Time for tea

Boost your wellbeing this autumn and winter with delicious herb and fruit infusions

Feature Kate Smith

As well as giving us an abundance of fruit and vegetables, autumn also provides us with tasty ingredients for infusions to promote our wellbeing and that you can easily make yourself. However, you need a little basic knowledge before you start to make your own. Pamela Spence, medical herbalist, has spent many years studying herbs and created her own tea recipes. She often prescribes herbal teas to her patients to treat a number of conditions. But herbal teas can also be a tasty, refreshing alternative to caffeinated hot drinks.

fennel, thyme, sage, rosemary, oregano and lavender, are all common herbs that contain lots of natural aromatic oils and give a good, strong flavour. You also need to think about why you are making the tea. Do you need it because of the medicinal value of the herbs? Or are you just looking for a nicely flavoured drink? You also need to consider the overall character of the tea – fruity, minty, lemony or floral? As the weather turns colder, warming spices become really popular – cinnamon, cardamom or ginger. When it comes to healing teas, choose the basic plant according

Herb and fruit teas are good for you and taste particularly good when the ingredients come fresh from your own garden or are foraged from the wild. If they are harvested at the right time and gently dried you can make delicious infusions from herbs, flowers and fruits. According to Pamela Spence, Medical Herbalist and owner of The Carrick Clinic in Ayrshire, Scotland, one of the most important things to consider is how the herbs are dried.

Herbs keep their flavour better when they are hand-dried and have not gone through industrial processing

Pamela, is it really worth making your own herb and fruit teas when the supermarket shelves are full of so many different varieties?
PAMELA SPENCE: Definitely. In teabags the herbs are chopped up so finely that they can often only provide enough taste in the cup with the help of other added flavourings. Mechanical harvesting destroys the delicate oil cells in the plants and this releases the aromatic oils during processing, which are what gives the herb flavour. On the other hand, leaves and flowers that are kept whole retain their flavour for longer.
So, infusions of wild and garden herbs don't need any artificial flavourings, then?
PAMELA SPENCE: Exactly. Although you may want to mix several herbs together to get a good flavour as some will be stronger than others. A good basic tea mix is generally made up with 50% of the one or two main plants. The remaining 50% can be a mix of decorative plants or other herbs and fruits that complement the main taste.

Lemon balm, lemon verbena, peppermint, to its effect on the body – for example fennel for indigestion, peppermint for a cold and so on. You can make special blends to ease coughs and colds or to strengthen the immune system.
That is relatively simple if you use garden herbs, but how do I know which wild herbs are suitable for teas?
PAMELA SPENCE: It is extremely important that you are very sure what you are picking before you harvest. If you are not sure, get a good wild flower guidebook and start to learn. You can also contact your local medical herbalist – they will usually run herb walks or foraging courses locally to you. You can find your local herbalist by going to the National Institute of Medical Herbalists website and using the 'find a herbalist' section. The key thing is that you must never take a risk!
Is it still worth harvesting herbs in autumn for drying?
PAMELA SPENCE: There is an optimal time to pick each plant when the content of essential oils is at its highest. ▶

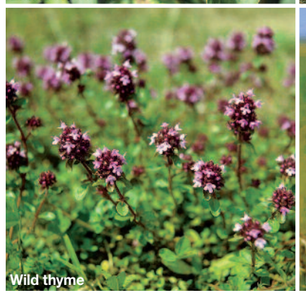
Bunches of herbs may look lovely tied together and hanging upside down, but this is not always the best drying method. Sunlight has a detrimental effect on the active ingredients in the drying plants and, in rainy spells, high humidity can promote rotting where stems are tied together. You can use a special drying cabinet which lets warm air circulate to keep the temperature constant and remove moisture. The flowers and leaves are carefully spread over wooden frames covered by fine mesh through which the air flows. This method of drying is quick and means that the ingredients retain their colour and flavour better. This is particularly important for moist herbs like mallow and mullein because they are very prone to absorbing humidity. We talk to Pamela Spence about the best ways to dry herbs at home.

Elderberries

Meadowsweet

Lime

Rosehips


Wild thyme

Mullein

Garden sage

Blackcurrants

Photo Suttons Seeds

That means that it will have the best flavour. Often this is just before the plant flowers. For roots, dandelion root, for example, the best time is always in autumn, when the energy of the plant is going back down into the roots for winter. For me, spring and summer are definitely the busiest times for harvesting and drying plants. Of course, you can also use herbs fresh from your garden when they are in season – that's the way I like to use herbs the best. There is no loss of aromatic oils at all in that case! Just pick a sprig of the plant, wash it and put it in a teapot or mug with boiled water.

If you are picking fruit you can use blueberries, wild strawberries, elderberries and blackberries as soon as they are ripe. In autumn you can gather sloes and rosehips. Although I find that most people prefer to keep their sloes to make gin with!

The quality of a tea mixture depends to a great extent on a quick drying process. What are your options if you don't have any suitable drying space?

PAMELA SPENCE: Even the smallest airing cupboard can be ideal because it is warm and dry. If you are lucky enough to have an AGA or similar then the very coolest oven is a great place to dry your herbs. Even a conventional oven can help. Drying leaves and flowers takes just a few hours at a maximum of 40 degrees. You need to leave the oven door ajar to let the moisture out and this also makes sure that the air continues to circulate. With fruit the drying process takes longer – which makes sense because pieces of fruit are thicker.

What do you need to watch out for when you store the dried herbs and fruit?

PAMELA SPENCE: Light destroys the active ingredients so try to keep your dried herbs in a dry, dark place. You can use glass jars to store herbs in – dark coloured glass is best but clear glass is fine if you keep them in a closed cupboard. You can also paint the outside of your glass jars which looks pretty. You could also use cardboard boxes and paper or linen bags. In my clinic, all the herbs are stored in brown paper bags with my most popular recipes premixed in glass kilner jars. Just don't use plastic as it doesn't allow the herbs to breath, moisture gets trapped and rot can set in.

But the most important thing is that you experiment with tastes and find ones that you enjoy! And, of course, that you take frequent breaks for a nice cup of tea!

Gentle medicines that strengthen and protect

EASING COLDS AND RESPIRATORY AILMENTS

Elderberries are prized for their immune-boosting vitamins and also their vegetable dyes. The raw berries can upset the stomach so must be cooked or dried before being eaten.

Meadowsweet is the predecessor of the well-known painkiller aspirin. Its flowers contain salicylic acid and help reduce inflammation, fevers and are often used by herbalists for reflux. The flowers of the lime tree species are an old home remedy for feverish colds and coughs. They can also calm nervousness and anxiety.

Rosehips are rich in vitamin C, vegetable dyes, fruit acids and minerals. They are an excellent source of vitamin C and help to support the immune system.

Like its big brother, the common thyme, wild thyme is also an excellent herb for easing coughs, colds and sore throats.

A tea made from mullein flowers loosens thick mucus, and can help to alleviate hoarseness and tickly coughs. An oil of the flowers is also a traditional remedy for earache.

Blackcurrants are full of vitamins that help the immune system to function. They are very astringent and this helps to tone up the mucous membranes of the body and can help stop diarrhoea. Some research suggests that they may even have anti-cancer activity in some cases.

Garden sage has long been used to soothe throat infections. Taken hot it can promote sweating (which is helpful in combating colds) while taken cold it can help to reduce hormonal flushes.

The abundant mucilage in wild mallow flowers protects the mucous membranes in cases of inflammation of the mouth and throat. It is a very useful way to soothe heartburn and indigestion.

Melissa

Camomile

Raspberries

Marigold

Peppermint

GASTROINTESTINAL PROBLEMS

German camomile (not to be confused with the much larger Roman camomile) is one of our most ancient medicinal plants. For many generations it has been used to alleviate stomach cramps, flatulence, irritable bowel and anxiety. It can also be used externally for skin ailments and wound healing.

As well as its calming effect on the nerves, lemon balm also promotes digestion and eases flatulence. Used externally, extracts of this medicinal plant have an antibacterial and virus-inhibiting effect. Herbalists often use it for cold sores.

Raspberry leaves are rich in tannins and, when brewed as tea, can help to reduce diarrhoea and soothe sore throats. The leaves are also commonly used by pregnant women in the last few weeks before labour. Dried raspberries can add a lovely flavour to fruit teas. The cheery orange flowers of the marigold do much more than add colour to a herbal infusion. It has long been used as an anti-inflammatory and wound healer and is a key ingredient in traditional ointments and skincare creams.

Peppermint has a soothing action on the digestive system and helps to ease indigestion. It is often the first choice to alleviate flatulence, nausea and stomach cramps.

Relaxing infusion for long autumn and winter evenings

Ingredients: 25g lemon verbena or lemon balm, 20g apple slices, dried and cut into pieces and rubbed in Bourbon vanilla powder, 15g rosehips, 10g marigolds, 10g slices of fresh or dried ginger, 10g cinnamon sticks, broken into pieces (small photo), 10g cardamom, crushed in the pod with pestle and mortar, 5g sunflower blossoms. If you like all things chocolatey, you can replace the ginger with cocoa husks (from a health food shop). This amount makes around 30 litres of tea

Preparation: Chop up 3-4 tablespoons of the tea mixture and pour 1 litre of hot water over it. Place a lid on the pot, leave for 5 minutes and stir several times. Infusion time: 10 minutes. Serving suggestion: Pour tea through a fine sieve, sweeten with honey if required – and enjoy.

Cough relief tea

Ingredients: 50g ribwort plantain, 30g oregano, 10g mallow flowers, 10g mullein flowers. To make it more anti-bacterial you can add 10g of thyme sprigs, but reduce the quantity of ribwort plantain to 40g. The mixture will make around 30 litres of tea

Preparation: Pour 1 litre of hot water over 2-3 tablespoons of the chopped tea mixture. Infusion time: 5 minutes. Sweeten with honey which is also anti-bacterial and can help to soothe the throat.

Use: Drink one cup three times a day as long as needed. ▶

Lemon verbena (Aloysia triphylla) enhances any tea infusion with its delicious fresh lemon flavour. The leaves retain their flavour for a long time, even when dried. The plants are easy to cultivate and grow as small shrubs in sunny locations. They must be kept frost-free over the winter, so it is easier to keep lemon verbena as a container plant.

Children's favourite – fruit tea with tasty vanilla apples

Ingredients: 30g apple slices, a little Bourbon vanilla powder, 20g hibiscus flowers e.g. from Whittard, 20g rosehips, 10g plums or prunes, 10g dried elderberries, 10g dried blackcurrants

Preparation: Chop the apple slices finely and flavour with Bourbon vanilla (see small photo). You can also use ground cinnamon instead of vanilla. Cut the prunes into small pieces. Pour 1 litre of hot water over 4 tablespoons of the fruit mixture and leave to infuse for at least 15 minutes.

Serving suggestion: Pour tea through a sieve and enjoy hot or cold. If required, sweeten with a little honey. Children love fishing the apple pieces and berries out of the cup and eating them.

Rose Petal Tea

Ingredients: 60g Moroccan mint, 10g peppermint, 20g scented rose blossoms. If you like, you can add 10g dried jasmine flowers to the mixture. You can also halve the quantities of the ingredients, because 100g of this mixture is enough to make around 30 litres of tea

Preparation: Pour 1 litre of hot water over 2-3 tablespoons of the mixture. Do not chop the ingredients. The roses will unfurl in the glass teapot and look really beautiful. Infusion time: 5 minutes.

Use: Use at any time as a feel-good tea or to ease tension headaches or indigestion.

You can find even more information about herbal teas in Brigitte Mar's book 'Healing Herbal Teas' published by Basic Health Publications, www.brigittemars.com

The best infusions are well prepared

1 Good quality. You can recognise good quality when flowers and leaves retain most of their original colours. Properly dried herbs will retain their aromatic qualities well.

2 Crushing. Crush the herbs only shortly before infusing either by hand or use a pestle and mortar for hard ingredients such as fennel and cardamom.

3 Use the right amount. In general 2-3 tablespoons (around 5g) is about the right amount of crushed herbs for 1 litre of water. But experiment and find out what you like best.

4 Brewing. Good water for tea is soft, which means it has no limescale. This allows the flavours in the tea to fully develop. If you can, use spring water or filtered water. Quickly bring the water to the boil and then wait 2-3 minutes before pouring it over the herbs.

5 Preserve flavour. After pouring on the hot water, immediately put a lid on your teapot so that the essential oils do not evaporate.

6 Stir. Halfway through the infusion time stir the mixture, to ensure that the water reaches all the ingredients evenly.

7 Filter the tea. A fine sieve will catch the solid ingredients which can often be used to make a second, weaker infusion.

8 Sweeten tea. Most herbal and fruit infusions won't need to be sweetened if the balance of flavours is right. However, with cough-relieving teas a spoonful of honey can really help to soothe a sore throat.

SAFETY TEXT

Some of these recipes may not be suitable for pregnant or breastfeeding women or for very young children. Please check with your local herbalist by contacting the National Institute of Medical Herbalists if you are unsure. If symptoms persist, please contact your doctor or other healthcare provider for advice.

GET IN TOUCH

Contact Pamela Spence at www.pamelaspence.co.uk or at her Carrick Clinic, www.carrickclinic.co.uk. Find a localist herbalist at www.nimh.org.uk.
Hibiscus flowers are available from www.whittard.co.uk/tea/loose_tea/hibiscus_flowers