

How to Grow a Medicine Cabinet

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Chamomile Bunches

It has crept up on us slowly, perhaps without the initial intentions of what we are now left with: prescription medicine. Medicine, for all of the valuable attributes it provides, has been an equally destructive force. Like the chemical fertilizers and pesticides in agriculture, the onslaught of fix-it-all antibiotics and a pills-over-health mentality has put us in more need of more and stronger medicines to combat the highly involved bacteria, infections, diseases and viruses.

Why is it that, in a time when technology has advanced so far, there are notable escalations in allergies and chronic diseases, namely in the first world? It's counterintuitive, and many of us out here in the real world are catching wind of what may be the cause: Too much technology. Food, once believed to be a health promoter, has become a detriment. Medicine, once believed to be curative, often comes with so many side effects it hardly seems worth "getting better".

And, herein may lie the answer, an old adage that seems to be cropping up more and more frequently these days: Let food be thy medicine. Of course, it starts with prevention, a daily dose of fruits and vegetables full of antioxidants, vitamins and minerals (and minus the excess sodium, syrup and processing), to have healthy immune systems. Thus, in our permaculture gardens, we are growing quality, organic food, thick with nutrients that they've gotten from the rich soils we create. It's a good start.



Geodome of Medicinals

Nevertheless, things happen. Illnesses creep up on us. Cuts and nicks and scraps are inevitable, as are bug bites and the occasional burn. Stomachs hurt sometimes, as do heads and muscles. Rashes break out. There are all sorts of minor ailments that can come our way, things that don't require taking another trip to the doctor or using over-the-counter medication. As the generations of old, say a hundred years or less, knew, they simply require more plants.

Considering the escalating health problems, as well as Big Pharm and Big Ags monetary interests over quality service, it would seem medicine, in the doctor's office and/or pharmaceutical sense, should perhaps be a last resort, as it once was. Instead, we could be growing our own medicine cabinets, a most self-sufficient means of reliable treatment. And, besides a few genetically modified seeds, plants are still fairly free of patents.

What's in a medicine cabinet?

When building a medicine cabinet, the easiest place to start would be in simply taking inventory of what it is a typical kit holds.



Drying Leaves for Medicinal Teas

- Normally, this includes some stuff for cuts and scrapes, both to clean them up and get them bandaged. This might include something to stop the bleeding, something to disinfect it, and something to help it heal. Then, bandages are usually the final step in handling such situations.
- Minor burns are similar to cuts but different enough to often warrant some special treatments, such as something to quell the initial sting and soothe the painful flare up into tolerable.
- Bugs of some sort or another are in just about every environment, and occasionally, our interactions—even with those beloved bees—don't end favorably. These encounters often leave us with stings, perhaps some itching, and swelling, so it's good to have something for these issues.
- Then, there are the normal, it-happens-to-the-best-of-us illnesses like strained backs or stomach issues. There are headaches and pains of various sorts. And, in each of these cases, it's nice to have something to help us through it.
- Otherwise, medicine cabinets often have inorganic things or, better put, some rudimentary tools: scissors, tweezers, a thermometer, and maybe a first-aid book. We could add an herbal remedy book (or know that we have a most informative link at our [fingertips](#)). So, with all this in mind, we just need to get some of the right plants out in the garden.

Bloody accidents

We all try to be careful, but ultimately, when playing with knives, shovels, saws, hammers, nails, chickens and so on, the evitable gash, gouge or grate is going to happen. Such is life. But, when those incidents culminate, it's good to know we have the goods—the right plants growing—to handle them, so here are [some things worth sticking in the old food forest](#) or medicinal herb garden.



Hanging Medicine

- Yarrow, cayenne, and/or comfrey: First things first, it's imperative we stop the bleeding, and these three plants are all known for getting the job done. Yarrow is a flower, which can be harvested and kept for when it's needed (also good for urinary tract infections). Cayenne is a spicy pepper that has many other medicinal qualities, including heating up and relaxing sore muscles. And, comfrey—the permaculture wonder plant—is probably already in the garden as it is also a broad-leafed, fertilizing mulch.
- Calendula, chamomile, and/or juniper: Once the bleeding is under control, it's best to prevent any sort of infection that might want to kick off. Calendula is a great flower to have around and is also good for reducing swelling. Chamomile not only helps to relax at night with a sleepy cup of tea but also hinders swelling and battles infection. Or, juniper berries and leaves, famed for flavoring gin, are good for treating infections. There are many more: Echinacea, wormwood, Oregon grape, golden seal...
- Arnica and woolly lamb's ear: Ultimately, it's always a good idea to keep some other things around just in case. Homeopathic arnica—a relative of sunflowers—is useful to prevent shock from excess bleeding, bruising or swelling. It's been sworn by for

centuries. Then, finally, when all the treatment is applied and done, a bandage is handy, so why not use a plant? Woolly lamb's ear used to be the go-to battlefield bandage. It has soft, absorbent leaves with antiseptic, antibacterial and anti-inflammatory properties.

Wicked burns

It seems for many millennia now, humans just can't help themselves: They have to play with fire. For us permies, there are all sorts of choices here, from rocket stoves to cob ovens to mass heaters. And, while most of us have learned for sure that burns hurt like hell, we still manage to do it to ourselves every now and again. So, we need some plants on our side.



Playing with Fire

- Aloe Vera and plantain: Burns just, well, burn so bad, so it is so nice to have something around to relieve that pain. In such situations, soothe is the word that sounds so right, and nothing says so as fine as aloe vera. It comes in a ready-to-use gel for crying out loud.

Another common option is a popular weed called plantain, which is considered by many to be a pesky weed. Let them get burned!

- Lavender and Oregon grape root: Like with cuts, when burned, it's important to combat infection before it starts. Lavender (essential oil) is a very popular remedy here, as it also reduces swelling, promotes healing, and prevents scarring. Plus, it's considered a very safe treatment (good for children) and has a calming effect. Oregon grape root is another choice, good for warding off bacteria, virus, and fungi. Other good options are comfrey (there it is again!) and calendula.
- Gotu kola: Another concern with burns is the scarring that often occurs, but there are even plants to help minimize that. Gotu Kola, aka pennywort, is respected by practitioners of Ayurvedic medicines for its ability to rejuvenate skin, speed up healing and perform skin reparations.

That Must Sting

Insects: We love them, but sometimes we hate them. Nothing is quite so flinch-inducing as peacefully pruning along only to be mauled by an angry pollinator. We want them around. More so, we need them around. So, we better grow some plants for when our flight paths cross a little too closely.



Just a Minor Bite?

- Pig's ear and plain old mud: Stings hurt so bad that when something hurts, mentally or physically, people say it stings. Well, we all want that to stop as soon as possible. Certain

plants can help: Pig's ear (aka plantain), comfrey (again!), and yellow dock all numb the pain a little. Just chew the leaves and apply to the sting. Or, a big glob of mud (better yet, wet clay) can ease the suffering a bit.

- Witch Hazel and sage: Okay, the war against swelling and infection is becoming a bit redundant by now, but look at it this way: This list of effective herbal treatments is growing. Witch hazel is very widely regarded as a medicinal plant, and one of its many powers is reducing swelling from insect bites. Sage, both medicinal and spiritual (used to cleanse places of evil spirits) is an extremely useful and tasty herb, which reduces inflammation as well as cures cramps, colds and more.
- Citronella, horsemint, and marigolds: It's bad enough getting tagged by the bugs we want around, but to be bitten and harassed by the likes of mosquitoes is just infuriating. Thus, a few mosquito repellents planted around our sitting spots makes sense. Citronella—a clumping grass—is so famous for it that it's used make candles and sprays. Horsemint is great for shadier spots, makes tea, and attracts bees. Marigolds offend mosquitoes while protecting tomato plants from offending insects.
- Gooseberry
- Hazkap

Pain in the...

And, in this pantheon of ailments, we mustn't forget the aches and pains arena, including stomachaches, headaches, toothaches and backaches, as well as sore throats, sore joints, and sore muscles. These are the common crop-ups, health concerns that just inevitably appear at some point in life as, even though we are supercharged with healthy, organic food, we are merely human. Again, plants trump medicine.



Panamanian Medicine Garden

- Feverfew: It's no surprise, with a name like feverfew, that this herb can treat fevers, but it also a very well known remedy for migraine headaches.
- Peppermint: Widely recognized as a relaxing tea and breath freshener, peppermint is also good for headaches, nausea, intestinal issues, muscle spasms, and toothaches.
- Ginger: Basically, ginger is medicine in the form of a rhizome. It's good for motion sickness, stomachaches, sore joints, headaches, arthritis, colds and flus. It's also naturally anti-inflammatory, antiviral, antifungal, and antibiotic.
- Valerian: A root of renown, valerian is said to be a cure-all, with powers to reduce headache pain, calm the heart, thwart anxiety, and relax muscles.
- Horseradish: It makes a hell of cocktail sauce, but it also does an ailing body good, from the inside out. It helps with internal stuff like kidney and bladder infections, as well as joint and muscle issues. And, it's not bad for blocked sinus either.
- Clove: This one had to be included in the list as my wife became instantly infatuated with how powerful cloves numb an ulcer in her mouth. It's good for toothaches and gum issues and, combined with a bit of mint and water, makes a dandy mouthwash.



Raised Herb Spiral

The truth is, as the length of this list is making evident, that the accounting of medicinally useful plants could go on for days, for—quite literally—chapters and chapters of a book solely devoted to plants healing us. It's not that modern medicine is without merit. Break a leg, have a heart attack or some sort of major emergency, and there is nothing better than knowing highly trained people with the latest in technology are on our side. Both approaches have their place.

But, get a cold, a rash (oh, yes, for rashes), the sniffles, a headache, a bruise and so on, and there is no real need for a medical professional or pharmaceutical products. There never has been. The remedies were just out in the garden. Somewhere along the way, that knowledge was lost, or some might even suspect hidden and distorted for the sake of profits. But, that can all change with a few seeds and some soil.