

Making an herbal tincture

Traditional method

What you will need:

Glass jar (mason jars work well) of an appropriate size, and a same-sized measuring cup
80 or 100 proof vodka, preferably organic ('Rain' is one brand)

Fresh or dry herbal material

Muslin or cheesecloth; knife and cutting board

Step one: The Herbs

You will want the highest quality herbs you can get: the strength of the tincture depends on it! If you can grow them organically, be sure to harvest them at the peak of their vibrancy, before any yellowing or damage can occur. Sing or talk to them while you harvest, they love it! Follow your own rhythms and instincts, but in general:

- leaves are harvested under the Sun, before flowering, and just before the Full Moon.
- flowers are harvested under the morning Sun, at their peak, just before the Full Moon.
- barks and twigs are harvested under the Sun, right after the New Moon.
- roots are harvested under the evening Sun, or at night, when the tops of the plants have died back in the Fall or right before the plants come up in the Spring. Harvest just before the New Moon.

You can rinse leaves gently, but don't ever wash flowers. Roots and barks should be well washed and cleaned. Pat dry in a towel before proceeding.

If you are purchasing herbs, only buy organically grown. The residues on commercially grown crops (synthetic pesticides and fertilizers) make them unfit for medicine. If you can, buy them fresh, but dry herbs can make incredible tinctures! Make sure they are of a rich color, deep green or deep brown or fiery orange as it may be – this shows they have been properly dried and stored. They should have a strong smell, even if it's just the smell of 'green'. A small pinch under the tongue should produce a definite effect of some kind. If you can, buy whole herbs and chop them yourself. Herbs stored for six months to a year can still be good, if kept dry and out of the sun, but after a year they should be kept for teas only.

Step two: The Preparation and Tincturing

Once you have obtained your plant material, measure out enough to fill most of your glass jar. Then, lay it out on a cutting board. If it is finely chopped (almost powdered) already, you can just add it to the jar. Otherwise, use a knife (I like crescent-shaped blades) to chop it to a fine consistency. With some roots this may be impossible; just do the best you can. Some seeds and leaves, when dry, are easier in a mortar and pestle.

Once your herb is well chopped or ground, add it to your jar. Tell it that, soon, it will be medicine and will help many people. Then, add enough vodka to cover it completely (this may take a while – be sure to wait for all the alcohol to trickle down), put the lid on the jar, and shake it vigorously for a little while. Store in a cool, dry place away from even indirect sunlight – but don't forget about it! Shake it well every other day.

Step three: Maceration and Straining

When in the jar, the tincture is said to be 'macerating', or steeping. This should continue for at least one Lunar cycle (one month, approximately), at which point it can be strained. Start by placing a strainer (medium mesh) over the mouth of the opened jar. Then, turn the whole thing over into the measuring cup. Wait for most of it to trickle out, then flip the jar back over, take out the wet herbs, and squeeze them through muslin or cheesecloth to get the last bits out (make sure your hands are clean!). Rinse out your jar, and pour the strained tincture back in. Store in a cool, dry, dark place. This tincture can keep for 10 years!

Some additions to the Traditional Method

What you will need:

Two glass jars and a measuring cup
A scale
Grain alcohol (95% pure alcohol)
Distilled water
A calculator
Muslin or cheesecloth; knife and cutting board
Fresh or dry herb material

The Timing:

Harvesting and processing of herbs have always followed seasonal rhythms and cycles. The basic rule is a relationship, termed 'correspondence', that the herb has with its environment and with the universe. The correspondence is understood in terms of strong, universal symbols that resonate within us, the world, and the plant we are working with. The herbalist will strive to evoke layers of images and meaning as he or she interacts with the herbs – you have already seen this in the Traditional Method. Many like to use Elemental correspondences to govern harvesting and processing cycles: when the Sun is in a watery sign, like Cancer, we will harvest and process a watery herb, like Purslane, or Echinacea. This works for Moon signs as well (if not better). Ultimately, what is important isn't memorizing long lists of correspondences, but rather making your own and using them! (for example, telling the story of how well Echinacea fought off your flu last year while you make the tincture can have dramatic results).

The Weight-to-Volume Ratio:

To get a consistent tincture from batch to batch, it is of course necessary to keep obtaining herbs of consistently high quality. It can also help to use the weight-to-volume ratio, a simple technique to ensure a repeatable process. Basically, it relates the weight of the herb you are using to the volume of alcohol you will steep it in. So, if you have 5 ounces of Echinacea root and 15 ounces of alcohol, you are making a 1 to 3 (1:3) tincture, because for every one part of herb (by weight) you are using 3 parts of alcohol (by volume). Chop your herb as usual, but this time, weigh it before putting it in the jar. Then, decide what you want your ratio to be. *Fresh* herbs do well at 1:3, or 1:2. *Dry* herbs are usually 1:4, but can be anything you want. Just remember, the higher the Volume number, the weaker the tincture. Thus, a 1:5 is roughly twice as strong as a 1:10.

Solubility:

Certain herbs, we have found, produce a stronger tincture when they are steeped in an alcohol that is more concentrated than 80 or 100 proof vodka (which is 40 or 50% alcohol). We obtain this alcohol by mixing pure grain alcohol (which is 95%, or 190 proof) with distilled water until we obtain the right percentage. This isn't to say that all herbs do well with more alcohol in their tincture – some are damaged by too much! The term for the percentage of alcohol that the herb prefers to be tinctured in is *solubility*.

If you are mixing pure grain alcohol and distilled water to make a tincture, first determine your weight-to volume ratio. Weigh your herb, and multiply it by the volume number to determine what volume of mixture you'll need. The amount of alcohol required is given by:

$$(V \times S) : 95$$

where V is total volume and S is solubility. Measure out the alcohol, then make up the difference in the total by adding distilled water.

Bottling your Tincture and Keeping Records

After being strained, you need to bottle your tinctures if you're going to give them to others. Amber bottles work best at keeping the light out, cobalt works also. You should also obtain a small measuring cup, or better yet, a graduated cylinder.

Pour a small amount (2 or 3 ounces) of tincture into your measuring cup. Then slowly pour this into the glass bottle, stopping right as the mouth of the bottle begins to curve into the neck. This allows for ample 'shaking room', to keep the tincture lively.

Always label your tinctures clearly; you don't want to forget what's in the bottle and have to guess around later. The label should include:

- Name of herb, both common and Latin (if possible, to avoid confusion)
- Fresh or Dry, and the part(s) used in the tincture
- Date of Tincturing (and Moon / Sun sign if desired)
- Percent of alcohol by volume (40% for 80 proof vodka, 50% for 100 proof)
- Weight-to-Volume ratio, if applicable
- a Batch Number, if you plan on more than one batch per year.

It is also a good idea to copy down all the details of the label in a special 'tincture Recipe book'. Not only does this echo the fine tradition of the Herbal Grimoire, but it also is a good record of what's been happening in case the label on your tincture was damaged or unclear. It's also a great place to write down notes and ideas for each herb, to improve the process next time!