

The Fine Art of Herbal Tea *Betsy Bancroft, RH 2012*

Why tea?

Humans have made tea for more centuries than we can count. Teamaking can be as humble as placing a sprig of mint in a jar of water, or as elaborate as the highly-developed Japanese tea ceremony or an English High Tea. In any case, the preparation of tea is a beautiful, simple ritual of care for oneself or one's loved ones. It is a communion of the elements of the world: the plants of the earth, the water, the fire to heat the water, and the fragrance wafting up in the steam to mingle with the air. Tea is undoubtedly one of the most enjoyable and healthful beverages we have.

Taking one's herbs in a liquid base can also be an important part of the medicine. For the urinary system, water increases flow through the kidneys, bringing in the goodness of the herbs and flushing out waste. When we have a cold, the expectorant action of herbs like thyme, sage or mullein is very much facilitated by the hot liquid, helping to break up mucus congestion.

Infusions- the method of choice for leaves, flowers and ground up herbs. If herbs are ground up, even roots and barks can be infused. Place herbs in a jar, French press or other device such as a tea ball, cover with hot water and cap or cover. Steep the herbs for 10 to 30 minutes, depending on how strong you would like your brew. Longer steeping brings out more flavor and medicinal potency, but can also bring out more bitterness in herbs like chamomile.

Decoctions – usually used for roots, barks, and seeds. Herbs are placed in a pot, covered with water, the lid put on, and brought to boil. Watch carefully because it will boil over if you don't catch it. Turn down the heat and simmer the tea for 10-15 minutes, then turn off the heat and let it steep.

For tea blends with both roots/barks and leaves/flowers, decoct the woodier plant parts first, then add the leaves/flowers after you turn off the heat. Keep the two groups of herbs separate before they're brewed. Alternatively, you can grind up the roots and barks, which will make it easier to extract their flavors in an infusion, but the shelf life will be shorter.

Flavors

Citrus/lemon – lemon balm, lemon thyme, lemon verbena, lemon peel, orange peel, tangerine peel, rose hips, dried fruits. These herbs tend to be on the sour side and have a cooling, relaxing, uplifting effect on us. Many of them also benefit digestion. Citrus-flavored herbs combine well with minty and herby tasting herbs and can also be great in small amounts with earthy or pungent herbs.

Minty – peppermint, spearmint, other flavored mints, pennyroyal. Mints have powerful flavors that can be very useful to mask some less-palatable tasting herbs. They are helpful for digestive problems and help clear mental focus. They combine best with herby flavors and sometimes pungent herbs like ginger.

Herby/leafy – many nutritious herbs like nettles, dandelion leaf, horsetail, alfalfa, raspberry leaf, borage, red clover, violet leaf and oatstraw fall into this category. These herbs can make up the bulk of a blend with other, stronger-tasting herbs to lend them more flavor. Other relaxing herbs like chamomile, agrimony, passionflower, st johnswort and linden are also mild and ‘herby’ in taste.

Earthy/rooty – dandelion root, burdock root, sassafras rootbark, chaga mushroom, astragalus root, marshmallow root. Well-suited to decoction as winter tonic brews, earthy roots combine well with dried fruits like hawthorn and pungent spices that help keep us warm in winter and perk up our metabolism.

Pungent – spices like ginger, cinnamon, cardamom, fenugreek and clove. Warming in nature, these herbs are best known in chai blends. In smaller amounts, they can combine very well with citrus/lemon, licoricey, herby or earthy roots. A great combination that Celestial Seasons made for years was cinnamon with rose hips. Spices can also help mask stronger tasting medicinal herbs and serve as catalysts to increase their effectiveness.

Licoricey – licorice root, anise hyssop, licorice mints, anise or fennel seed. Many of these are wonderful digestive herbs especially helpful for gas. These herbs also combine very well with the herby/leafy group and pungent spices.

Savory – thyme, sage, rosemary, oregano, hyssop and other culinary herbs can be stronger flavored in tea than cooking. They benefit not only digestion, but often the immune system as well. In medicinal teas they combine well with more herby or lemony tasting herbs.

Tonics

Tonic teas incorporate preventive remedies and nutritive herbs. Look to your own and your family’s health history to find problems you may want to prevent. There are wonderful herbal tonics for each system of the body:

- Cardiovascular – hawthorn, rose, linden
- Urinary – nettles, goldenrod, agrimony
- Digestive – dandelion, ginger, chamomile
- Respiratory – astragalus, hyssop, mullein
- Endocrine – eleuthero, ashwagandha, licorice
- Nervous – oats, chamomile, st johnswort
- Liver – dandelion, artichoke, nettle
- Lymphatics – burdock root, calendula, violet

Creating a good tasting tea even with some not-so-great tasting herbs: Get to know the flavor of the herb(s) that you want to incorporate into a palatable tonic. Make a cup of tea using only one herb at a time. The cups need only be enough tea to get a sense of the taste.

You can add other herbs with similar actions yet taste good. Even though you dilute the specific, or more potent herb, because the herbs all have similar action they support one another and hopefully create synergy. Example, for a stronger-tasting expectorants like elecampane, thyme or hyssop, add mild and sweet flavored herbs like mullein, red clover, elder, fennel or anise seed, licorice, catnip. Another example is to add chamomile, lemon balm and/or linden flower to skullcap or passionflower. Flowers like rose or lavender are also lovely here.

You can add herbs from flavor groups that seem compatible with the taste of your chosen remedy. For example, with a pungent herb like chaste berry, add something earthy like

burdock and/or dandelion root and sour and pungent herbs like orange peel, ginger, rose hips. These herbs can all be decocted together.

To cover up a bitter herb like artichoke leaf, horehound, or motherwort, a combination of mild tasting herbs (herby category) and some more flavorful tastes like minty, savory or pungent herbs can work quite well. For example, if you'd like to make a menopause tonic with motherwort and sage, include mild flavored herbs like red clover, raspberry leaf, lemon balm and perhaps a spice like cinnamon.

Serving the tea with some fruit juice, honey, maple syrup or stevia can also make the flavor more palatable to folks who are not used to the flavors of herbs. Fruit juices like lemon or blueberry can also enhance the nutrition and medicine of the tea.

Blending, packaging, labeling

Blend your teas in small batches until you perfect your recipe. Mix the herbs in a large bowl and use a canning funnel to help fill your containers. If there are heavy, denser herbs and fluffy ones in the blend, they will tend to make layers rather than stay evenly mixed. If you separate this blend into smaller containers, use a spoon to get an equal amount of each herb.

A note about flowers: especially if you are making tea for someone who is feeling a bit sad or has been somehow hurt, be sure to include flowers in the tea. Not only are they visually beautiful (be sure to package the tea so they can be seen!), nothing uplifts the soul like flowers. Examples are lavender, rose, chamomile, calendula, mullein, red clover, mint, borage, bee balm etc.

For gifts:

Recycled jars with paper or fabric scraps and ribbon around the cap

Festive paper folded into pouches or any shape that can temporarily contain the tea

Cellophane bags tied decoratively

Ideally all herbs should be kept in glass jars out of direct sunlight. A dark cabinet or closet, or amber jars is best, but as long as the jars aren't in a window it's OK. Glass jars keep volatile oils in and pests out.

Always label your tea blends, whether for your own brews or for gifts. Include both ingredients and the date you put it together. A journal or notebook provides a place to record observations, notes for next batch like 'a little less ginger'.

Blends

Meadow Blend – peppermint or spearmint, alfalfa, red clover, nettle, raspberry leaf

Roots & Fruits – dandelion root, burdock root, hawthorn berry, chicory root, sassafras root bark, dried elderberries, orange peel

Earthy Chai – roasted dandelion root, cinnamon bark, cardamom pods, ginger root, licorice root, clove

Lemon Mint – lemon balm, mint, lemon basil, catnip

Evening Tea – linden flower, lemon balm, chamomile, rose petal

Stuffy Nose Tea – elderflower, catnip, mullein leaf, hyssop, sweet goldenrod, plantain leaf