

BLOOMSBURY
Concise
Herb
Guide



B L O O M S B U R Y

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There are 47 individual Wildlife Trusts covering the whole of the UK and the Isle of Man and Alderney. Together, The Wildlife Trusts are the largest UK voluntary organization dedicated to protecting wildlife and wild places everywhere – at land and sea. They are supported by 800,000 members, 150,000 of whom belong to their junior branch, Wildlife Watch. Every year The Wildlife Trusts work with thousands of schools, and their nature reserves and visitor centres receive millions of visitors.

The Wildlife Trusts work in partnership with hundreds of landowners and businesses in the UK. Building on their existing network of 2,250 nature reserves, The Wildlife Trusts' recovery plan for the UK's wildlife and fragmented habitats, known as A Living Landscape, is being achieved through restoring, recreating and reconnecting large areas of wildlife habitat.

The Wildlife Trusts also have a vision for the UK's seas and sea life – Living Seas, in which wildlife thrives from the depths of the oceans to the coastal shallows. In Living Seas, wildlife and habitats are recovering, the natural environment is adapting well to a changing climate, and people are inspired by marine wildlife and value the sea for the many ways in which it supports our quality of life. As well as protecting wildlife, these projects help to safeguard the ecosystems we depend on for services like clean air and water. All 47 Wildlife Trusts are members of the Royal Society of Wildlife Trusts (Registered charity number 207238). To find your local Wildlife Trust visit wildlifetrusts.org

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Contents

Introduction	6	Willowherbs	76
		Witch-hazels	77
Junipers	10	Nutmegs	78
Willows	11	Ivies	79
Hop	12	Carrots	80
Wax-myrtles	13	Heathers	98
Nettles	14	Gentians	101
Sandalwoods	15	Olives	102
Knotweeds	16	Bogbeans	103
Goosefoots	17	Bedstraws	104
Amaranths	19	Borages	108
Pinks	21	Verbenas	111
Buttercups	23	Dead-nettles	113
Poppies	24	Nightshades	135
Cabbages	27	Sesames	140
Capers	37	Figworts	141
Laurels	38	Valerians	142
Star-anises	41	Broomrapes	143
Custard Apples	42	Plantains	144
Stonecrops	43	Peppers	146
Roses	44	Elderberries	147
Balsams	54	Daisies	148
Peas	55	Amaranths	174
Nasturtiums	60	Aloes	175
Geraniums	61	Onions	176
Spurges	62	Asparaguses	179
Rues	63	Irises	180
Torchwoods	64	True Grasses	181
Quassias	65	Duckweeds	183
Buckthorns	66	Gingers	184
Limes	67	Orchids	187
Mallows	68	Water-plantains	188
St John's-worts	70	Bulrushes	189
Violets	71		
Myrtles	73	Index	190

Introduction

This book pictures and describes 180 key commonly used herbs, indicating which parts are used and for what purpose. The information is concise and does not describe gardening or preparation methods, culinary techniques or doses in relation to the healing properties of herbs. Detailed information on all these aspects can be found elsewhere, although a qualified practitioner should always be consulted before using herbs medicinally.

What Are Herbs?

The word 'herb' can be used in several ways. Scientifically, it refers to plants that lack woody tissues, but as an everyday term it also refers to plants used for culinary or medicinal purposes.

Herbs are plants, or parts of plants such as roots, leaves, flowers or fruits, which are used to flavour foods and for their healing properties. Spices are generally regarded as the hard parts of aromatic plants, usually of tropical origin. They include roots, stems, bark, dry fruits and seeds, but some are actually soft parts like flower buds, as in the case of Cloves. The hard parts of many temperate plants also provide herbal products, and can be regarded as spices, Cumin seeds being an example. In the medicinal sense even less distinction is made between herbs and spices, and all medicinal plants tend to be referred to as herbs.

Uses of Herbs

Herbs originally began to be used for culinary purposes for practical reasons – to improve the keeping qualities of meat, and disguise the poor-quality and often rotten food that was all there was to be had. Today, many herbs are used to make food more palatable by adding flavour and easing digestion. They are often regarded as essential ingredients, and are commercially important as preservatives.

Medicinal herbs were once the only remedies available to people, and have long been the mainstay of domestic medicine. Some have been shown to be valueless or even dangerous, but others have proved effective; many have had a long and unbroken history of use.

Therapeutic herbs are used in aromatherapy and other holistic preparations. They are a source of the essential oils used in aromatherapy, as well as to scent pot-pourri mixtures and various cosmetic preparations. They are very concentrated and used in tiny amounts in massages, aromatic baths, inhalations and compresses.

In early herbalism there was no strict division into culinary and medicinal herbs. Many plants can be used for both purposes, and there were others – dye plants, cosmetics, colourants and strewing herbs – that also came within the domain of the herbalist and apothecary.

USING HERBS SAFELY

Herbal treatments are not without risk and should not be used with abandon, and the warnings attached to many of the species in this book should be heeded. Herbs may be harmful if taken in large doses, if toxic parts of a plant are used, if a plant is taken internally, if a person is suffering from a condition that may be adversely affected by using a specific herb, or if an individual is allergic to a particular herb. This book describes the parts of the herb that are usually used and their forms. It does not provide dosages, since these can vary depending on factors such as the condition being treated, and the age and health of an individual. Before attempting *any* treatment other than simple everyday remedies such as tonics, always consult a doctor or other qualified practitioner.

When gathering herbs in the wild, bear in mind that a required herb may have very similar relatives – perhaps harmful or even poisonous – with which it is easily confused. The carrot family, for example, contains many common herbs, but also extremely poisonous plants such as Hemlock. Unless you are very familiar with a herb, always thoroughly check its identity and seek expert advice.

8 Introduction

Gathering Herbs in the Wild

The garden is the best place to collect herbs, but if you do choose to look for herbs in the wild there are some fundamental rules that you should follow:

- Damage plants as little as possible, taking only the parts you need, and leaving plants to continue growing.
- Bear in mind that in Britain it is forbidden by law to uproot any plant without express permission of the landowner, and to collect any part, including seeds, of some rare species.
- Do not collect near main roads or in areas where pesticides or other chemicals may have been used.
- If there is any doubt whatsoever about the identity of a plant, leave it alone (see box, page 7).

Growing Herbs

Grown in a garden, herbs can look and smell wonderful, as well as being useful. You can plant them formally, laid out in well-defined patterns, or fit them into borders among other plants. Never spray or apply artificial chemicals to herbs.

Plants from Mediterranean regions, such as Lavender and Rosemary, generally thrive in a sunny position and light, well-drained soil. Woodland species do best in shade, and other herbs, such as Chervil and Valerian, grow happily in partial or dappled shade. In cooler northern areas, tender herbs can be grown in cold frames or moved to grow indoors in winter. Some plants described in this book, such as Cloves, Allspice and Frankincense, are tropical and cannot be grown outdoors in Britain, though smaller species may be grown in a heated conservatory or greenhouse.

Harvesting, Drying and Storing Herbs

If using fresh herbs, pick only the amount needed and use this immediately. Choose young and tender growth. In perennial species pinch off the tips of the main shoots to encourage bushy growth from side shoots. Otherwise pick off lower, older leaves first.

Harvest herbs for later use on a sunny day once the dew has dried out, but before the sun is strong enough to reduce a plant's oil

content. Gather only as much as can be used quickly. Aromatic plants are generally best harvested just before the flowers emerge, while herbs in which the leafy flowering tops are used are best just after the flowers have opened. Pick individual flowers when they are well open and before they begin to fade. Collect seeds as they ripen; it is often easiest to cut off the whole head and handle it by the stalk. Roots are generally best dug up in the autumn, when they are plump.

Dry herbs in a dark, warm and airy place, spreading them thinly on open racks or suspending them in bunches. Quick drying is essential to prevent loss of flavour and colour.

Herbs are ready to store when all parts are brittle and break with a snap. Leaves can then be stripped from the stems if required. Seeds are best shaken out of the dry heads. Store dried herbs in airtight containers such as glass jars, opaque boxes or tightly sealed plastic bags, and keep them in a dark place.

Explanations of Some Relevant Terms

ANTISEPTIC Countering infection by preventing the growth of bacteria.

AXIL Angle between leaf and stem.

CALYX Sepals of a flower.

CAPSULE Dry fruit splitting when ripe to release seeds.

DISC FLORET Very small tubular flower with equal lobes, typical of daisies.

DIURETIC Increasing urine production.

ESSENTIAL OIL Volatile oil produced by aromatic plants and providing their characteristic scent and flavour.

LANCEOLATE Shaped like the blade of a spear, widest below the middle.

MUCILAGE Substance that swells and becomes slimy in water.

OPPOSITE LEAVES Pair of leaves at each joint of the stem.

PALMATE LEAVES With lobes or leaflets spreading from a single point.

PERIANTH Sepals and petals of a flower.

PINNATE LEAVES With two parallel rows of lobes or leaflets.

SPUR Projection formed by a flower's sepals or petals.

STAMEN Flower's male organ.

TRIFOLIATE LEAVES With three leaflets.

UMBEL Branched inflorescence, with branches of equal length and all radiating from the same point, typical of the carrot family.

VERMIFUGE Substance used to drive out worms.

Juniper

Juniperus communis

SIZE AND DESCRIPTION Small tree or shrub to 6m tall. Prickly green foliage of female trees is studded with berry-like green cones that ripen to blue-black with a dull bloom in the second or third year.

DISTRIBUTION Native to most areas of the temperate northern hemisphere.

USES Berries are used to flavour marinades, gin, pickles, sauces and game-bird stuffings. They yield an antiseptic and diuretic oil used to treat cystitis. They should not be eaten during pregnancy, and the oil must only be taken internally under medical supervision.



White Willow

Salix alba

SIZE AND DESCRIPTION Silvery-grey tree to 25m tall and with upswept branches. Leaves are narrow and silvery-hairy; they eventually become dull green above. Catkins appear with the leaves; males and females grow on separate trees.

DISTRIBUTION Found in most of Europe, and western and central Asia.

USES Fresh and dried bark has long been used for colds and aches, and as a general painkiller. Contains the basis of aspirin, although this is now produced synthetically.



Hop

Humulus lupulus



SIZE AND DESCRIPTION

Perennial climber with twining stems growing to 6m tall. Leaves are large, opposite, bristly and usually have 3–5 leaflets. Plants are unisexual, males with branched clusters of flowers, females with papery cones.

DISTRIBUTION Native to northern temperate regions, and often cultivated.

USES Best known for its use in flavouring beer, and grown on a large commercial scale for the brewing industry. Only the fruiting heads are used. Young shoots can be steamed and eaten like asparagus. Hops are said to counter liver and digestive disorders, and used to make a mild sedative.

Bog-myrtle

Myrica gale



SIZE AND DESCRIPTION

Deciduous shrub to 1m tall. Leaves are oval and toothed at the tips. Red female and orange male catkins, borne at the tips of shiny reddish shoots on separate plants, appear before the leaves. Fruits are small waxy berries. Also called Sweet Gale.

DISTRIBUTION

Locally common in boggy areas on moors and heaths in western Europe.

USES In Yorkshire, leaves were used for flavouring beer (gale beer) before hops became popular. Leaves and berries can be dried and used for flavouring soups and stews.

Common Nettle

Urtica dioica

SIZE AND DESCRIPTION Coarse perennial to 1.5m tall, covered with stinging hairs. Leaves are ovate, pointed and toothed. Flowers are greenish, small and form axillary spikes.

DISTRIBUTION Found throughout northern temperate regions.

USES Aerial parts are rich in vitamins A and C, and iron and other minerals. Young leaves may be added to soups and salads, or made into nettle pudding or beer. Old plants can be toxic and should not be eaten uncooked.



Sandalwood

Santalum album

SIZE AND DESCRIPTION Small evergreen tree to about 10m tall, with slender drooping branches and smooth grey-brown bark. Flowers are bell-shaped, initially dull yellow, turning reddish-purple. Fruits are about 10mm across, and dark red to black. Sandalwood is semi-parasitic on other plants. Also called Indian Sandalwood and Sandalwood Oil Plant.

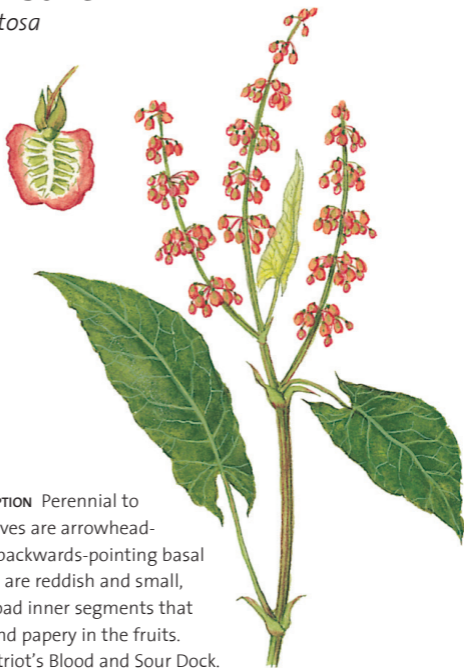
DISTRIBUTION Possibly native to Indonesia, and cultivated across tropical Asia.

USES Essential oil has a characteristic sensuous aroma and has been extracted from the plant for centuries for use in perfumes, incense and cosmetics. It is soothing and relaxing, and said to help promote restful sleep. Heartwood yields medicinal extracts that are used to treat bronchitis and cystitis.



Common Sorrel

Rumex acetosa



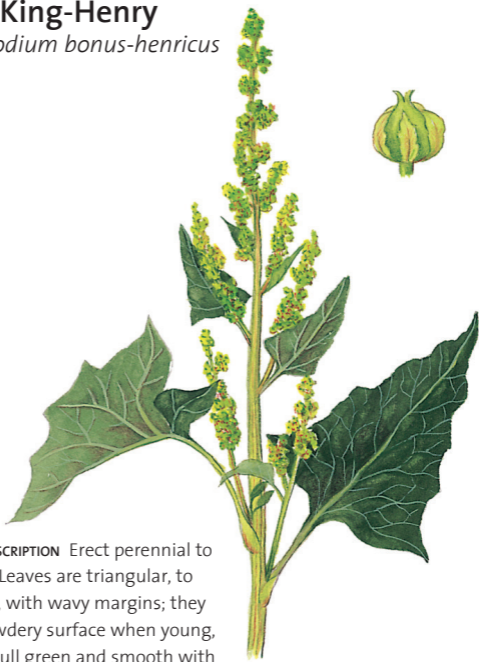
SIZE AND DESCRIPTION Perennial to 60cm tall. Leaves are arrowhead-shaped, with backwards-pointing basal lobes. Flowers are reddish and small, with three broad inner segments that become red and papery in the fruits. Also called Patriot's Blood and Sour Dock.

DISTRIBUTION Widespread in northern temperate regions, and cultivated in gardens.

USES Salad pot herb from ancient times; tastes metallic if cooked in an iron pan. Leaves are high in vitamin C, and oxalic acid gives them a tangy acid taste. They can be added to salads, soups and vegetable dishes, and sorrel purée is a good complement to fish and egg dishes.

Good-King-Henry

Chenopodium bonus-henricus



SIZE AND DESCRIPTION Erect perennial to 50cm tall. Leaves are triangular, to 10cm long, with wavy margins; they have a powdery surface when young, and turn dull green and smooth with age. Flowers are very small, greenish and borne on spikes.

DISTRIBUTION Widespread but local throughout Europe, except the south-east.

USES Young leaves can be eaten raw in salads, older leaves cooked in stews and soups, and young shoots cooked like asparagus. Seeds have a laxative effect. Avoid the plant if suffering from a kidney complaint or rheumatism.

Fat-hen

Chenopodium album

SIZE AND DESCRIPTION Annual to 1.5m tall. Reddish stems are usually covered with a powdery white meal. Leaves are generally oval and pointed, with toothed margins. Flowers are whitish, and grow in small tight clusters on an open spike with leaves at the lower end.

DISTRIBUTION Common across Europe.

USES Young leaves and shoots can be eaten like spinach, or finely chopped and added to stews and soups. They are a good source of vitamin B₁, protein, iron and calcium.

