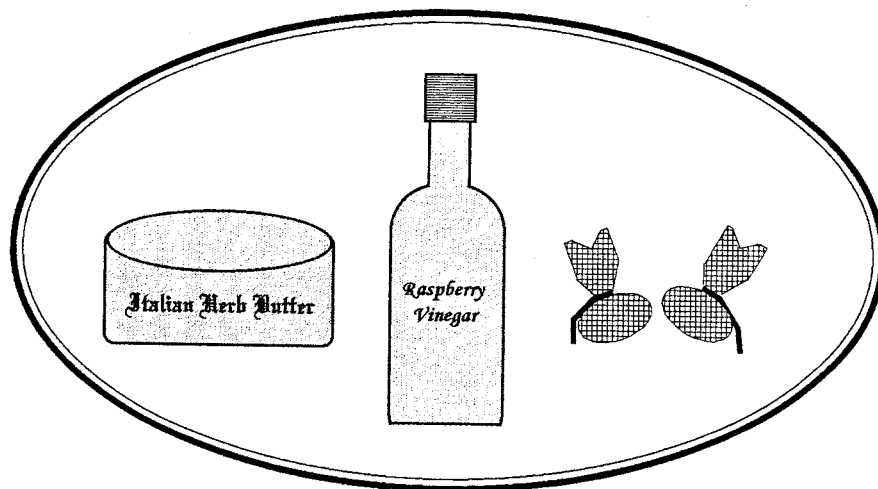


A Potpourri of Herbal Uses

By Lynnette de Sandoval del Valle de los Unicornios



INTRODUCTION

Plants were important in a personal way in the Middle Ages. They were powerful, living things—the miracle of rebirth—earth’s gift to man. Plants represented: wood in all its uses; some fabrics; most dyes; food; seasoning for foods that were often bland, repetitive, heavily salted for long storage and near the end of storage, starting to rot; cosmetics; perfumes; air fresheners; insecticides; and cures for ills physical, mental, spiritual and magical.

Today plants are no less important, just more impersonal. We buy fabric pre-dyed, furniture and homes pre-built, and vegetables preprocessed—we’ve lost contact with nature in our dealing with plants! An opportunity to finally plant my own garden (for one season) sparked an interest in herbs as growing things and led me to investigate uses other than spaghetti sauce.

This pamphlet deals more with the joy of experimenting with herbs than it does the rules and recipes. There are many excellent books on everything-you-ever-wanted-to-know-about-herbs (see the bibliography for The Complete Book of Herbs and Spices and The Herb Book)—buy or borrow a couple. They will introduce you to some members of the “extended family of herbs” that you may have never met, as well as provide ideas and recipes. If you can, plant some herbs: in a garden (yours or a friend’s), in planters on the patio or containers in a window.

And Then PLAY!

COOKING WITH HERBS

In this section, I'll only cover bouquet garni, herbal butters and herbal vinegars but there is much more to cooking with herbs. There are breads, sweets (rose petal cookies!), teas, jellies, sauces, oils, and more.

EXPERIMENT!

Two things to remember when cooking with herbs:

1) Fresh herbs and flowers are best, but make sure they were grown for consumption — pesticides are a no-no!

2) The oil (flavor) is more concentrated in dried herbs than fresh, a rule of thumb equivalent is:

1/4 teaspoon dried, finely powdered =
3/4 to 1 teaspoon dried, crumbled =
1 1/2 teaspoons fresh chopped

HERBAL BUTTERS

Homemade bread fresh from the oven with herb butter melting into it, steamed vegetables with a pat of herb butter, baked potatoes with lots of herb butter! Wherever you use it, herb butter adds a touch of class as well as flavor.

To make herb butter:

Soften one stick of butter or margarine.

Mix in (by spoon or blender) 4 to 6 tablespoons of finely chopped herbs — fresh is best. If you use dried herbs: soak them in warm water for 5 to 10 minutes and then drain before use.

Store in a covered container in the refrigerator or freezer.

Maitre d'hôtel butter, one standard combination, includes parsley, lemon juice, salt and pepper. The lemon juice helps to enhance the herb's flavor — use a few drops to 1 tablespoon, as taste dictates.

Bouquet garni mixtures are perfect combinations for butters. Other possible ingredients include (alone or in combination):

ground onion or garlic, dill, paprika, chives, mint, sage, tarragon, cinnamon, ground rose or marigold petals, nutmeg, rum, vinegar, honey, ground citrus peel (just the colored portion — not the white parts). Play around with it, butters are not expensive to make!

For table service: the butters can be reshaped into a stick, served in a bowl or crock, or molded into fancy shapes with cookie cutters, molds or ice cube trays

BOUQUET GARNI

Bouquet garni is a traditional method of flavoring soups and stews in which fresh stalks of several herbs are bundled together, simmered with the food and then discarded.

The “classic” bouquet garni combination is:

- 1 sprig of parsley
- 1 bay leaf
- 2 sprigs of thyme
- 1 sprig of marjoram (optional)

Tie the herbs together with string and hang inside pot during cooking. Remove before serving.

Other popular bouquet garni combinations include:

Parsley, celery leaves, onion and thyme.

Parsley, thyme and cloves. (for lamb)

Parsley, basil, rosemary, oregano, bay leaves, peppercorns and garlic.

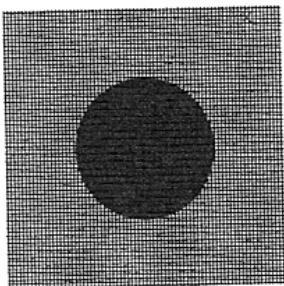
Seasoning is, of course, a matter of taste — experiment with bouquet garni mixtures: start with the traditional recipe and substitute or add other herbs until you find your own special combinations.

If you wish to collect every bit of herb before serving:

Place the herbs in a tea ball during cooking

or

Package them in a cheesecloth bag:



Herbs in the center of
Cheesecloth square



Cheesecloth bag, the
corners of tied up

Place the bouquet Garni in the center of a 5-6 inch square of cheesecloth. Bring the corners of the cheesecloth together and tie the neck of the “bag” with string. Leave enough string to hang bag in pot.

Bouquet garni can also be made with dried herbs, using a tea ball or cheesecloth bag. These make wonderful gifts: give a jar of bouquet garni mix and include a tea ball or a jar of bouquet garni filled cheesecloth bags, remember to include directions for use and perhaps a recipe or two.

HERBAL VINEGAR

Herbal vinegars add a special “tang” to your cooking. They can be used for salad dressings, marinades, steaming vegetables (add a little to the water for a subtle taste difference) and anywhere you would use plain vinegar.

Herbal vinegars are easy to make: add fresh herbs (or other flavorings) to the vinegar and heat it so that the herb’s oils are released to combine with and flavor the vinegar. Herbal vinegars are as much about looks as they are about taste, think vertical: stand stocks of herbs upright in the bottle, wind citrus peels around a bamboo stick, use whole (eatable) flowers instead of petals, the visual effects are wonderful!

Ingredients:

Vinegar:

There are many types of vinegar commercially available. None is more “right” as a base for your flavored vinegar than others.

Cider vinegar complements many herbs with its flavor and is supposed to be more healthful than other vinegars.

Red wine vinegar will add its distinctive flavor and color to the mix. Rosemary-flavored red wine vinegar is wonderful on beef!

White distilled vinegar gives you a “pure base” of flavor and color to play with.

There are more — again — experiment. If it doesn’t taste good, maybe it will make a good face or hair rinse!

Flavorings:

The possibilities are endless, try bouquet garni recipes or your favorite herbs and spices. Don’t forget: citrus peels, onions, garlic, peppercorns, rose petals, marigolds, sugar (sweet mint vinegar for lamb!), and fruits (strawberry vinegar!). Again, fresh herbs are best—but if you are using dried herbs, use one of the cooking methods described below and strain them out before bottling (I’ve had the best luck with using the crockpot method with dried herbs).

Preparation methods:

Traditional:

Bottle the ingredients and the vinegar and place in the sun for 3-6 weeks, until the flavor has reached its peak.

Stovetop:

Combine 1/2 of the vinegar and 1/2 of the flavorings in an enamel or glass pan (remember no metal) and SIMMER for 10 to 20 minutes (boiling will cause the vinegar to break down). Let it set for 20 to 30 minutes more and then remove the flavorings. Divide the remaining ingredients between the bottles and fill them 1/2 way with the cooked vinegar and 1/2 way with fresh vinegar. Adjust the flavor by adding more or less of the unflavored vinegar, but remember that the fresh ingredients will continue to flavor the bottled mixture. Cap and store in a cool, dark place. Taste in a couple of weeks and adjust flavor if necessary.

Crock pots:

Combine 1/2 of the vinegar and 1/2 of the flavorings in the crock pot cook on the highest setting for 2 to 6 hours, taste as you go to determine when to stop cooking. Let it cool and then remove the flavorings. If you use dried herbs, package them in cheesecloth (see Bouquet Garni instructions) for easy retrieval-use several small packages rather than 1 large one.

Divide the remaining ingredients between the bottles and fill them 1/2 way with the cooked vinegar and 1/2 way with fresh vinegar. Adjust the flavor by adding more or less of the unflavored vinegar, but remember that the fresh ingredients will continue to flavor the bottled mixture. Cap and store in a cool, dark place. Taste in a couple of weeks and adjust if necessary.

Storage:

Bottles for herbal vinegar can be anything from old wine bottles to store bought, cut glass fancies and anything in between. However, vinegar reacts badly to metal so use plastic caps, corks or lined lids. Herbal vinegars made with distilled vinegar last 3-6 years while wine vinegar last 6 months to 2 years, depending on the storage method. Vinegar kept in the refrigerator will last longer than vinegar displayed in the window or other sunny spot. Discoloration or cloudiness means the vinegar is starting to break down and will probably go bad in the next year.

VINEGAR RECIPES

Rosemary Vinegar:

2 sprigs of rosemary per bottle (an inch or two shorter than the bottle)
Red wine vinegar

Place half the rosemary in an enamel or glass pan (keep the best stems for the bottles), add 1/2 the vinegar. Simmer for 10 minutes and let stand for 30 minutes. Place a sprig of rosemary in each bottle and fill 1/2 way with the cooked vinegar and 1/2 with fresh.

Lemon Vinegar:

6 4-6 inch lemon peels per bottle (use the yellow part of the peel only, the juice or the white rind will produce cloudiness)

White distilled vinegar

Combine 1/2 the peels with 1/2 the vinegar in an enamel or glass pan. Simmer for 15 minutes. Let set for 20 more minutes. Divide the remaining peel among the bottles and fill each with 1/2 cooked and 1/2 fresh vinegar.

Onion and Garlic:

8 1/2 inch slices of onion

6 cloves of garlic (peeled but whole)

White distilled vinegar

Warning: Cook this on a day when you can air out the house (think about the smell of hot onion, garlic and vinegar!).

Combine 1/2 of the onion slices 1/2 of the garlic cloves with 1/2 of the vinegar in an enamel or glass pan. Simmer for 15 to 20 minutes. Let set for 30 minutes. Divide the remaining ingredients among the bottles and fill each with fill 1/2 with cooked and 1/2 with fresh vinegar.

LIVING WITH HERBS

In this section, I'll cover a couple of herbal uses for your home. Potpourri for scent and color, and bath salts for the end of a long day.

BATH SALTS

The salt softens the water, the oils add your favorite scent and the color completes the luxury. What could be better after a hard day?

The simplest form of bath salts consists of just that:

1/2 cup (per bath) of non-iodized salt (rock salt, sea salt or Epsom salt)

Food coloring to desired color

Oils to desired intensity

Bath salts can be mixed up in a bowl or jar or, I prefer: heavy-duty zip-lock bags.

Preparation:

Add desired amount of salt to bag. (1/2 cup works well for test batches.)

Add a few drops of food color.

Seal bag without squeezing out the air; shake the bag until color is evenly distributed.

Repeat until you find the right color. Keep a record of how many drops you used.

Decide which oil(s) go with that color and add a few drops.

Seal bag without squeezing out the air; shake the bag to distribute oil.

Repeat until you are happy with the result (remember you will use 1/2 cup per bath, the scent should be fairly strong). Keep a record of how many drops you used.

If you over do the color or scent, add more salt.

Then test your batch — take a bath — if it needs more or less of something amend your formula.

If the oil you want to use has too sweet a smell, try adding a few drops of lemon oil to the salt.

If you mix the color and salt completely you will get one solid color; if not you will get a speckled appearance — both are lovely.

HERBAL BATH SALTS

The next step is Herbal Bath Salts — herbs and flowers (spices have a stronger oil that can cause skin rashes) are added to the salt for their medicinal and cosmetic values as well as for their scent. The herbal bath salts are tied in a cloth bag (cheesecloth, muslin or an old washcloth all work well) and used as a tea bag for the bath.

1/2 cup (per bath) of non-iodized salt (rock salt, sea salt or Epsom salt).

Herbs, flowers as desired

Oils to desired intensity

(Fixatives (other than salt), food coloring, and other decorative color are not necessary)

For the strongest effect — boil the bag of herbal bath salts in a small saucepan of water for 5 to 15 minutes — then add the water and the bag to your bath.

A simpler, but less intense, method is to hang the bag on the bath faucet so that the water hits it and infuses the herbs into the bath water.

POTPOURRI

The name translates as “rotten pot” but don’t let that stop you: potpourri is a beautiful way to freshen the air or scent linens and clothes. There are 3 types of potpourri: moist (or wet), dry and simmering.

Wet potpourri is made by layering fresh flowers and herbs, with lots of salt in a glass jar or pottery crock. The ingredients will “rot fragrantly,” remove the lid when you want to scent the room. The scent lasts longer and is softer than the other potpourri types — but you **MUST** use fresh, not dried, ingredients and it can be used only as a room freshener.

(Potpourri, Incense and Other Fragrant Concoctions by Ann Tucker Fettner has a good section on moist potpourri.)

Simmering potpourri is made with large pieces of herbs and spices and is simmered in a pan of water to scent the whole house, or over a candle to scent a smaller area. The potpourri can be reused several times before discarding and refrigerated between uses. Ginger, apple, sage, lemon are some of the favorite ingredients for this.

Dry potpourri is made from dried herbs, spices and flowers mixed with oils and scent fixatives. It can be used in pomanders, sachets, drawer pillows, baskets, jars or whatever. It can last for years.

When we sat down to make dry potpourri we looked through book after book finding and discarding recipes, “too complex” “too expensive” “too many ingredients”, etc. Finally we threw away the books, gathered what dried herbs, spices and flowers we had and asked, “What goes well with mint?” “How about one that smells like orange spice tea?” “Can we do something with lemon?” “What about roses?” We started mixing test batches: some we liked, some needed work, some formed the basis for other recipes, and one was thrown out (“It **SOUNDED** like a good idea!”). Then we bought oils and fixatives to supplement the scents. It was fun, less expensive, and more rewarding than using someone else’s recipes!

Potpourri basics:

Most books on dry potpourri divide ingredients into 3 sections:

Main scent: What you want the potpourri to smell like.

Blenders: What goes well with the main scent?

Fixatives: To hold the scent.

I add:

Color: Potpourri is visual as well as olfactory. Add colors that show what the potpourri smells like.

The main scent and blenders can be:

Herbs and spices: Rosemary, mint, geranium, lemon grass, bay marjoram, anise, sage, cloves, cinnamon, vanilla, etc.

Flowers: Lavender, hibiscus, black malva, orange, geranium, rose, carnation, marigold, etc.

Fruit peels: Lemon, lime, oranges, grapefruit.

Tree bark, leaves and roots: cedar, pine, eucalyptus, sandalwood, sassafras root, moss, etc.

Oil: Individual scents or premixed blends.

Fixatives are many and varied:

Cedar wood, sandalwood, orris root, calamus root, rock salt and more. They come powdered, coarse ground, or as oil. We have had best luck with coarse ground orris and calamus roots (both have a faint violet odor). One or two tablespoons to a quart of potpourri is usually enough.

Color can be:

Flowers from the main scent and blenders: Roses, black malva, carnation, etc.

Flowers with little or no scent: Statis, geranium, hibiscus, etc.

Chunks of other ingredients: Cloves, citrus peel, cinnamon, etc.

Dry Potpourri uses:**Sachets and pillows:**

These are cloth bags filled with potpourri and tied or sewn shut. They can be plain, made from old bed sheets or handkerchiefs, to be tucked in drawers and chests; or ornate, made from lace, velvet, beads, etc., to be worn as a necklace or hung in your car or closet. Use finely ground ingredients and powdered fixatives, since the potpourri will not be visible, color is not a consideration here.

Pomanders:

These are perforated balls filled with potpourri that hang in closets or cars or are used to scent rooms. You can buy china pomanders ready to be filled or decorate china or wire tea balls. The potpourri will not show, but powdered ingredients will sift through the holes, use coarse ground ingredients but don't worry about color or visual composition.

Displayed:

Potpourri can be kept in a jar or basket or tied in a small-holed net to show off the visual effect. Powdered ingredients are a no-no they will sift through the basket or net and will cloud jars. Course ground ingredients with distinct shapes and color elements work best here. Potpourri reacts badly with the solder used in many cans; use tea tins or other non-soldered cans for storage.

When making dry potpourri:

Dry all ingredients completely or it will turn moldy.

Check for bugs or eggs on the ingredients — if you find them, or are unsure: 2 minutes in a 200 degree oven should get rid of them.

Make a test batch of new recipes and let it stand covered for a couple of weeks. This gives the scents a chance to mix and gives you a truer idea of the potpourri's scent. Adjust the recipe if necessary and let stand another couple of weeks.

When you make a test batch of a new recipe, and as you add to it during testing, write down what you put in —

YOU WILL NOT REMEMBER!

When the potpourri starts to lose its scent, mix it up a little to bruise the oil cells and release more scent, or place it under a lamp, the heat will help release the oil. As the potpourri gets older a drop or two of compatible scented oil or of brandy will help revive the scent.

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