

MATERIA  MEDICA  
MONTHLY

Your Path to Mastery  
in the Art of Herbal Medicine

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**Volume #: 14**

**Pathways to Herbal Mastery**

## Pathways to Herbal Mastery

I remember being at an herbal conference and listening to a lecture given by one of my personal herbal heroes Paul Bergner. The title of his class was “How to Become a Master Herbalist in 30 years or more.”

That really struck me.

It made me think about how to have an overall *strategy* for how to become a truly successful and effective herbal practitioner. Oftentimes it’s important for us all to take a step back and look at our lives as a whole, and specifically, as herbalists, to reflect upon our plant path- to assess where we have been, where we currently are, and most importantly, what our next steps are.

I heard it once that there’s a saying in Montana that goes, “the best time to have the map is before you enter the woods.” I think that saying can translate into a lot of areas of life. As herbalists, it’s critically important to have some sort of map, some framework that will guide you towards learning the essential skills, strategies, principles and practices that will make you an incredible herbal practitioner.

And by herbal practitioner, that can look a wide variety of ways. Perhaps you want to focus on wildcrafting, plant ID and learning your local flora. Perhaps you want to become an amazing medicine maker. Maybe you want to reach a new level of health and vitality yourself. Or maybe you want to start seeing clients and being of service to your family, friends and community.

Whatever scale your practice of herbalism looks like, what you need is to have clarity. To me, clarity is simply knowing where you are at, where you are trying to go, and what the specific step-by-step processes you are going to take to get to that next level. As herbalists, we all need to be clear within ourselves in regards to where our “weak spots” are, where we can improve our knowledge and skills, and what specific things we need to do to become stronger in our healing art.

So this months issue of *Materia Medica Monthly* is a little bit different, as we straddle the ending of a new year and the beginning of a new one (it’s December 2017 for those of your reading this at a later date)- but nonetheless this guide will prove to be helpful at any point in time.

My goal with this issue is to provide some tips for you to move forward on your plant path and to enhance your skills as an herbalist.

## Pick 12 Herbs to Study for the Next 12 Months

I always say that one of the best ways to become a better herbalist is simply through consistency of not only study, but your personal *experience* with the plants. A good way to go about this is to setup some structure and boundaries around your research and experiential learning.

A simple way to go about this is to select 12 remedies that you deeply called to, resonate with, or simply feel interested in learning more about. I encourage to sit down and reflect upon this and write out the names of these 12 plants, and assign them a specific month of the year where you will focus on *that one individual plant*.

Now the most preferable situation in your plant selection would be to choose remedies that are directly accessible to you- meaning that they are either in your garden, front lawn, or the wild ecosystem where you live. This isn't *necessary*, but definitely preferable. That way you can study it in its natural habitat, engage with it via your senses, sit with it, and harvest it yourself. But if that's not possible, then simply select remedies that you *really* want to learn.

During the month of working with that plant, here's what I would suggest you do:

1. Taste the plant daily: I cannot stress the importance of this enough. You do not just want to collect knowledge and data about plants, you want to *understand* them- and the only way we move beyond knowledge and into understanding is through your own direct experience with the plant itself. You want to bring that knowledge down from your head and into your body, your sensation, your organ systems and tissues- from your head down to your heart. I always say it's better to learn your herbs by heart than to just memorize their properties.

When you taste the plant, take a moment with it. Perhaps you can create some sort of altar or special place in your home where you are free from distraction, can journey inward and focus on the medicine you are taking. This practice is preferably done twice a day- in the morning upon rising and at night just before bed. Simply take 10-15 minutes to sit down, take some breaths, decompress a little bit, *relax*, and take 1-3 drops of the tincture on your tongue.

Allow the flavor to suffuse your senses, to permeate your body. Become highly attuned to the intelligence of the plant as it enters your body, as it touches your organ systems and tissues. Your mind will certainly wander... you will get distracted- but practice returning to the plant, return to the plant, return to the plant...

Become sensitized to what is happening in your body. Acutely *feel* within your body, within your organ systems and simply notice what is going on there. Do not engage the mind- do not try to think about what is going on- just *feel*. You can also attune yourself to any emotional or feeling tones that arise within your heart, any memories that surface, any insight or inspirations you receive. But the trick here is to discern what is coming from your mind and coming from the plant. Whenever you think you received something from the plant, you probably didn't... you have to *feel it*, because that is how plants

communicate. You must be authentically connected to the plant itself in order for the communication to occur, otherwise you are just within your own mind.

It's good after 10-15 minutes to take some time to journal and reflect upon your experience. I suggest getting a specific journal that is specifically dedicated to your experiences with plants and keeping it with you at all times- for you never know when a plant might reach out and speak to you.

2. Prepare Medicine: If you can harvest the plant yourself then that is the best, otherwise you can do your best to obtain high quality wildcrafted or organic dried plants from a reputable supplier. A few places we get herbs include: Pacific Botanicals, Oshala Farm, NatureSpirit Herbs, and Michael Pilarski (Friends of the Trees).

You want to get some practice preparing that specific plant as a medicine. I suggest preparing a tincture of the herb simply via maceration. I also encourage you to do both infusions and decoctions of the plant in order to compare the difference in potency. Experiment with small amounts and large amounts. What's the difference between 1 tsp of herb per 8 oz water vs. 1 tbsp vs 5 tbsp? What's the difference when you just pour hot water over the herb to infuse it, vs. decocting it for 15 minutes? What's the difference between decocting it for 30 minutes vs. 8 hours?

The only way to know is to do it yourself. I encourage you to journal and reflect upon these different preparations and what you feel like is the strongest preparation.

This part goes in conjunction with step 1, tasting the herbs. Don't just taste the tincture, taste *all* forms of the medicine. When you ingest the medicines you prepare do it in a meditative fashion as described above so you are connecting with the plant directly through your experience.

I also encourage you to play around with your dosage ranges. What's the difference between 3 drops of tincture and 3 dropperfuls of tincture? Try 1 dosage for a week and a higher dosage for another week, and *pay attention to what happens* both in your body and your psyche/soul.

3. Plant Sits: If you chose a plant that grows in your local bioregion, take the time to get out there and sit with it. Observe the plant in its natural ecosystem, attune your senses to the plant, trace the outline of the plant with your heart field, sensitize yourself to its unique diction and syntax. Pray to it. Talk to it. Make offerings. *Remember that these plants are alive, sentient and intelligent*, and that the true herbalist not only knows their remedies, but has a deep connection and relationship with them. This is by far one of the best ways to establish and deepen in those vital relationships with your medicines.

Another way that can be incredibly power to connect with the plants more deeply and spiritually is to consciously dream with the plant. This can be done by putting some of the plant under your pillow at night and before going to bed expressing yourself to the spirit of the plant that you want to visit it during your dreams. Talk to it like you would a

person, setting a clear intention to dream with the plant and to remember your dreams upon waking. This takes some time, but with patience, discipline and diligence can yield otherworldly results.

A good note here is that when you dream with a plant, it isn't always necessarily that the plant is going to come to you in the dream in some spiritual form saying "I am the spirit of Holy Basil, let me teach you all of my secrets!!" Unfortunately it isn't always quite that clear... A good way to think of it, is that the plant will "bring you a dream." This means that the nature of your dreams may be reflective of the qualities, characteristics and/or properties of that plant. Remember dreams speak through symbols, through signatures, and sometimes require some deciphering. The most important thing here is to make sure you are authentically connecting yourself and praying to the plant to establish this relationship- otherwise you might just have dreams processing your day or something and then project that onto the plant. Not good. This is the slight risk in working with plants in this way- you have to learn to discern what is coming from the plant and what is your projection.

4. Study Study Study!! As your focus on this 1 plant each month, I encourage you to read everything you can about the plant. Study its botany, its chemistry, its actions, energetics, organ system affinities, its relationship to the Chinese organ systems, the doshas of Ayurveda, the tissue states of the Physiomedicalists. Learn about how the plant is used medicinally, what types of symptoms and diseases it benefits- BUT always relate this information back to its fundamental actions, tastes, energetics, and affinities.

At the end of the month, take EVERYTHING you learned about the plant both from your studies and your experience, and do your best to determine what the primary ruling Element or Planet or Principle (or all 3) would best relate to the plant.

I encourage you to use the Materia Medica Monthly monograph template (in the downloads section of this issue) as a guide for your studies and research on the plant.

5. Diet: No I don't want you to go on the Atkins diet or something like that! What I am referring to here is a traditional practice in the Amazon used to learn plants directly from the plants themselves, what is called "la dieta" (the diet). While commonly associated with the use of Ayahuasca, this practice is traditionally done for anyone wanting to learn the medicinal properties of herbs and cultivate healing virtue.

The practice is quite simple. During a plant diet, you are advised to restrict certain foods from your diet, specifically: salt, sugar, spices, and sour flavors. The way I see it, you are restricting the Elemental forces from your diet, and reducing it to the most simple bland foods. Traditionally what was eaten during la dieta is rice, boiled plantains, and river fish. Other foods commonly done these days are: potatoes, quinoa, chicken, eggs and simple vegetable soups. I recommend steaming or boiling these foods, not cooking them in oils or fats, and keeping it very plain with no added salt or spices of any kind.

During this time the apprentice will take time to sit with the plant, make offerings and prayers, and consciously attune themselves to the plant in order to learn its medicinal properties and applications. The diet returns you to baseline, limiting any stimulation of the particular elemental forces so you can become highly sensitized to the medicinal influence of the plant.

Perhaps during your month of working with your plant, take a week or so to hold a diet with it- as this has been an incredibly powerful way to build and strengthen your relationship to the plants.

### **Find a Sit Spot in Nature**

I always say that the herbalist is first, foremost, and forever a student of nature, an apprentice to life itself- for our healing work is solely focused on working with life: the life of the plants, the life of the person, the life of an organ system, a tissue, the life of their mind, their heart, their soul. Thus to become an effective herbalist it is critically important to study nature, and the only way to go about that is to go out into nature!

A great way to do this is to find yourself a good a sit spot, a simple place where you can relax into the natural world. This doesn't mean you need to travel to the top of the mountain, actually, what's most ideal is that it's somewhere close to home so you can get there easily- at the very least 1x a week. This could be your backyard, a local park, and hiking trail etc. Somewhere you can sit and simply pay attention to the nature that is there. What birds come around? Where's the water flowing? How does the sun traverse the sky? What animal footprints do you see? When do the plants sprout, leaf, flower and fruit?

Connecting yourself to the qualities of the seasons, the Elements, the life of that place will become the greatest textbook in your repertoire. Because this is the training not of your mind, but of your heart. To learn the ecological intelligence of the Earth, and to train yourself to see that reflection within your medicines, within yourself, and within the people you work with.

I would recommend visiting your sit spot at least once a week, ideally once a day if possible, and for at the *very* least 15 minutes, ideally an hour or so. While there, *do absolutely nothing*. This is an exercise not of the mind, but of the senses and of the heart. While sitting become acutely aware of your surroundings. Study the nature around you with your eyes, your ears, and most importantly, your *feeling*. Allow the intelligence of the ecosystem to reach out and touch you- but also consciously reach out from your heart and touch the Earth around you. *Consciously connect yourself to it*. Become a nothingness. A passive observer. An emptiness, so that nature can fill you.

### **ID Your Local Medicinals**

It's always good to know your local plants. With our modern global culture and materia medica, it's easy to get sucked into the latest herbal fads, the most fancy plant from a distant land, and in that process we forget or overlook the medicine growing right outside our front doors.

Schedule in at least 1 day a month to get out into the woods and take a hike. Find yourself a good local plant ID book that is specific for your area and start determining the plants around you. This can expand beyond medicinal plants and into edible and wild foods, or other plants with useful properties. The more you learn your local ecosystem the more a part of it you feel. After all, if the proverbial sh\*t hits the fan in the world, these are the plants you will have access to- best to learn them now.

If you don't feel confident in your ability to properly ID plants, then perhaps find a local herbalist to study with, take a local botany course or plant ID class. Find some way to learn your local medicines. **This is critically important for all herbalists!!**

### **See 1 Client a Month**

If you have a calling to work with people, the only way to *really* start learning how to do this is to just start doing it. We all have family members, friends, co-workers, and acquaintances that we can practice our herbalism on. I would recommend putting yourself out there to people you know and tell them you want to start practicing your herbal skills on them.

Every client you see is *the best* learning experience that reaches far beyond anything any book can tell you. I can't tell you how many herbalists I know that are completely overqualified to start working with people, but always feel like they need another training program, another workshop, to read another book, or do another apprenticeship before they can start helping people.

A certain inner blockage can develop, a feeling of not being competent enough to practice. But in truth the issue oftentimes isn't competence, it's **confidence**. And the only way to develop confidence in working with people is to simply start working with people. The only way to learn how to heal others with plants is to just get started.

So don't hold yourself back! If you have a calling to heal people, then put yourself out there to your friends, family, and community to support them in their healing.

Each person you see is an opportunity to learn about your plants more deeply, specific conditions and diseases, the organ systems, tissue states, constitutions... basically it's where **it all comes together**. This is where you put everything into action.

*After all, what's the point of learning all this stuff if you aren't going to help someone with it?*

### **Elimination Diet**

Okay this where I'm going to put you on a diet... Let's face it, a lot of people out there in the modern world are not eating in a way that is healthy and supports optimal physiological functioning of the body. In fact, a lot of the modern diet can lead to pathology.

Over the last 10 years of helping people, I've found one of the most important therapeutic strategies to have in your toolbox is the Elimination Diet. More and more people out there are having intolerances to certain foods they eat every day that are leading to their health conditions. From chronic digestive issues (constipation, diarrhea, gas, bloating, reflux etc.),

joint pain, musculoskeletal pain, and headaches, to stress, anxiety, tension, nervousness, depression and chronic skin conditions like eczema or acne- what people put in their mouth every day can have broad reaching adverse affects upon the body.

I learned from Paul Bergner what they call at his school the food intolerance triangle. This is a constellation of symptoms that oftentimes points to a potential intolerant food in the diet. These 3 points include: digestive symptoms (*any* digestive symptom), musculoskeletal or skin symptom (muscle pain, fatigue, joint pain etc.), and a mood/energy symptom (stress, anxiety, depression, fatigue etc.). This is something to keep on your mental dashboard when you are helping people and can be a critically important guide in your work with people.

If you notice this constellation of symptoms, the best thing to do is run them through a 6 week elimination diet, whereby they eliminate certain foods from their diet and gradually reintroduce them 1 at a time in order to screen for which ones are causing the problem. **This is considered the gold standard of food intolerance/allergy testing and FAR surpasses any blood work.** In fact, it's been scientifically proven that food allergen blood tests are inaccurate.

While I was at Bastyr, they did a study where they took the same persons blood and sent it to multiple different labs for food allergen testing, and they all turned up with different results. But where it got really interesting was when they took the same persons blood and sent it to the same lab under different names and still got **TOTALLY** different results- tons of false positives and negatives. So the only way to *really* know what foods someone is intolerant to is to do an elimination diet and see what the body itself says based on symptomatic presentations- not what a lab test says.

The two primary foods to eliminate are dairy and gluten. If after 6 weeks things don't clear up, then check for soy, corn, or eggs. Eggs are common with skin conditions like eczema. Soy is common for thyroid issues and headaches. Always make sure to screen for *covert sources* of these foods too. Some people don't know that casein is a milk product and overlooks that on ingredient lists. I always just tell people on an elimination diet to eat veggies, fruit and meat, maybe some rice and quinoa. Simple is the key.

But if you are going to have people go through this process *you* need to experience it for yourself first. I always encourage anyone that wants to practice herbalist to also be a practicing dietician as well- not that you need to get a degree in it, but you should always consider food as medicine and incorporate that into your work you do with people.

So, 6 weeks... you up for the challenge?

### Expand Your Library

When doing your research on medicinal plants, it's critically important for you to have a broad spectrum of resources to draw upon. Different herbal texts oftentimes have different focuses and strengths, and because of that they also tend to have some weaknesses too.

Hence I believe it's good to have a broad range of herbals on your shelf that have these different approaches and perspectives, so when you are studying your 12 plants and writing your monographs, you can integrate as much different information as possible together for a holistic and synergistic understanding of the plants.

I've been getting a **lot** of requests for book recommendations, so be sure to download the book list PDF on the lesson page to get some specific book recommendations that cover different aspects of herbalism. I divided it up into different sections so you can broaden your library in a way that will give you the tools and resources you need to learn what you want/ need to learn.

### **Post in Materia Medica Monthly and Start a Study Group**

I really want Materia Medica Monthly to be a **community of learning**. In that regard I want to encourage you to read the comments people post, share your insights, perspectives- start conversations with one another to build this community strong.

Another way you can do this is to start a local herbal study group. Perhaps with the clarity you gain from the questions listed below you can get a small group of plant inclined friends together to nerd out about herbs. Perhaps you can do the tasting exercise together and share your experiences. Perhaps you can all study the same herb each month and get together and compare notes.

Something magical happens when people get together and talk herbs. I'm doing my best to create the environment digitally through Materia Medica Monthly, but I encourage you to start building local community around herbs as an opportunity to grow together.

And hopefully you can make it out to one of our live workshops here at the School of Evolutionary Herbalism- since you are in an online program you'll be invited!

### **Determine Your Gaps**

The above points lend some insights on how you can optimize the next 12 months of your herbal studies in order to take your work with herbs to the next level of precision, accuracy, and efficacy, and so you can begin to build up your confidence and competence as an herbalist.

But we are all at our different places on the plant path. Some of us are just getting started, some of us have been doing this for a long time, and others still are somewhere in between. So I want to close this lesson with providing some insights for reflection on your plant path that can help you to determine what you specifically need to be focusing your studies on in order to move forward in the best way possible.

I want to encourage you to take the time to reflect on these questions and to journal on them so you can get the clarity to determine your gaps in herbalism. This is a little bit of a test, but it will help you to know where you need to focus on your studies for the next 12 months.

- How would you define your current skill level in herbalism? Are you a total beginner? Intermediate? Advanced?
- What is your vision for your practice of herbalism? Do you want to see clients? Wildcraft plants? Make medicine? How do you foresee yourself applying your knowledge and understanding of medicinal plants?
- Can you adequately identify the 6 different primary tastes of medicinal plants, their general properties, organ affinities and actions? Can you list at least 3 plants that embody each taste? This would be sweet, salty, sour, pungent, bitter, and astringent. *If no, then focus on refining your understanding of the tastes.*
- Are you confident in your understanding of herbal actions? If you were to see a list of actions associated with a plant, could you decipher its properties and how it would primarily be used medicinally? For example, if a plant is: carminative, circulatory stimulant, spasmolytic, diuretic, and expectorant, could you understand what that plant is doing? *If not focus on really learning your herbal actions in more depth.*
- Do you understand what herbal energetics means, the 3 primary qualities and how they each have a polarity which is critical to understanding a plant holistically? If you were to take an herb for a period of time, could you decipher its energetic patterns? Can you list at least 3 herbs that have one of the 6 energetic dynamics? *If not, focus on understanding the 3 primary qualities, their polarities, and what herbs embody those energetic dynamics.*
- Have you ever prepared an herbal medicine before? This could be infusions, decoctions, oils, tinctures, spagyrics, etc. Do you feel like you could look up a plants biochemical profile and know either directly, or have resources to reference, how to best extract that plant? *If not then focus on your medicine making skills (see book recommendations for resources)*
- Can you identify at least 10 medicinal plants that grow in your immediate bioregion? *If not, focus on learning some more of your local herbs and how to properly identify them.*
- Do you feel confident in your ability to work with a client? Do you feel like you understand how to ask them the right questions that point you in the direction of knowing what types of remedies and suggestions you can make to improve their overall health and wellbeing? Do you have any knowledge of holistic evaluation skills such as pulse, tongue, facial lines, medical astrology, iridology etc.? *If not, focus on developing intake, interview and assessment skills.*
- Do you know how to put together an intelligently designed herbal formula? When you formulate, do you feel like you are throwing herbs in the bottle at random, or is each plant selected for a very specific and intentional reason? When formulating, are you considering the net actions, energetics, and affinities of the individual herbs, as well as the wholeness of the formula? *If not, focus on refining your formulation skills.*

- **Do you feel like you have a decent grasp on the physical body, it's anatomy and physiology, location of organ systems and tissues, and their general functions? Do you feel like you can discern underlying tissue states based on symptomatic presentations? If not, focus on learning some anatomy, physiology, and refining your understanding of tissue states.**
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If you take the time to *really* reflect upon these questions, you should get immediate insight on where you currently are on your plant path and what skills you need to learn in order to advance more rapidly. Sometimes it's important to take a step back and assess where you are at so you know where you need to focus in order to move forward. Hopefully these simple questions provide some clarity for you on that, and in conjunction with the book resources you'll have some additional study materials to help you along your way.

My goal is for Materia Medica Monthly to be an ongoing resource for you. And in that regard **I need your feedback!!** The only way I can make this program the best ever is if I hear back from you. What's great about it? Is there anything you feel like is missing? Is there any other modules or sections that you would like to see in there? In short, **what is going to help you the most?**

Please drop us a line at [support@evolutionaryherbalism.com](mailto:support@evolutionaryherbalism.com) so we can get your insights on how to make the program better and serve you to the best of our abilities.

Because in the end, I truly care about your learning process with the plants and want you to get everything you need to go out into the world and be of service to humanity through the healing power of the plants. Because that's what is so needed during these changing times.