

Sustainable Herbal Treatments for the Common Cold

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Very often, I see people reaching for the goldenseal and osha at the first sign of a cold. While I agree completely that respiratory infections should be treated swiftly because they can progress rapidly, I am more likely to begin with substantial doses of “food herbs” rather than more potent, ‘at risk’ ones. What do I mean by “food herb”? Herbs commonly used as culinaries and wild edibles are some of the most effective and sustainable remedies we possess. For colds, my favorites are garlic, ginger, thyme, sage, rosemary, elder, pine or fir needles, peppermint, horseradish and marshmallow. Throw in a few invasive species like honeysuckle flowers (*Lonicera japonica*) and ground ivy and you’ve got plenty of weeds for your needs.

One principle that’s very important to pay attention to especially when the respiratory system is involved is the principle of energetics. If you have a cold – characterized by often copious clear or white mucus, pale face and tongue, chills, desire for hot foods – you will want to use the typical heating remedies to balance, or warm up, that cold. Ginger, garlic and small amounts of cayenne in food and especially soup are wonderful here! On the other hand, if your condition is characterized by heat symptoms – redness in face, tongue or throat, yellow or green mucus, particularly if it’s not easily expectorated, feeling hot, headachy, flushed – and you take the ‘standard’ cayenne treatment you will not be happy, for the herb will exacerbate your sore throat and other heat symptoms. Try cooling herbs like marshmallow, plantain, or mullein leaves.

Similarly, for dry mucus membranes, use a nice moistening herb like marshmallow root. A healthy mucus coating is critically important to the health of the respiratory system, and we have an abundance of immune activity in that mucus. Marshmallow soothes inflamed mucosa and helps replenish this protective immunity. Excessive mucus, on the other hand, can be a symptom of ‘dampness’ and common garden sage is a great remedy for this. Aromatic herbs like thyme, rosemary and pine are excellent expectorants that help loosen mucus and make it easier to cough out. Because tea provides a lot of contact with the mouth and throat, this is my favorite way to use these herbs. The hot water also loosens mucus, and a little honey is soothing, both part of the medicine. Tinctures or capsules will not be as effective as tea. For clogged sinuses, try breathing a potent tea of thyme and/or peppermint with a towel over your head. Amazing!

When you use gentle “food herbs”, you can take as much of the remedy as necessary for relief. You will mostly feel better while sipping that hot cup of tea, so keep sipping! A few quarts of tea per day in an acute situation is not too much. When you use stronger herbs like osha, over-doing the remedy is possible. They are potent not only in their action, but in their energy—goldenseal is cold and dry, and osha is hot and dry. Another consideration is to look at where these herbs grow. Both goldenseal and osha tend to grow far from human settlement, in the deep forest and rugged mountains. Better to stick close to home—use the plants in our gardens and yards.

What about Echinacea? How could I write something about colds and leave out the most popular cold remedy! Echinacea is great for stimulating immune response, especially when the lymphatics under the jaw are getting sore or swollen. Use organically cultivated Echinacea root, flowers or seeds (it's 'at risk' too!) in frequent doses when you feel your immune system start to kick in or you are exposed to airborne pathogens. Here a tincture is quite appropriate, up to a teaspoon every couple hours. But to soothe the symptoms of a cold, and help the body resolve the infection and get back to balance, by all means sip that tea! Keep it warm in a thermos, add a little mint and honey, carry it around with you, enjoy!