

# herbal HEALING

Don't confine herbs to the kitchen. Many of them should be in your medicine cabinet too. By Julia Nekich.

**D**id you know that most common culinary herbs and flowers also have wonderful medicinal uses?

John Baxter, of Wholistic Health and Therapy in Sydney and Melbourne, and president of the National Herbalists Association of Australia (NHAA), says: "Herbs contain a complex cocktail of chemicals, and often it is this mix that gives the herbs their healing actions."

As they're natural products, herbs are easily digested, absorbed and metabolised by our bodies.

According to the NHAA, most herbal medicines are safe (with some notable exceptions), can be used for long periods, and some are as effective as some pharmaceuticals, without the side effects.

We asked a panel of qualified Australian herbalists and naturopaths to nominate the most effective culinary herbs and flowers for alleviating some common illnesses.

## THYME

Gabrieli Rosa, of Natural Fertility and Health Solutions in Sydney, says: "Thyme is my herb of choice when treating respiratory infections and coughs, particularly when the condition has deeply settled into the lungs."

## Marigold

Marigold (or calendula) is a popular garden flower. But according to naturopath and herbalist Anne Gowper, based in Lake Macquarie, NSW, its petals have also been known to herbalists for centuries for their gentle healing action on the skin and eyes.

"We now know much more about the constituents of the plant and its antiseptic and anti-inflammatory actions," Gowper says. "Calendula is still used to treat eye conditions, both internally and topically. It's particularly valuable for treating infections in children and boosting immunity. It has a gentle astringent action useful for damaged skin and the internal mucous membrane."

David McLeod, of Brisbane's Healthwise Clinic, says that marigold flowers and leaves, made as a tea or in extract form, can also be used for colds, tonsillitis and indigestion.

"Thyme helps loosen and dispel mucus, while killing the organisms causing the problem. As a naturopath, I use it in a liquid extract form, but it's a great home remedy for colds and sore throats. Make a tea or gargle using equal parts of dried sage and thyme."

According to Adelaide-based Helen Stevenson, executive director of the NHAA, thyme contains the essential oil thymol. "This is partially excreted through the lungs, and is strongly anti-microbial, which is why it helps kill lung infections."

## CINNAMON

David McLeod, of Brisbane's Healthwise Clinic, says: "Cinnamon is a warming digestive herb, used a lot for irritable bowel syndrome, flatulence and digestive deficiencies associated with colds, and it is often added to cold and flu remedies."

Rosa adds: "Therapeutically, cinnamon is extremely effective in a concentrated liquid extract form. Some recent scientific studies showed that consuming as little as half a teaspoon each day may reduce blood sugar, cholesterol and triglyceride levels by as much as 20 per cent in patients with type 2 diabetes who are not taking insulin."

Rosa says cinnamon is also a great uterine tonic: "It helps relieve uterine cramping and also assists in preventing menstrual flooding in women with heavy bleeding."

## PEPPERMINT

Peppermint has been discovered in Egyptian tombs dating back to 1000BC.

"Peppermint can be taken internally as a liquid extract," says Rosa. "It's good for digestive complaints, and there are few remedies more efficient than peppermint for bloating, wind and vomiting. It calms the stomach, making it the tea of choice after an over-indulgent meal. It also helps settle morning sickness in pregnant women."

And Stevenson says it can also help reduce cold and flu symptoms.

## NASTURTIUM

"The young leaves and flower heads are used for their antibiotic action on the lungs and urinary tract; the green seed (which can be pickled) has topical antifungal actions; and the whole plant, with its large fleshy stem, is used as a gentle antibiotic and 'cleanser'," Gowper says.

Stevenson says: "Make a nasturtium tea to use as a wash for treating tinea."

## TURMERIC

This mildly spicy herb used in Indian cooking is available cheaply as a root or powder.

## Ginger

Ginger has an anti-nausea effect – good news for pregnant women. "Take ginger tea in the morning to help prevent the onset of nausea," Baxter says. "Trials have also been done on its effectiveness as a seasickness treatment and, in one trial involving more than 1400 people, ginger was as effective as some drugs. For the best effect, take it before the journey begins."

Used in cooking or as a tea, ginger also increases circulation. "Steep half a teaspoon of ginger in hot water," says Stevenson.

Ginger can help also relieve arthritic pain. "Combine it in a tea with peppermint for digestive upsets. It stimulates the digestive juices, so enhances the absorption of nutrients," McLeod says.



suffering from arthritis. "It is safe to use with other medications and during pregnancy," he says.

McLeod warns that turmeric needs to be used with care, and that it may irritate some stomachs.

## CHAMOMILE

Chamomile was considered a sacred herb in Saxon times. It was believed it had the power to revive other plants growing nearby.

"It's chamomile flowers that are used medicinally," McLeod says. "Add two teaspoons of the flowers to a cup of boiling water. It can be used for infantile colic, insomnia, dyspepsia and stomach complaints. It's also great as a skin wash and hair tonic."

## SAGE

McLeod says: "Infused in water, sage can be used as a mouthwash to alleviate sore throats. It's also used as a remedy for excess bleeding during menstruation."

Steeped in vinegar, sage can be used to help reduce flushing and sweating in menopausal women, Stevenson says.

The National Herbalists Association of Australia (NHAA) advises that culinary herbs should not be relied upon as the only form of medicine. Consult with a qualified herbalist before taking any herbal medicine, particularly if you are on medication or pregnant. The NHAA website, [www.nhaa.org.au](http://www.nhaa.org.au), has a list of all qualified member herbalists.