Medicinal Properties of Culinary Herbs

Our last speaker of the season was Sarah Sorci of Sweet Flag Herbs. Sarah is an herbal educator, writer, and therapeutic gardening facilitator. She shared great information, samples, and recipes with us! Check out her website at <https://sweetflagherbs.com/>

Sarah talked about aromatic herbs, which are characterized by very small oil molecules that allow them to disperse in the air easily, and to help in our bodies. These herbs can usually be easily accessed by growing them, or by buying them at the grocery store. Use of the plants is generally less expensive than using essential oils of the same herbs, which can have a high cost. Use of the plant is also usually safer than use of concentrated essential oils (especially if ingested – which is not recommended for essential oils without special knowledge/training).

The small molecules of aromatic herbs allow the plants to spread their lovely scents, and also allows the molecules to pass through cell walls of pathogens. For this reason, many aromatic herbs are antimicrobial. Some are also helpful to good bacteria while fighting bad bacteria.

IMPORTANT NOTE: Please consult with a medical professional if you have any health condition or want to take an amount of herb larger than a usual culinary serving, or use an herb more often than occasionally.

Common uses for aromatic herbs include:

* Skin salves - for cuts or burns
* Culinary preservatives - like high amounts of hops used in IPA beers (originally done to help the beer survive long transportation routes; IPA = India Pale Ale.
* Digestive aids
  + Gently stimulate the lining of the digestive tract to keep things moving
  + Improve nutrient absorption
  + Relieve gas/bloating
* Aromatherapeutic – no essential oils needed
  + Molecules can cross the brain-blood barrier to improve mood (Sarah recommends covering your tea cup as you steep herbal teas to keep those aromatic molecules from escaping before you can breathe them in or drink them)

Sarah gave these instructions for making an herb tincture, which is a concentrated extraction of the herb:

1. Press herbs into an airtight glass jar until almost full
2. If using dried herbs, use 100 proof vodka and fill to cover the herbs in the jar
3. If using fresh herbs, use 190 proof Everclear. This higher amount of alcohol compensates for the water content in the fresh herbs
4. Cover jar and keep in a cool, dark place. Shake the jar every few days
5. After 2 to 4 weeks, drain the jar, squeezing all the liquid out of the herb material. Store the liquid and discard the herbs.

Dried herbs should be ok to store for 1 to 2 years if kept in an airtight container in a cool, dry place.

Tinctures can be stored for decades in bottles with a polyseal cap. Caps with rubber parts (like dropper caps) can deteriorate over time, so are not good for long-term storage.

You can also freeze herbs, stored in a plastic bag. Use a straw to suck the air out of the bag as you seal it (or use a food vacuum sealing system).

Sarah then talked about a few herbs that are grown easily in Western New York…

**Rosemary** has been shown via some studies to improve memory (drinking rosemary tea before a test may help you remember what you studied). It is high in antioxidants. When used as a seasoning on meat, it can help reduce the amount of carcinogenic compounds (like the carbon from grilling) that you ingest.

**Thyme** is a gentle antispasmodic, meaning it can help relieve a cough. It is also an expectorant; it thins mucus and makes it easier to expel. Sarah shared a sample of honey infused with thyme – it was delicious. See the photos for a recipe.

**Bee Balm (Wild Bergamot)** is part of the mint family and can be used as a replacement for oregano or thyme in recipes. You can infuse honey with it too using the same recipe. Sarah advised that for any herbal infusion, be mindful of the carrier substance you use. Honey is helpful in its own way; it is antimicrobial, soothing for a sore throat, and use of local honey can help with allergies.

**Garlic** is easy to grow, and may help blood pressure and cholesterol levels. It is also an expectorant. It can help reduce pathogens in your digestive system while helping beneficial gut flora. Studies have suggested that garlic may be helpful for recurring infections. Bacteria become resistant to antibiotics by building a biofilm that allows the bacteria to survive. Garlic can penetrate biofilm and help improve antibiotic performance. As cautioned above, check with your doctor before taking large amounts or garlic or taking it often. You can combine garlic, olive oil, and salt and use in many recipes. But be cautious that you use it within a few days – garlic has no preservative properties. The jarred garlic in oil you buy at the grocery store has preservatives added, but read labels for safe storage time. You can make a vinegar infusion if you want to store for a long time – vinegar does have preservative properties.

Sarah also passed around a jar of salt infused with **Basil**. The salt infusions usually work well with drier herbs (lemon verbena is a good one) but the basil salt turned out pretty good (basil has a lot of moisture in it). See the photos for how to make herbal salts.

Sarah recommends Mountain Rose Herbs as a good place to order herbs online.

She also recommends the book “The Healing Garden” by Juliet Blankespoor. It has lots of herbal information from the seed stage to what to do with the harvest of your herbs.

Please check out her website <https://sweetflagherbs.com/> for more information, workshops, newsletter sign up, classes, and more!



