



## Nature's Medicine Cabinet

**Herbs not only taste good, they can also treat common ailments. Discover more uses for what grows in your garden.**

By Bruce Burnett, CH

Find instructions for making these natural remedies: Herbed Carrot Soup (beta-carotene rich)

Bouquet Garni (easy-to-remove, salt-free flavor for your next stew)

Laurel Bay Mint Bath (to ease tired muscles pharmaceutical free)

Roast Potatoes with Rosemary and Garlic (to improve circulation)

Calendula Cream (an effective skin conditioner)

“Let food be your medicine and medicine be your food,” were the words of Hippocrates, the “Father of Medicine,” in 400 B.C. What was true 2,400 years ago is even truer today with the typical American diet being high in processed foods that contaminate our bodies with anarchist-sounding rogues named “free radicals.” Jump to more about: Thyme, Sage, Calendula, Bay, Rosemary Free radicals are the leading villains in the aging process and are a major cause of age-related diseases such as arthritis, heart disease and cancer.

Although fruits and vegetables have been traditionally regarded as the best dietary source of free-radical fighting antioxidants, a recent report by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) in the Journal of Agriculture and Food Chemistry revealed that many common kitchen herbs have higher antioxidant activity than fruits and vegetables.

A quick tour of your pantry and garden will help you get started on the path to good taste, nutrition and well-being.

### Thyme

Pun-provoking thyme is one of the most popular and commonly used culinary herbs.

It grows well in most climates and prefers a light, sandy, well-drained soil in full sun. It's one of the easiest herbs to grow in containers, but it's quite susceptible to root rot and fungal disease if grown in soil that's too moist or heavy.

Thyme requires no fertilizer and grows well with lavender and sage. This herb will attract bees to your garden, but it will repel cabbage worms.

Propagate thyme by seed, cuttings, root division or layering. Its fine root system makes it more difficult to transplant than most herbs. It should be moved well in advance of any risk of freezing; a layer of sand applied on the soil will help protect the delicate roots from frost.

Common thyme (*Thymus Vulgaris*) is the most-preferred species for use in the kitchen and in essential-oil products.

Common thyme includes both English—or German or winter thyme—and the narrower-leafed French thyme. The latter is the sweeter of the two and certainly preferred in French cuisine. Both are perennials, but French thyme is less robust than the English variety and may require some winter protection.

Today, thyme's well-documented antiseptic and tonic qualities make it the ideal immune-system booster. It's particularly effective for chest infections such as bronchitis, whooping cough and pleurisy.

Thyme may be taken as a tea in a natural cough syrup found at your local health-food store. The essential oil of thyme, however, must not be taken internally as it can destroy intestinal flora and cause digestive and nutrient absorption problems.



Some herbalists recommend a handful of dried thyme—in a porous bag or cheesecloth—added to bath water to ease back spasms.

#### Sage

Sage is a hardy (to zone 4) perennial that should be watered frequently until it's well established; it can then be watered infrequently.

The seed doesn't store well and although it germinates quickly, it takes about two years for the bush to grow to the productive stage. Therefore, it's better to propagate sage from cuttings.

Medicinally, sage is an antiseptic and astringent, and is recommended as a mouthwash for canker sores, sore gums and sore throats. The astringency of the herb makes it beneficial in cases of mild diarrhea. Sage is a digestive tonic and stimulant.

In his book, *The Green Pharmacy*, James A. Duke, Ph.D., claims he has identified six anti-inflammatory compounds in sage and advocates its use in cases of carpal tunnel syndrome. He also extols the herb for treating Alzheimer's disease (British researchers have confirmed that sage inhibits the enzyme that breaks down acetylcholine, thus preserving the compound that seems to help prevent and treat Alzheimer's), asthma, bad breath, baldness, body odor, gingivitis, tonsillitis, wrinkles and yeast infections.

Sage has an affinity for other muscular Mediterranean herbs such as rosemary, oregano and thyme. The combination produces a rich flavor in robust, winter soups and stews. Also, fresh sage contains delicately flavored oils, which are a delight in contrast to the pungent taste of dried sage that has languished in the kitchen cabinet too long.

Sage contains potent antioxidants that retard spoilage, endorsing the herb's traditional use as a sausage preservative.

#### Calendula

The sunny face of calendula, or pot marigold, is a year-round delight in our herb beds, especially in the fall, when other plants are succumbing to declining light and temperature. This very hardy, beautiful and useful herb will continue to bloom until the first frost.

One appealing Greek legend concerning calendula tells the story of four wood nymphs who fell in love with Apollo, the god of the sun.

The nymphs became so jealous of each other that they began neglecting their duties to Apollo's sister, the goddess Diana. She turned them into four dull-white marigolds. This upset Apollo and he countered by sending down his most brilliant golden rays to color them.

Calendula prefers a rich loam and full sun, but will grow in most soils and partial shade. A self-seeding annual, it can become quite invasive if grown in ideal conditions.

Medicinally, calendula has proven itself as an effective skin conditioner for cuts, scrapes, wounds and burns. It's beneficial for diaper rash and for soothing soreness associated with breast-feeding.

Calendula petals added to a salad not only enliven it with color, but also contribute nutrients. The herb is a good source of lutein, a powerful antioxidant. It's particularly effective in combating age-related macular degeneration, the leading cause of irreversible blindness in the United States.

Calendula also makes a delightful tea, especially when combined with lemon balm. One caveat: If you're allergic to ragweed, you might also react to pot marigold.

#### Bay

The death of a bay tree was historically regarded as a portent of evil or pending disaster.

In *Richard II*, Shakespeare wrote: "Tis thought the king is dead; we will not stay/ The bay trees in our country are all wither'd."

In the garden, the bay tree is a tender perennial and extended freezing temperatures will kill it. Although the bay will grow to 60 feet in its native Mediterranean habitat, in a temperate or cooler climate it's best grown in a pot so it can be moved to a protected area during the coldest months.



Bay laurel is used medicinally primarily to treat upper digestive tract disorders, having a similar effect as spearmint—cooling and soothing. It's also used to ease muscular aches and pains.

Bay leaves are an effective insect repellent; they can be placed in closets and drawers, as well as in flour canisters to deter weevils.

The taste of bay is tangy and slightly peppery. It enhances the flavor of just about everything, but especially soups, stews and tomato-based dishes. Pot roasts and shellfish should almost never be served without bay. It even improves the taste of custard sauces if the milk is scalded with one or two leaves.

#### Rosemary

Rosemary is a perennial in zones 6 to 8, but even mature plants will not survive a severe frost. If one is forecast, mulch your plants heavily. To avoid mildew, plant your rosemary where it will enjoy good air circulation. With adequate light, rosemary can be grown indoors and can easily be cultivated as a topiary.

The name comes from the Latin *Ros maris* or "dew of the sea." It was later called "Rose of Mary" or "rosemary" in honor of the Virgin Mary because it supposedly was the bush that sheltered the Holy Family on their flight to Egypt.

Rosemary traditionally symbolizes memory and in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Ophelia cries, "There's rosemary, that's for remembrance, pray you love remember." Rosemary is also entwined into brides' head wreaths to help couples remember their wedding vows.

Medicinally, studies show that rosemary improves circulation, especially to the head, helping to relieve headaches and improve concentration and memory.

It also helps combat bacterial and fungal infections, and makes a good antiseptic gargle for sore throats, gum problems and canker sores. As with all herbs, do not use medicinally when pregnant except under the direction of a doctor.

In the kitchen, rosemary is superb with lamb, pork and poultry. It also turns plain, old spuds into a gourmet dish.

According to the American Dietetic Association, free radicals in your body are like rust on your car; the same oxidation damages cells and contributes to aging. Antioxidants reduce oxidation (by neutralizing the free radicals), help increase immune function and lessen the risk of infection and disease. So, grow those herbs for good taste and good health!

About the Author: Bruce Burnett is an award-winning writer, a chartered herbalist and author of *Herb Wise: Growing, Cooking, Wellbeing* (HerbWise, 2002). Contact Bruce Burnett through his website at [www.herbwiseproducts.com](http://www.herbwiseproducts.com)