar mythology tied to it. Though also useful for anxious conditions, it is better suited to the depressive side of the winter blues, where it warms, enlivens, and improves circulation. Consider between ½ tsp and 1 tsp (3-5ml) of a good, fresh tincture prepared from the whole buds and flowering tops. This extract can be taken up to 5 times a day – though it should never be consumed alongside conventional medication without checking with an herbalist first.

**Mimosa** (*Albizia julibrissin*) is perhaps a bit less well-known, but is a stellar and powerful plant for supporting darker, sadder moods characterized by apathy and withdrawal. It comes from the flower and bark of a medium-sized tree, and has an astringent and somewhat acrid flavor. The tincture is usually taken at a dose of 30 drops all the way up to 1 tsp (1-5ml) twice a day.

**Rhodiola** (*R. rosea*) is an anti-stress, energy-enhancing tonic. As such, it lessens the pressures our psyches may feel when we are also sluggish or anxious from the changes in daylight. And of all the “stronger” herbs, it has the greatest affinity for the overwhelmed and frazzled type, where it also serves the purpose of enhancing and evening out energy throughout the day. ½ tsp once, or sometimes twice, a day usually suffices to add spark back into a tired life – and sometimes enough spark to start back in to an exercise program, a snowshoe adventure, or that wintertime project you were putting off...

### **Aromatic plants: a daily habit to keep us happy, focused, and “in the flow”**

Plants with strong smells, rich in volatile essential oils, have been used throughout history as ways to facilitate ceremony, mark momentous (large or small) events, reduce the effects of stress on the human system, and spark creative focus. They accomplish this by quite literally balancing the level of internal tension we experience: tension in our internal organs, along our nerves, in our skeletal muscle. Though probably best to consume them daily, they make a more frequent appearance in my life from about mid-September to mid-March – the darker half of the year. All of the plants below can be combined together, are very safe to use alone or in concert with conventional medication, and are perhaps somewhat interchangeable. Find a few that you like, and try to start consuming them regularly *before* mood becomes an issue: it’s always easier to prevent a downside than it is to climb back out of a dark hole.

**Holy Basil** (*Ocimum sanctum*, aka Tulsi) reduces inflammation in the body, buffers the effects of stress, calms anxiety and gladdens the heart – all while tasting delicious as a simple cup of tea! Various teabags prepared with Tulsi are available today, and almost all are delicious, safe, and effective when used habitually (2-3 cups of tea a day). The tincture too can help, when at least ½ tsp is taken twice a day, perhaps alongside other herbs.

**Frankincense** (*Boswellia* species) is a resin from an east African / Arabian tree. It is traditionally burned as incense, but its internal use is also storied and has been receiving a lot of attention over the last decade. It seems very useful at controlling inflammation, especially in nervous system and cardiovascular tissue, but has important mood-balancing effects as well. It is a rich and sensuous ally for the darker days. Typically ¼ tsp to ½ tsp of the “tears” (amber-like resin chunks) are eaten daily.

**Lemon Balm** (*Melissa officinalis*) has a delightful scent that is enlivening and makes for a happy heart. It brews a delicious tea, and its aromatic constituents are antidepressant and very, very useful in anxiety. Clinical research shows that consuming a strong cup of Lemon Balm tea (2TBS of leaf per cup) or its extract (1tsp per dose) lessens anxiety and uplifts the frazzled, overwhelmed person for up to six hours! That said, I usually recommend at least 3 cups or doses a day.

**Rose** (various *Rosa* species, the stronger scented the better) holds a sad heart and nourishes it. In clinic, its specific use centers around trauma, physical or emotional, and the withdrawal and closed-heartedness that can result. But it is also quite applicable in any context where sadness is overwhelming the ability to enjoy and engage life. Typically not used alone, Rose makes an amazing addition to tea blends and extract formulas for sadness and apathy. Use about 1tsp of petals per cup of tea, or 30-60 drops of tincture. If you can find a "rose elixir" (Avena Botanicals makes an amazing one), 5-50 drops can be used as needed to mend a broken heart.

**Pine** (*Pinus* species, often *P. alba* or white pine), along with spruce and fir, is an evergreen that has always been associated with the darker winter months. It's for reasons that are more than celebratory that its fronds are brought indoors to decorate the home when the light is waning: the smell is uplifting, antidepressant, and energizing. It is also a great source of vitamin C and very good for the lungs. I've only ever used a tea of the fresh needles, regardless of species: about 1TBS of chopped needles steeped in a cup of hot water, taken 2-3 times a day.

Finally, **Oats** (*Avena sativa*) is the most nourishing of the bunch. It may be needed for folks who have experienced a SAD pattern for years, or who are perhaps getting worse and worse with every dark season's passing. It also makes a good tonic for those used to burning the candle at both ends – all in all, not the strongest and immediately relieving anxiety and depression, but the secret ingredient for building resistance to stress and weathering the lack of sunlight with greater grace. Typically a tea is made with 2TBS of unripe, dried oat seedheads per cup of hot water – and 3-4 cups are consumed every day.

There is extensive research correlating the use of highly scented plants (think lavender, for example, or peppermint) to less tension, stress, anxiety and sadness. People have consumed these plants in a range of ways: as teas and extracts, but also as aromatherapy essential oil blends, in room diffusers, as incense, or in bath sachets. Other plants, such as white sage, pine, and citrus fruits, are brought into the home for decoration (and their noticeable medicinal effects). One way or another, it does us all a lot of good to share our space and lives with these sweet-smelling herbs: and it may be that the rise in patterns such as SAD in our culture parallels the loss of these allies in our environment. Many of the scented candles used for the holidays are artificially aromatic nowadays, their medicinal effects unclear (and perhaps even detrimental, as they might lead to hypersensitivity symptoms). So consider real plants, wreaths of evergreen fronds, and true potpourri and mulling spices as part of your seasonal rituals: there are good reasons for these customs, and a happy heart may be the most important!