

## Tea Is Good Medicine

By Susan Camp

It's Friday afternoon, it's snowing, and I'm bored. There is nothing to watch on our 900 channels of satellite television. I should begin working on one of my many projects. I have several awaiting my attention, not to mention this weekly column. I think I will have a cup of herbal tea and write about herbal medicine.

Information about herbal preparations abounds in alternative and complementary health care literature, including how to grow herbs used for teas, aromatherapy, and medicine. If you have ever grown a kitchen herb garden or filled a flowerpot with lavender or lemon balm, you have grown medicinal herbs.

The history of plant medicine goes back to the beginning of recorded time. Can you imagine the first upright human who thought, "I wonder what will happen if I pour water over these leaves and drink the results?" During the Middle Ages and Renaissance, apothecary or physic gardens were grown at European monasteries and convents. Through the centuries, medicinal plants formed the basis for pharmacologic treatment of illnesses and injuries.

Herbal preparations once were the mainstay of health care providers' defense against illness and injury. Doctors often were in scarce supply in rural areas, so granny or yarb (herb) doctors in the Appalachians and Ozarks gathered the plants and concocted the teas, salves, and poultices used to soothe coughs and pains and heal wounds.

Many medications used today either are produced from the plants themselves or else their chemical components are synthesized in the laboratory. Pharmacy shelves are stocked with various concentrations and combinations of herbal preparations for nutritional supplementation and physical and psychological conditions. Most of us have no problem trying the latest product to improve memory, relieve joint pain, or elevate mood, even though the purity and efficacy of the product can't be insured. Herbal preparations are used extensively as standard medications in Europe and other areas of the world.

Have you ever thought about dedicating a portion of your garden to growing a few medicinal herbs? If you decide to make your own medicines, there are a few rules to follow. Pregnant women and breast-feeding mothers should avoid using herbal preparations without first consulting a physician. Check with your doctor to make sure herbal medicines don't interact with prescribed or over the counter drugs. Herbal preparations should not be given to children. If you are allergic to a plant, don't use it. Avoid using pesticides and fertilizers on your herbs.

A few herbs that are easy to grow and make delicious, healthy teas are chamomile, lemon balm, and echinacea. German (*Matricaria recutita*) and Roman (*Chamaemelum nobile*) chamomiles, with their dainty, white and yellow, daisy-like flowers and lacy foliage have long been used to

induce sleep and relieve gastrointestinal upsets. German chamomile is a short-lived annual that sprouts easily from seed in full sun and sandy loam with good drainage, although it will tolerate most soil conditions. Chamomile will volunteer in the garden next season.

Lemon balm (*Melissa officinalis*) is a perennial that is easy to grow in the garden. It likes full sun, but our hot summers can leave it looking a little ratty. It will tolerate most soils. Bees love it for its nectar and humans enjoy its lemony, minty fragrance. The leaves make a delicious hot or cold tea that can aid digestion and relieve stress.

Purple coneflower (*Echinacea purpurea*) is a popular native perennial, touted as an immune system booster and used to decrease the length of common cold symptoms. Echinacea grows well in full sun to part shade in well-drained soil. Tea is made from the leaves and flowers.

Whether you prefer to buy your herbal teas at the grocery store or grow and harvest the flowers and leaves to make your own delicious brews, you are participating in the long history of using nature's health products. Medicine that helps me have sweet dreams, eases heartburn, and shortens the sniffles can't be bad, especially if it tastes good, too.