



The Herbal Primer

A Primer for National Schools

Compiled with the assistance of
Coachford National School

A vibrant, stylized illustration of various vegetables and fruits. The composition includes several onions (one large yellow one, one smaller orange one), numerous blueberries, a large purple flower with prominent stamens, a carrot, a green vegetable (possibly a zucchini or cucumber), and a slice of orange. The style is simple and colorful, with bold outlines and flat colors.

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Proof reading Lucy Quane

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What is a herb?

A herb is a plant that is valued for its culinary, medicinal or health giving properties.

Herbs can be used in cooking, made into medicines, into products to clean the house, to keep the garden healthy or for skin care. Herbs are also used as natural dyes, to make perfumes and you may be able to think of other uses.

A herb may be an annual plant, a perennial plant, a wild plant, a vegetable, a shrub or a tree. There are many many different types of herbs. Some grow well in Ireland whilst some need warmer growing conditions and grow in the Mediterranean or the tropics.

In Ireland we have many useful local plants but have always imported some exotic herbs and spices such as ginger, cinnamon, black pepper, tea and coffee (yes, those can be used as herbs too).

We have a huge wealth of herb lore in Ireland. This country used to grow many medicinal herbs to export to the UK and people used to come to Ireland to learn about herbs and their uses.

Some ideas of how to learn more about the plants:

For a particular plants explore the following questions:

- What does it smell like?
- What does it look like? What color are the flowers? Do the leaves or flowers or whole plant remind you of anything? For example, the leaves are heart shaped, the flowers remind me of little faces, the flowers are the color of the sky, the leaves are furry, the flowers look like suns, the texture of the leaf looks like snake skin- whatever your imagination can come up with:)
- What does it taste like - sweet, sour, bitter (explain difference between bitter and sour), pungent/spicy, salty? Lemony, or other tastes it might remind you of.
- What does it feel like- furry, smooth, spiky, soft or other descriptions? Don't try this with plants that sting like nettles!
- Does the plant have a sound? This can be a tricky one, but some have seed pods that rattle or you can hear the sound of the wind blowing through them, see what you can come up with.
- Do you know any poems or songs that refer to the plant?
- Do you know any folklore about the plant?
- Do you know any recipes that the plant is used for?
- Do you know any other uses for the plant?
- Does the plant attract any beneficial insects - bees, butterflies, ladybirds or others?
- Is the plant annual (grows for one year), biennial (grows for 2 years) or perennial (grows for several years)?

Other ideas

Press some of the flowers or leaves and use them to make a picture Draw a picture of the plant

Use the flowers instead of crayons by rubbing them on a piece of paper, the colours they make can be quite surprising.

Make a tea with the plant

Try some of the recipes

Grow the plant in a tub or your garden

Write a story about the plant



SOME HERBS TO GROW IN THE GARDEN

ROSEMARY (*Rosmarinus officinalis*) The first part of the Latin name means sea dew because of the colour of the flowers and the second part of its name indicates it was one of the medicinal herbs used by the apothecaries) It is in the Mint (Lamiaceae) family.

It is a perennial bushy shrub with long narrow leaves which are dark green above and greyish underneath and have a strong aroma. The flowers are shades of blue and purple and are also aromatic, with a sweeter scent.

How to grow: Rosemary is originally from the Mediterranean so it prefers a light sandy alkaline soil and a sunny spot sheltered from gusty winds. It hates having its roots too wet or too cold. It was a favourite of the Greeks and Romans and has been grown in gardens for thousands of years. A rosemary bush can live more than 20 years if pruned regularly and may grow as tall as 1.5-3 metres; prune after flowering (January-May) and a couple more times before winter. It is easier to grow from a slip or to buy a plant as the seeds are hard to germinate in the Irish climate. If grown with cabbage, beans and carrots it deters their pests. It does not like growing next to basil.

Uses for health: Rosemary contains iron, calcium and vitamin B6. It contains antioxidants, essential acids, and phytonutrients that are good for the immune system and improve blood circulation. It is good for the digestion and can be used to treat tummy upsets. Rosemary is good for your brain and memory. It is good for your eyes too and scientists have found the antioxidants can help prevent cancer.

Skin care: Rosemary is used to treat acne and skin infections and also rejuvenates the skin, helping to prevent wrinkles. It is an excellent hair tonic, encouraging the hair to grow strong and healthy and preventing dandruff. For these reasons it is used as an ingredient in lots of skin care products and hair products.

Recipe ideas:

Rosemary Shortbread cookies Makes about 36 cookies

340g butter
135g sugar
3g chopped fresh rosemary
345g flour
2 g salt

Beat the butter and sugar until light and fluffy. Blend in the salt, flour and rosemary. Cover and put in the fridge for 1 hour. Preheat the oven to 190 oC and line a baking sheet with greaseproof paper. Roll the dough out and cut into cookie shapes. Bake for about 8 minutes or until golden brown. Allow the cookies to cool and then eat.

Rosemary potato wedges

1 kg potatoes
1 tablespoon olive oil
Chopped rosemary (1-3 dessertspoons depending on taste), black pepper, salt and some crushed garlic
Heat the oven to 200 oC. Wash and dry the potatoes, cut into large wedges and place in a baking tray. Sprinkle the other ingredients over and stir thoroughly. Bake until golden brown and cooked through 30-45 minutes.

Rosemary also works well in tomato sauce, on pizza, in soups, gravy, stuffing and stews. It is widely used in French, Greek, Spanish and Italian cooking. It goes well with poultry, red meat and with roasted vegetables and is also added to biscuits, apple pies and fruit crumbles.

Interesting facts and folklore:

- Rosemary attracts bees
- Rosemary is associated with friendship and wisdom
- It is a tonic for the heart



Oregano/ Wild Marjoram (*Origanum vulgare*) Origanum comes from a Greek word meaning joy of the mountain and vulgare means it is common. It is in the Mint (Lamiaceae) family .

How to grow: Native to Europe and also to Ireland. It is easily grown from seed planted after the last frosts or you can divide an established plant up. Set plants 10-15 cm apart and trim back regularly to encourage the plant to bush out. The leaves and flowers can be harvested regularly throughout the growing season. There are different varieties of the herb with distinctly different taste and appearance. It is closely related to Sweet marjoram (*Origanum marjorana*)

Uses for health: Oregano contains iron, manganese, vitamin E, calcium , omega 3 fatty acids and tryptophan as well as an essential oil and other valuable substances, including anti-oxidants. It is used to treat skin conditions including acne and dandruff. It is also used to treat asthma, respiratory infections, tummy upsets and infections, menstrual cramps and urinary infections

Skincare: Oregano has been used to treat warts, verrucae, and fungal skin conditions.

Recipe ideas:

Oregano and Lime roasted Chicken Breasts

1 tablespoon chopped fresh oregano
2 teaspoons grated lime rind
1 teaspoon ground cumin
2 teaspoons minced garlic
1/4 teaspoon ground black pepper
2 teaspoons olive oil
1/2 teaspoon salt
4 skinned chicken breasts

Combine the first 6 ingredients and rub over the chicken breasts. Cover and marinate in the fridge for at least 4 hours. Place the chicken in an ovenproof dish and bake at 190°C for about 30-45 minutes until cooked through.

Oregano pesto

1 litre loosely packed oregano leaves
A handful of pine nuts or cashew nuts
3-5 cloves garlic
Dessertspoon of balsamic or cider vinegar
Salt to taste

Place ingredients in food processor and start to blend. Drizzle in olive or hemp seed oil until desired consistency is reached.

Oregano is good in tomatoes sauces, especially for pasta and pizza. It works well in salad and salad dressings or with steamed or stewed vegetables. In Mexico the local variety of oregano is added to chilli, stews and meat dishes.

Interesting facts and folklore:

- The plant is recorded as being used in Assyrian medicine in 3000 BC
- Shepherds used to encourage their sheep to graze on oregano to improve the flavour of the meat
- The Greeks believed it was an antidote to poison
- Oregano became popular as a pizza herb in the USA when soldiers returned with a taste for it after the Second World War.
- In Shakespearean times ladies carried the herb in their tussie mussies (flower posies) to mask unpleasant odours and prevent infection. They also drank a tea of it on St. Luke's day to enable them to see their future husband
- Oregano is widely used in Turkish, Lebanese, Egyptian, Syrian, Portuguese, Italian, Spanish, Phillippino and Latin American cooking. It is popular in Southern Italian cooking whilst in the North they prefer Marjoram



Thyme (*Thymus vulgaris*) from the Greek thymos meaning spirit (originally meaning smoke) and vulgaris meaning common. A member of the Mint family (Lamiaceae)

How to grow: Thyme needs full sun and dry gritty soil. It can be grown from seed. The plants can be fairly shortly lived and may need replacing in the spring. There are many varieties of ornamental thymes and ones with unusual flavours such as lemon and orange thyme. Cut the plants regularly to encourage them to fill out. The flowers and leaves can both be used for cooking and health benefits

Uses for health: Thyme contains Vitamin B complex, beta-carotene, Vitamin A, K, E, C and folic acid. It contains many anti-oxidants and an essential oil that includes thymol which has been proven to have antiseptic and antifungal properties. Thyme is good for the immune system and helps the formation of white blood cells. It is good for the flu, bronchitis, asthma, whooping cough and colds. It is good for the digestion and the liver, treating wind, colic and tummy bugs. It is also good for muscle spasms and arthritis. It has a reputation for treating bedwetting.

Skincare: Nail fungus, hair loss

Recipe ideas:

Thyme and mushroom sauce

1 punnet of mushrooms, finely chopped
1 clove garlic, minced
2 tablespoons olive oil
3 tablespoons thyme leaves finely chopped Salt and pepper to taste
2 teaspoons arrowroot, cornflour or potato flour

Sauté the mushrooms and garlic in the olive oil until they soften. Add the thyme leaves, cover and allow to simmer for 10 minutes. Add 500 ml water and season to taste with salt and pepper. Dissolve the flour in a little good quality vinegar (balsamic or organic apple cider), stir into the sauce and simmer for 5 minutes. Serve with meat, potatoes, rice or pasta.

Interesting facts and folklore:

- The Greeks believed this plant would restore strength and clarity to the mind
- It was used as an incense in religious ceremonies and also to give courage in difficult circumstances
- It was placed in coffins at funerals and it was believed that the souls of the dead took up residence in the flowers of the plant
- Thyme used to be used as a disinfectant in bandages and to promote wound healing
- Thyme used to be used to preserve meat before the invention of fridges and freezers
- A glass of thyme and beer had a reputation for curing shyness



Basil (*Ocimum basilicum*) Ocimum is the classical Greek name for this plant and basilicum means princely or royal. It is in the Lamiaceae family.

How to Grow: Basil is native to India and Asia and has been cultivated for more than 5000 years. There are many species of basil; Sweet Basil is the most commonly grown and has many varieties. It is generally grown as an annual here and often under protection since our climate is often rather cold for this plant. It grows 30-130 cm tall and benefits from regular trimming. The leaves are about 2.5 cm long smooth, soft and cool to the touch. The highly fragrant flowers are small and white. Basil's main requirement is a good supply of warm sunshine. The seeds can be sown in April, about 5 seeds into a 5 cm pot. Lightly cover the seeds with compost and place in a warm spot. The seedlings will emerge within 2 weeks. Make sure that the compost is kept moist but not too damp. The seedlings can be potted on into a larger pot as they get bigger. Pinch out the growing tips regularly to encourage it to become bushy and cut individual leaves rather than chopping whole stems from the plant.

Uses for Health: Basil helps with digestion, easing wind, stomach cramps and indigestion. It can also be used to treat migraine and is full of antioxidants which keep the body young. It is calming and refreshing to the mind and nervous system and can help keep the mind fresh when studying. It has some antibacterial properties so can help prevent infections

Skincare: Full of antioxidants which keep the skin looking young if included in the diet. The plant can be used as an insect repellent and the leaves can be rubbed on insect bites

Recipes ideas:

Tomato, Basil and Chilli sauce Serve with fish or meat

2 cloves of garlic
A handful of black olives
A good bunch of fresh basil
1 fresh red chilli
Olive oil
400g tin of chopped tomatoes
Sea salt and ground black pepper to season



Peel and finely slice the garlic. Squash the olives and remove any stones then roughly chop them. Pick the basil leaves off their stalks and tear into pieces. Chop the chilli (remove the seeds if you want a milder flavour). Heat some olive oil in a large frying pan. Add the garlic, olives and chilli. Once the garlic is lightly golden add the basil followed by the tomatoes and seasoning. Bring to the boil and simmer for a couple of minutes then serve

Basil Pesto

110 g fresh basil leaves
150 ml extra virgin olive oil
25g fresh pine nuts or ground almonds
2 large garlic cloves peeled and crushed
50g grated parmesan
Salt to taste

The best pesto is made in a pestle and mortar but you can also make it in a food processor. If you cannot get sufficient basil other herbs such as parsley or oregano can be substituted; different but still delicious. You can even use fresh nettles or plantain or sorrel leaves. Pesto keeps for weeks in the fridge covered with a layer of olive oil. Either pound the first 4 ingredients together in a pestle and mortar or whizz in the food processor. Transfer into a bowl and stir in the parmesan. Taste and season then spoon into sterilized jars. Cover with a layer of olive oil and store in the fridge. Pesto can also be frozen but it is better to add the parmesan after defrosting. Serve stirred through pasta, on baked potatoes or in sandwiches.

Interesting facts and folklore:

- Basil was first mentioned in English writing in the Seventeenth Century and in American literature a hundred years later
- The plant is considered sacred in the Hindhu culture and is often planted around temples and houses to protect and bring prosperity. The species they use is called Tulsi or Holy Basil (*Ocimum sanctum*)
- In the Mayan culture they add basil to their water for mopping the floors to clear negativity and bring prosperity and happiness into a house
- In France farmers wives presented pots of basil to their visitors for their windowsills as a fly deterrent
- Some restaurants still put the plants on pavement tables for the same purpose
- The plant is said to appreciate the touch of human hands

Chives (*Allium schoenoprasum*) Allium is the Greek word for garlic and possibly derived from the Celtic word all meaning hot. Schoenoprasum refers to its resemblance to a rush. It is in the Liliaceae family.

How to grow: Chives are part of the onion family and prefer moist soil. They will happily grow in light shade or sun. They can be grown from seed planted in the spring or the clumps can be divided in the spring or autumn. Both the leaves and flowers can be used in cooking. Once they have flowered trim back to encourage another flush of growth.

Uses for health: Chives are high in beneficial nutrients such as vitamins A, C, K, folate, minerals calcium, magnesium, phosphorous, potassium and antioxidants as well as choline. The choline helps with sleep, healthy muscles, learning and memory. It also helps with building healthy cell membranes, good nerve function, healthy fat absorption and reducing chronic inflammation. They also help with digestion. They may increase urination and can help maintain healthy blood pressure.

Skincare: Chives do not tend to be added to skincare products due to their smell but eating them improves the health of the skin.

Recipe ideas

Chives can be used in salads, sandwiches, soups, stuffings, omelettes and many other dishes. The flowers are a wonderful colourful addition to salads

Interesting facts and folklore:

Marco Polo is credited with bringing chives back to Europe from China



Parsley (*Petroselinum crispum*) is a member of the Apiaceae family. The name means rock celery as it tends to grow in rocky habitats in the wild. It is native to the Mediterranean and can grow up to 30-45 cm. There are flat leaved forms with a stronger flavour and curly leaved ones that are milder and often used as garnish.

How to grow: The plant can be grown from seed every year (it is a biennial) once the soil temperatures warm up. Some people grow the seeds under cover initially and water them in with tepid water to encourage germination. Germination can be slow and may take up to 6 weeks. It attracts bees and butterflies and small birds feed on the seed heads if they are left for them.

Uses for health: Parsley is used as a tea or in food to improve the health of the digestion. It is also used for urinary problems and rid the body of excess acids. It has been used to make antiseptic and anti-inflammatory poultices for wounds, insect bites and sprains.

Skincare: An infusion or tea is used to wash the hair. It is used in facial steams and lotions for dry skin and to remove freckles. It is also used as a soothing eye bath.

Recipe ideas:

Bean and parsley paté

1 can cannellini beans
Juice and grated zest of 1 organic lemon
2 cloves garlic, minced
1 red pepper
Salt to taste

Large bunch of flat leaved parsley, stems removed if tough

Black pepper or a little chilli to taste

Place all ingredients in the food processor and blend until smooth. Add a little water or olive oil to get the desired texture. Great with rice, on crackers, with baked potatoes or to accompany other salads

Herb stuffing

4-6 cups bread crumbs 1 onion finely chopped

Large bunch of parsley plus sprigs of any or all of sage, rosemary, thyme, tarragon, oregano, chervil all finely chopped together

2 minced cloves of garlic

1/3 cup lemon juice

Grated zest of one lemon (optional) Black pepper to taste

Mix ingredients together making sure there is enough lemon juice to moisten the mixture. Place in a baking dish and drizzle a little olive oil on to make the top crispy. Bake at 180-200 oC for about 30-40 minutes

Interesting facts and folklore:

- Parsley is traditionally planted on Good Friday
- Parsley and rue were used by the Greeks as edging plants for their herb gardens giving rise to the saying 'at the parsley and rue' meaning the beginning of an enterprise
- Parsley garlands were worn at banquets to prevent intoxication
- Greek warriors fed parsley to their horses

Parsley



Mint (*Mentha species*) Mentha comes from the Greek name for the plant. Menthe was a nymph beloved by Pluto who was transformed into this plant by his jealous wife. It is in the Lamiaceae family

How to grow: Some mints (Spearmint and Green mint) can be grown from seed sown in the Spring. Others need to be raised from root or shoot cuttings taken in the Spring since they are hybrids (a cross between two parents that does not come true from seed). Mints prefer moist well drained soil with plenty of nutrients and do not mind a little shade. They can be invasive unless harvested regularly and therefore some people prefer to grow them in pots. The leaves should be picked regularly and have the best flavour before flowering.

Uses for health: Mints are generally good for the digestion, improving liver function and reducing flatulence or cramps in the guts. It helps with the digestion of fatty foods which is why mint sauce is traditionally served with lamb. They also help to relieve colds and fevers, reduce mucus and phlegm. Mint tea can reduce headaches and clear the mind after too much mental activity. Mint is also good as a wash for itchy skin and can relieve some aches and pains.

Skincare: The tea can be added to a bath or footbath for itchy skin.

Recipe ideas:

Tabbouleh

1/2 cup wholemeal couscous
1 cup boiling water
3 large tomatoes, diced
1 cucumber, diced
2 cloves garlic, minced
1 small red onion finely chopped
5-6 sprigs flat leaved parsley, finely chopped 5-6
sprigs mint, finely chopped
1 dessertspoon lemon juice
1-2 tablespoons olive oil



Pour boiling water over couscous and leave to stand for 10 minutes. Stir in other ingredients and add salt and pepper to taste. Allow flavours to mingle for at least half an hour before eating.

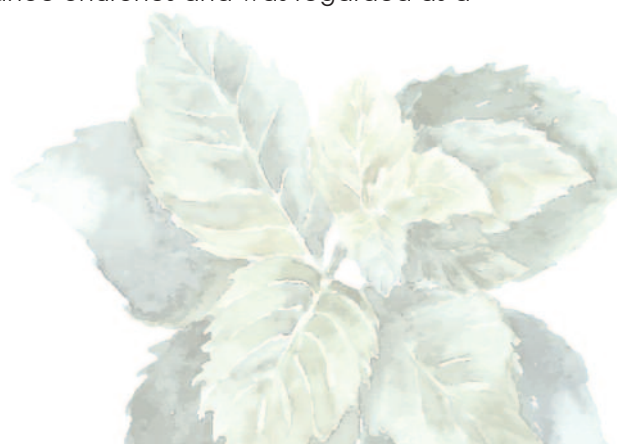
Koftas

500 g minced organic lamb, or chicken, or beef
1 onion, finely chopped
3 cloves of garlic finely minced
1 teaspoon bouillon powder
1 dessertspoon powdered cumin seeds
1 dessertspoon powdered coriander seed
Large bunch of mint, finely chopped

Combine ingredients thoroughly. Form into balls and bake at 190 oC for about 30 minutes until thoroughly cooked

Interesting facts and folklore:

- Mint has been held in high esteem throughout history
- The Pharisees were willing to take their tithes in mint, dill and cumin
- Mint is a symbol of hospitality
- It is known as Erba Santa Maria in Italy as it was used to fragrance churches and was regarded as a sacred herb in France and Italy



Melissa, Lemon Balm (*Melissa officinalis* Lamiaceae)

The name Melissa comes from the fact that bees love this plant

How to grow: The plant is native to the Mediterranean but has happily naturalised in Ireland. It can be grown from seed sown in the spring and will readily self seed. It can also be propagated by dividing clumps. The leaves are heart shaped, with toothed edges and are very wrinkled. The flowers are small typical lipped mint family flowers and the whole plant has a pleasant lemony aroma.

Uses for health: The plant has antiviral properties that can help treat cold sores and other viruses. It is a calming tonic for the heart, helping to lower blood pressure. It is also a calming nerve tonic that can be good for those who find it hard to sleep or for treating shock and hysteria. Although it is calming to the nerves it also has a reputation for improving memory function. It is a great liver tonic and is also calming to the digestion. It can be used as a fever tea. It is used in compresses or poultices for gout and painful swellings of the joints.

Recipe ideas:

The fresh leaves make a wonderfully refreshing tea.

A herb butter can be prepared by mixing the finely chopped herb into butter to serve with fish or chicken. The leaves can also be used to line the baking tin when making a sponge cake to impart a gentle lemon tang.

Interesting facts and folklore:

- Beekeepers sometimes rub the inside of the hives with Melissa leaves to stop the bees from vagabonding
- The Romans soaked the leaves in wine to treat scorpion stings and venomous bites
- The Elizabethans used the herb in salads, for tea and to flavour wine
- It had a reputation for renewing youthfulness even up to the 18th century
- It is considered to 'chase away melancholy'



Mint



Basil



Rosemary

Heartsease (*Viola tricolor* Violaceae)

How to grow: This small plant can grow as an annual or short lived perennial. It is grown from seed planted in the autumn or in the spring once the soil is warm and will self seed freely once established. It prefers a reasonably rich soil and a sunny position. It grows up to 40 cm tall. The leaves are lobed and oval and the flowers have 5 petals of a characteristic pansy arrangement. Usually the upper two are purple and the lower three are yellow/white with purple marking although this can vary. They nearly always look like happy smiling faces though.

Uses for health: Heartsease is good for itchy dry skin conditions especially eczema in children. It has also been used for respiratory problems such as bronchitis and whooping cough. It can reduce fevers and has been used for urinary infections. It is a nerve tonic and was traditionally used for broken hearts.

Skin care: Used as a wash or to make a cream to treat dry itchy skin. Recipe ideas: The flowers can be added to salads once they are tossed and they can also be used to garnish desserts or salsas.

Interesting facts and folklore:

- It's name stretches back into antiquity and it is traditionally associated with easing heartache and bringing happiness
- The name pansy comes from the French word Pensée, meaning thought
- It was once used in love potions and this is the flower whose juice was dropped into Queen Titania's eyes in Shakespeare's play A Midsummer Night's Dream to make her fall in love with Bottom the donkey
- In Medieval times, its association with love and romance was frowned on by the church and so it was called the Herb of the Trinity in an attempt to move peoples thoughts to more spiritual matters
- It is one of the flowers used in the traditional French tea or tisane of 5 flowers along with borage, marigold and a couple of others



Lavender (*Lavandula officinalis/vera/angustifolia* Lamiaceae)

The name *Lavandula* derives for its traditional use in laundry and washing (lavere)

How to grow: It is challenging to grow lavender from seed in the Irish climate so it is easier to buy a plant or take slips from existing plants once they have flowered. The plant needs to be vigorously trimmed back after flowering to prevent it becoming leggy.

Uses for health: Lavender is great for lots of things- headaches, migraine, indigestion, irritability and over excitement, asthma, coughs and colds, worms, burns, sunburn, sleeplessness, poor digestion and lots more.

Skin care: Lavender can be used as an infusion to wash the skin. It is also included in skin care preparations for helping heal scars, treat acne, repair the skin, sunburn, insect bites, athletes foot.

Recipe ideas:

Lavender shortbread

100g butter

50g sugar

175g self raising flour

2-3 teaspoons lavender flowers or combination of flowers and leaves according to taste. Alternatively use 1/2 and 1/2 lavender and rosemary

Cream the butter and sugar together. Mix in flour and lavender then knead into a smooth dough. Roll out the dough and cut into biscuits with a cutter. Place on an oiled baking sheet and bake at 220 oC for 10-12 minutes until golden.

Night time tea (put on your pyjamas before drinking this)

2 parts by volume each of dried lavender flowers, chamomile flowers, Tilia blossom, Melissa and 1 part rose petals. Used 1-2 teaspoons per cup. Pour on boiling water and leave to stand for 10 minutes before drinking.

Interesting facts and folklore:

- Lavender was widely used in the public bathhouses in ancient Greece and Rome
- It was widely used as a strewing herb
- The glove makers in Grasse used to scent their gloves with lavender oil and it seemed to protect them from many infectious diseases
- Lavender oil is still widely prized as an addition to laundry products
- In Provence, France where a lot of Lavender is grown they use Lavender water, oil and soap for cleaning and laundry



Marshmallow (*Althea officinalis*) Althea from the Greek alchaine to heal or cure. In the Malvaceae or mallow family.

How to grow: Marshmallow will grow easily from seed sown in the autumn or the spring. It can also be grown by dividing the roots.

Uses for health: Marshmallow roots, leaves and flowers are used to treat coughs, sore throats, heartburn, urinary infections, and irritated skin

Skincare: An infusion of marshmallow leaves can be used to soothe irritated itchy hot skin conditions like eczema. In France they combine the marshmallow with Tilia for this purpose.

Recipe ideas:

The traditional marshmallow sweets are rather complicated to make so here is an alternative.

Marshmallow Root Brownies

125 g butter

40 g marshmallow root powder

200 g sugar

50 g self-raising flour

1 teaspoon cinnamon and 1 teaspoon ginger (optional)

75g Chopped walnuts (optional)

Preheat oven to 180 oC. Line an 8 inch square cake tin with parchment. Melt the butter and stir in the marshmallow powder. Beat the eggs and sugar together, then add the butter and marshmallow root mixture to it Fold in the flour and spices. Stir in the nuts. Spoon into the cake tin and bake for about 40 minutes until cooked. Allow to cool in the tin then cut into squares

The seed heads were traditionally eaten and known as cheeses, biscuits or pies (they are delicious).

Interesting facts and folklore:

Marshmallow sweets were originally made from the root of the plant and included nuts and honey.



Marigold (*Calendula officinalis*) Calendula refers to the fact that in a mild year it will flower throughout the year. In the Asteraceae family

How to grow: An annual plant that will grow easily from seed sown in early spring. If one leaves a couple of plants to go to seed it will self seed freely. It loves a sunny position and good rich soil or can be grown in containers

Uses for health: Marigold flowers are really healing for the skin and the digestive system. They are good for relieving fevers, treating fungal infections.

Skincare: Marigold flower infusions are good for repairing damaged skin. The infused oil can be used to make skin repairing creams or ointments and also to make lip balm for chapped lips. Marigold can also be used to prevent and treat cold sores.

Recipe ideas:

Calendula and honey lip balm

100 ml calendula infused oil

50 ml rosehip oil

10 g beeswax or cocoa butter

2-3 heaped teaspoons honey

Gently melt all ingredients except the honey together in a bain marie. Allow to cool slightly and add honey and a few drops of essential oil (for example tea tree and lemon to protect against cold sores; mandarin and chamomile to help tissue repair for chapped lips; peppermint and eucalyptus); whisk until it starts to emulsify and pour into small jars; 15 ml plastic jars as ideal to carry around.

Interesting facts and folklore:

- Marigolds are a symbol of constancy and endurance Associated with heartease pansies it means happiness in recollections
- Its oldest name is ymbglidegold which means that which moves round the sun
- It is associated with the Virgin Mary and Queen Mary Tudor of England



Some of our most valuable herbs are often referred to as weeds, here a few examples:

Nettle (*Urtica dioica*) From the Latin *uro* to burn and *dioica* meaning that the male and female flowers occur on separate plants. In the *Urticaceae* family.

How to grow: One does not normally need to plant this herb, it just pops up all by itself. Trimming nettles regularly stops them from going to seed and means that there are leaves available to use all summer. Leave a few to go to seed though as the seeds are tasty and nutritious too.

Uses for health: Nettles are considered anti-inflammatory and good for gout, rheumatism, and arthritis. They also help reduce allergies such as eczema and hayfever. They are considered to be a good tonic for the blood. They are also good for the kidneys and liver. The Romans used to beat themselves with nettles to relieve their arthritis but nowadays people are more likely to drink the tea to help with this complaint.

Recipe ideas:

NETTLE SOUP

1-2 chopped onions
2 cloves of garlic
2 tablespoons olive oil or butter
2 diced potatoes
1 litre of nettle leaves
1 vegetable stock cube or a dessertspoon of bouillon powder
A few sprigs of parsley and thyme
Black pepper or ginger to taste

Sauté the onions in the olive oil. Add the potatoes and other ingredients and then add about a litre of water or oat milk. Simmer until the potatoes are cooked then liquidize to produce a rich green soup.

A similar soup can be made with other green herbs

RAW NETTLE PESTO

About a litre of gently packed nettle leaves (or 2/3 nettle and 1/3 golden marjoram)
1-3 cloves garlic
1/2 cup of ground almond or hazel nuts, or use whole cashews or pine nuts
1 dessertspoon balsamic or cider vinegar
125-250 ml olive or hemp seed oil, depending on the texture you like. I tend to gradually drizzle the oil into the mixture as it is processed in the food processor until the desired texture is reached
Salt to taste

Put all the ingredients except the oil in the food processor. Start the processor running and drizzle in oil until the desired texture is achieved; a little water can also be added. Pesto can also be made using a pestle and mortar.

Interesting facts and folklore:

- Nettles make a great animal fodder if dried and fed to them overwinter
- Nettles produce a fabulous green dye for fabric
- Nettles have been used to make the finest linen and also to make twine
- Nettles were traditionally used to brew beer
- A plant fertiliser can be made from nettles



Dandelion (*Taraxacum officinalis*) from the Persian talkh chaakok or bitter herb via medieval Latin tarasacon. In the Asteraceae family

Uses for health: The leaves are wonderful as a spring tonic high in potassium that helps flush excess fluid and acid from the body so assisting with healthy blood pressure and the treatment of arthritis or gout. The leaves and root both are good liver tonics

Skincare: Using the leaf and root internally can improve the skin by flushing out toxins

Recipe ideas:

Dandelion and burdock flapjacks

150 g porridge oats

100 g butter or olive oil

3 tablespoons agave syrup or honey

50 g raisins optional

50 g hazelnuts chopped optional

3 tablespoons mixed seeds optional

Dessertspoon ground dandelion root

Dessertspoon ground burdock root

Heat oven to 180 oC Melt butter and agave together. Mix in dry ingredients and press into a baking tray. Bake for 20 minutes or until golden brown. Allow to cool and cut into squares.

Interesting facts and folklore:

- In France the plant is known as Pis en Lit due to its diuretic effect
- The flowers make great spring food for bees



Daisy (*Bellis perennis*) probably from the Latin *Bellus* meaning pretty and *perennis* meaning perennial.

In the Asteraceae family

How to grow: These really do grow themselves. Just persuade people to let them grow in their lawns and you'll have a ready crop and they will have a prettier lawn

Uses for health: Daisy flowers are more effective than arnica for treating bruising and are great skin food. They are also traditionally used to make a tea for chest infections

Skincare: Use daisy tea as a wash and make daisy cream or ointment to repair the skin

Recipe ideas:

Plantain and Daisy Skin oil

Harvest equal quantities of plantain leaves (either ribwort or large leaved) and daisy flowers and place in a pyrex bowl in a bainmarie. Cover with olive oil and simmer for 2 hours. Leave over night and then press off. This may be used simply after bathing or showering to nourish the skin. It can also be used to prepare a bumps and bruises salve by adding 35g beeswax per 500 ml and 2% each lavender and tea tree essential oils. Daisy flowers (and a few young leaves) can be added to forage salads and are rich in vitamin C.

Daisy tea can be taken internally for the chest and stomach. The decoction or infusion can also be added to the bath.



Some valuable herbs are trees or shrubs. Here are three examples of natives that are valuable for their food and medicine

Hawthorn, White thorn, May (Crateagus monogyna) is our native White thorn Crataegus is from the Greek meaning strength either alluding to the hardness of the wood or its heart strengthening properties and monogyna refers to the single hard seed at the centre of the berries. It is in the Rosaceae family
Uses for health: Hawthorn flowering tops and berries are both renowned for strengthening the heart and circulation. They both strengthen the blood vessels and repair the lining of the gut and help reduce inflammation as well as improving collagen repair. Their action on the circulation means they can help with skin problems by improving the circulation to the skin and the memory by improving circulation to the head. The action on the heart means it can improve both high and low blood pressure and irregular heart beats. Skincare: A tea of hawthorn can help with various skin problems by improving circulation.

Recipe ideas:

The young flowering tops can be added to sandwiches or salads and are traditionally known as salt and pepper. The haws or berries can be used to make jelly to eat with game and red meat but this takes a lot of work. Hawthorn brandy is made by soaking the berries in brandy and is a traditional winter tonic for older people

Interesting facts and folklore:

- Hawthorn is known as a fairy tree in Ireland and it is traditionally believed to be bad luck to chop them down. Several major roads have been re- routed to by pass fairy trees due to the strength of the belief here
- Another name for Hawthorn is May as it flowers in this month and is a part of traditional Beltaine celebrations such as dancing around the Maypole in the UK
- The Irish name for Hawthorn is Sce and it is one of the Ogham alphabet trees



Elder (*Sambucus nigra*) is in the Caprifoliaceae family along with the Guelder Rose and Honeysuckle. It may be named for the sambuca, a musical instrument made from the wood and nigra meaning black due to the dark colour of the berries

Uses for health: Elderflowers are a wonderful tonic for hayfever, arthritis and anxiety. They are also used to treat fevers by promoting sweating. The berries are mildly laxative and an excellent treatment for flu having been shown to inactivate the flu virus. They are also good for repairing collagen in all the body tissues

Skincare: An aromatic water made from elderflower is widely used for improving the quality of the skin and as an aftershave to prevent barber's rash, a tea would probably be just as effective

Recipe ideas:

Elderflower cordial recipe from Neil McNulty

Ingredients:

35 large heads of Elderflower – all stalk removed

Juice of 3 lemons

Zest of these 3 lemons

2 litres of the best water

5 tsp citric acid

2 kg sugar (of course, you could try some Rice syrup but it won't thicken as much)

Method:

Put water, lemon juice/zest, citric acid & elderflowers in a large glass bowl exposed to the sun for a day

Strain the liquid – keep the elderflower heads in another bowl

Heat the liquid and turn off the heat, stir in the sugar until you have the consistency you want for the syrup.

Let syrup cool to the touching temp (lukewarm) and then pour syrup on top of the elderflowers and let sit for a couple of days (covered with cloth)

Strain and bottle and store in the fridge.

Elderberries can be used to make a delicious syrup, using to the recipe described under Rose.

Interesting facts and folklore:

- Elder trees have a huge amount of folklore attached to them
- In Denmark the tree is believed to be home to the Elder Mother and that one should always ask permission before cutting or harvesting any part of it
- It was believed that if one placed a baby in a crib made from elder wood the fairies would take the baby and substitute a changeling
- If one sleeps under an elder tree one would be carried off to fairyland



Wild Rose (*Rosa canina*) Rosa is the Latin name for these plants, canina means dog. In the Rosaceae family

Uses for health: Rosehips have long been used as a winter tonic due to their high levels of stable vitamin C. Recent research has shown that they also help relieve inflammation in conditions such as asthma and arthritis and help to repair collagen and are good for the gut lining. They are very high in antioxidants including vitamin C and bioflavonoids which help the action of vitamin C in the body. Both these constituents help with tissue repair and preventing aging processes in the body.

Skincare: A macerated oil of rosehip helps to repair the skin. An oil is extracted from the seeds in Chile and great value is placed on this for preventing wrinkles and healing scars

Recipe ideas:

Rosehip syrup

Use 40 g dried berries in 750 ml cold water, and simmer until reduced to about 500 ml. Strain off and add 500 g of rappadura sugar, honey or apple juice. Return to simmer until reduced to a syrupy consistency. Pour into a sterilised bottle and store in the fridge. Delicious poured over stewed apple or ice cream or as a winter cordial

Interesting facts and folklore:

- School children used to be sent out in the autumn to gather the berries to make rosehip syrup as a winter tonic before oranges were freely available
- Rose is a symbol of the heart and true love
- Rosa gallica/damascena is grown for its petals which are used to make an essential oil much prized in perfumes and skincare
- The petals are also used to prepare rose water which is used to make Turkish delight and other Middle Eastern delicacies and is used in skincare



Some basic recipes for preparations You can make at home

Food medicine One of the simplest and oldest ways of using herbs is to eat them as food. Hippocrates said let your food be your medicine and your medicine be your food; well, we can really do this with herbs. Dieting on herbs is a most excellent form of preventative medicine, a way of connecting properly with our environment, making ourselves more aligned with nature, part of nature. Herbs are full of all sorts of nutrients which are anti-oxidant, anti-inflammatory, immune system and tissue building, cleansing and tonic to the blood, clearing for the liver and much more besides. Studies are emerging that show that forage foods, and including good quantities of herbs and spices in the diet are preventative and curative for most of the ills of Western culture such as diabetes, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, chronic inflammatory disease in general. Kids love the frisson of preparing food from 'weeds' and wild plants. Many of our most valuable native and naturalized plants can be included in the diet easily and are much easier to grow than the cultivars that we tend to eat; they are fresher, in season, totally local and really flavoursome. For inspiration explore the recipes in the monographs at the end of the book.

Teas, tisanes or infusions are probably the next oldest way of using herbs, and definitely one of the easiest ways of using them. They are generally prepared from leaves, flowers, aerial parts and some seeds, either fresh or dried; they can also be prepared from powders of harder plant parts such as roots, barks and seeds. Teas will mainly extract the water-soluble components of the plant. If you are using an aromatic plant (one containing essential oil) use a teapot, or place a saucer over the cup whilst infusing. Always use freshly boiled water. Some plants are used as a substitute for tea and up to 5 cups can be safely consumed in a day. However, I would recommend that if being used in this way a maximum number per day would be 3-4 for any single herb, and to use a variety of herbs from day to day, or during the day rather than just one). Some herbs are much stronger in their action and only one or two cups should be taken in a day. Some herbs are not suitable for babies and young children, pregnant women or people on medication. The standard way to prepare a tea is to use 1 tsp dried herb or 2 tsp fresh herb (or mixture of herbs) for a one cup dose; pour on boiling water and allow to infuse for 5-10 minutes. If you are preparing a pot use 20g dried herb or 30g fresh herb to 500 ml water. Infusions can be stored in a covered container in the fridge for up to 24 hours. They may also be made in a thermos flask and stored in this for 24 hours. Do not add milk as this may bind some of the active constituents. Try to take without sweetening, but if necessary add a small amount of honey or apple juice concentrate.

Cold infusions are used for herbs containing large amounts of mucilage e.g. *Althea officinalis*, linseed. Aromatic herbs, those containing significant amounts of essential oil, are sometimes also extracted by cold infusion; soaking in cold water for 12 hours, this can be good if a cooling effect is being sought as in making cold Tilia infusion to calm hot flushes.

Teas can be prepared from a single species or you can experiment with blending herbs together in a tea; there are some examples in the monographs but this can be an extremely creative process and encourages us to work with taste, smell and the appearance of the tea.

Decoctions are used to prepare harder plant parts such as roots, barks, twigs, berries and seeds that need a stronger extraction method. Decocting is simply simmering in boiling water. The plant material, whether fresh or dried, should be cut or broken into small pieces before simmering to allow maximum extraction. The herbs are placed in a pan, covered with cold water and brought to the boil. They are then simmered for 20 -30 minutes. Use 20 g dried herbs or 40 g fresh herb in 750 ml cold water, reduced to about 500 ml by simmering; sufficient for 3- 4 doses. The standard dose is 3-4 cups per day (about 500 ml) and decoctions may be stored in a similar way to infusions.

Syrups are sometimes prepared as a way of disguising unpalatable herbs for children (of all ages), as a way of preserving herbs, and are particularly useful for treating sore throats and coughs. Syrups are made by adding 500 ml of prepared infusion (infused for 15 minutes) or decoction (simmered for 30 minutes) to 500 g honey, sugar (use the most whole form you can find such as rappadura), or apple juice concentrate. The liquid and sweetener are gently heated together until the sugar/honey is dissolved and the consistency is syrupy. The mixture is then removed from the heat and cooled. The syrup can then be stored in sterilised jars or bottles with corks. Be aware that they do sometimes ferment and explode, so store with caution!

They can be stored for about 6 months (preferably in the fridge) and the standard dose is 5-10 ml 3 times a day. Two classics are elderberry syrup to boost the immune system, and as a gentle laxative at higher doses, and thyme/licuorice as a cough remedy (see monographs for recipes). Syrups can also be used as cordial drinks in the winter and used as a food poured over ice cream, stewed fruit, fruit pies and crumbles and other foods.

Herbal vinegars are prepared by steeping the herb in organic cider vinegar (or other local organic vinegar, depending where you are preparing them).

200g dried herb

Or 300g fresh herb, finely chopped

1 litre organic cider vinegar

- 1 Place herbs into a clean jar
- 2 Pour on the vinegar, ensuring that the herb is covered
- 3 Close the jar tightly and label with the date and contents
- 4 Shake thoroughly for 1-2 minutes to ensure that the herb is thoroughly soaked in the vinegar
- 5 Shake every day for 1-2 minutes for 14 days

The easiest way to extract the vinegar is by using a wine press. Pour the mixture into the press and collect the liquids in a jug. Press down the material until no more can be extracted. If you do not have a wine press, strain the material through a jelly bag or muslin bag, then squeeze thoroughly, wearing food preparation gloves to prevent contamination.

Pour the pressed vinegar into sterilized jars or bottles and close firmly. Label the bottles clearly with the date and name of the preparation. Vinegars should keep for up to 3 years if stored in a cool, dark place. They can be used medicinally, to flavour food and as cleaning products (e.g. mopping floors, cleaning glass). For medicinal use, the standard dose is 5 ml 3 times daily in a little water or fruit juice for a healthy adult. Medicinal vinegars are particularly useful for extracting mineral from herbs.

Macerated or infused oils are made by soaking the herb in a cold pressed unrefined vegetable oil (almond, olive, sunflower are commonly used) for several weeks to obtain a cold infusion or by gently heating to about 60°C over a water bath for about three hours for a hot infusion. Once the maceration process is complete the oil is put through a press to complete the extraction and remove the spent herb. This process extracts the fat-soluble components of the herb for use in massage oils, liniments, creams and ointments. If a stronger preparation is required then the process is sometimes repeated with a fresh batch of herb. They will keep for up to a year if stored in a cool dry place.

Hot method

250g dried or 500g fresh herb

750ml cold pressed virgin and preferably organic vegetable oil (olive oil is the most stable for heating).

1. Mix the chopped herbs and oil together in a pyrex bowl and place over a pan of boiling water. Cover and simmer gently for 2-3 hours. May also be placed in a slow cooker.
2. Remove from the heat and allow to cool, then pour into a wine press as described for the vinegars, or through a bag .
3. Collect the strained oil in a sterile jug and pour into sterile bottles. Label with date and contents.
4. Store in a cool dark place for up to 1 year.

Cold method

1. loosely pack a sterile jar with fresh or dried herb. Herbs with a high water content such as calendula, chickweed, basil or comfrey are best prepared with dried herb, or by the hot method to prevent them going rancid. St. John's wort is best prepared by the cold method.
2. Place the jar on a sunny windowsill or in the hot press and leave for 2-6 weeks.
3. Strain as described for vinegars.
4. Label and stored as described above.

Infused oils may be used for culinary purposes, as massage oils or as the base to prepare ointments and creams.

Ointments/salves/balms are oil-based mixtures which help to protect the skin and only contain oily ingredients. They can be thickened with any wax, but beeswax is preferable as it has its own therapeutic properties. Use unbleached beeswax. If beeswax is not available use cocoa butter or another plant wax/or fat. Previously duck or goose fat and pig lard have been used and would be deemed to have their own therapeutic benefits. Ointments stay on the skin for a long time, so they are useful for forming barriers to protect the skin. They are also healing and soothing so are good for nappy rash, and for protecting the lips. They are also useful for dry areas such as knees, heels, feet and elbows.

They also keep heat and water in so are good for rheumatic aches, dehydrated skin and conditions made worse by cold weather. Do not use them if the skin is hot, inflamed or weepy.

300 ml infused oil or base oil

25 g beeswax; shredded or in beads.

Warm the ingredients together in a bain marie just to the point where the waxes melt. Add essential oils if desired and pour into clean jars. Label and leave to set in the fridge.

Creams are lighter than ointments, as they contain water and oil in an emulsion. Creams are more cooling than ointments and are absorbed more quickly. They are more suitable for hot, inflamed and weepy skin conditions. They are also useful for applying to warm areas of the body such as the groin. The ones described below are water in oil emulsions, which are good for moisturising. Oil in water emulsions are more difficult to make at home. A basic cream can be made with:

50 ml oil

15 g beeswax

50 ml infusion/decoction/ floral water

Cream method

Make sure ingredients are weighed accurately in a clean scales, otherwise consistency will be affected. If beeswax is being used then shred finely before weighing or use beads. Put oily and fatty ingredients into a stainless steel or pyrex bowl (oils, beeswax, cocoa butter). Stir the bowl with the fatty ingredients to facilitate melting. The best way to form an emulsion is to use an electric egg beater on its' lowest speed. Alternatively, use an egg whisk or a balloon whisk. Add the water slowly (a few drops at a time, increasing to a small stream), until it is all incorporated - like making mayonnaise. If adding essential oils, stir in carefully (the maximum amount one should use in the recipe above is 20-40 drops). The cream can then be put into jars and left in the fridge until set. Make sure to label jars with ingredients and date.

The recipe can be multiplied up to make larger batches of cream. Once the technique has been mastered you can also play around with the proportions to make lighter or firmer creams - enjoy.

These creams do not have preservatives so will not last as long as commercial creams; storing in the fridge will lengthen shelf life. Also, rather than dipping fingers into the jars use a spatula or spoon to dispense the cream. Before making any of these preparations you need to prepare your equipment and ensure that it is spotlessly clean. Use stainless steel, or glass containers, bowls and pans. Use stainless steel implements, for stirring, mixing, chopping ingredients and so on. Avoid using any dirty jars, or implements, tie back long hair and keep fingers out of all mixtures to prevent contamination. Any preparations that show signs of contamination (mould growing or smelling 'off') should be discarded immediately. Occasionally, water will 'bleed' out of the cream. This does not mean that they have gone off, but that some separation has occurred. They are still ok to use.

Baths: Bathing with herbs has a long tradition. In Ireland there are still several places that offer seaweed baths for health. Herbal baths can be used for many purposes. Foot baths are really good for detoxifying the system and stimulating the circulation. Hand baths can be valuable for arthritic hands. Full body baths can be great for delivering a good dose of herbs through the skin. Our skin is permeable to many of the plants constituents and they get straight into the general circulation. Sitz baths are used to treat the bowel, kidneys, reproductive organs and congestion in the abdomen and pelvis and problems with the hips. For a sitz bath one needs two containers that are large enough to sit in; one contains hot water with the herbs or oils added, the other contains cool water. One sits first in the hot water and herbs with the feet in the cool water so that the circulation and the medicine are drawn into the lower trunk for about 10 minutes. Then one sits in the cool water with the feet in the hot water for 10 minutes to draw the circulation to the

extremities. This can be repeated several times. Baths can be prepared with infusions, decoctions or essential oils and salt or Epsom salts may also be used.

Poultices are made with a mixture of fresh, dried or powdered herbs, simmered or simply steeped in the minimum quantity of water for two minutes and applied externally. Marshmallow root powder, green clay, or linseed can be added to give a better texture and for their own drawing qualities, especially for infected wounds, ulcers or boils. Poultices are also used for nerve and muscle pain, sprains and broken bones - in these cases a small pinch of ginger or a couple of drops of ginger oil may be added to 'potentise' the action. Poultices may also be used for mastitis or engorged breasts- either cold cabbage leaves or warm calendula. Try to ensure that only sufficient water is present when simmering or soaking in hot water to form a firm texture without having to squeeze off any liquid; apply some oil to the area being treated to prevent the poultice sticking and the herbs are applied as hot as possible, taking care not to scald the skin. The herbs are laid on lint and covered with gauze, then the poultice is applied gauze side to skin and bandaged in place. It may be left for between 30 minutes and 24 hours, depending on what is being treated.

There are many other forms in which herbs can be used; these ones are easy enough to prepare and fun to make at home. The books listed below give other formulae and recipes and there are some excellent recipes available online



RECOMMENDED READING

Hedley, Christopher and Shaw, Non Herbal Remedies Mustard

Irish Wild flowers Zoe Devlin

Jekka's Complete Herbal Jekka McVicar

Any of Glennie Kindred's herb books



Mint



Basil



Parsley



Thyme



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leaves

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