



ALI ENGLISH
WILD MEDICINE
Autumn & Winter

WILD MEDICINE
Autumn and Winter

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Wild Medicine: Spring

Wild Medicine: Summer

WILD MEDICINE

Autumn and Winter



Ali English

Aeon Books

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About the Author

Herbalist Ali English has been passionate about herbs from a young age and went on to study herbal medicine at Lincoln University, graduating in 2010 with a BSc (Hons). Since then, she has set up a practice in Lincolnshire that focuses on offering herb walks, workshops and a variety of related services, in which she tries to convey her love of our native herbs and wildflowers to anyone who will listen. *Wild Medicine: Autumn and Winter* is her second book, with many more to follow.

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and for my family, as always.

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Preface

Welcome to *Wild Medicine: Autumn and Winter*. It is my hope that this series of seasonal books will provide a source of information and kindle a keen delight in the glories of our native plants, both those growing in the hedgerows and those weedy adventurers tucked into nooks and crannies in our own gardens.

At the time of writing this brief introduction, harvest is well underway and the garden is ripening up with all sorts of delicious fruits, nuts and seeds. In the hedgerows, a slow tide of crimson is gradually making its way up the country as the hawthorn berries begin to take on red hues, and later on there will be rosehips garlanding the bushes, ripening slowly until the first frost nips them and renders them perfect for gathering. The first hop strobiles have appeared and will be ready for bringing in sometime in late September, in all their fragrant, resinous glory. I've always spent many happy hours in the autumn gathering in medicines and preparing syrups and tinctures, elixirs and teas, and the scent of rosehip syrup cooking on the hob is synonymous with autumn for me. I added root gathering somewhat later on, about halfway through my formal training as a herbalist, and it is now a cherished part of the yearly routine of gathering and medicine

making – and a delightfully messy enterprise that really reintroduces me to the soil every year.

Hopefully this book, which rather arbitrarily divides out a selection of herbs and designates them as autumn and winter herbs, will give you a rough idea of what delights can be gathered and made in the autumn and winter, using herbs, fruits and roots that are available from September through to February. It is by necessity a fairly brief introduction to the subject, but, herbalism being such a vast topic to cover, it may give you a thread to begin following as you commence or continue on your own journey into plant healing. By necessity there will be some plants not covered in this book that can be found in the other two volumes, though I have tried to include some recipes for autumn linked to, for example, the elder tree.

It is my aim that these books will provide hedgerow travel books to tuck into a pocket and take along with you in the warmer seasons and perhaps to inspire and console you through the winter. May they give you many years of enjoyment and help you towards your own deepening friendship with the plants that surround us and give us so much.

Green Blessings!

North Lincolnshire, 2019

Autumn and Winter



Introduction: gathering and preparing roots, seeds, barks and fruit

Many of the basic skills needed for medicine-making are covered briefly in *Wild Medicine: Summer*, but roots, seeds, barks and fruit require somewhat different preparation and gathering skills. Here is a brief outline of some of the things to remember while gathering and preparing medicines with the ingredients available in autumn and winter.

Roots

Roots are almost always dug in the autumn and winter, and occasionally (in the case of wood avens, *Geum urbanum*) in early spring before the plant really gets going with the new growth of the year. I tend to recommend that roots are dug in the afternoon and evening, or even at night, when the energy of the plant will be most thoroughly anchored in its roots, a principle that is part of moon gardening and biodynamics. You can even check the planetary ruler of each plant and try to gather on the appropriate days if you want to. I suggest using a garden fork to loosen the soil around the roots thoroughly before you try to unearth the

plant itself – remember that some roots, such as burdock, go down an astonishingly long way, so you will need to dig a much deeper hole than you expect to unearth a decent amount of it. In many cases, you can take the side roots of the plants and leave the central rhizome intact. Many plants will happily regrow from a tiny bit of root left in the ground, but do be aware that for most plants the roots are their life force, so show appreciation and respect – and, if you can, sow a few seeds from the plant in its place. Roots of biennial plants, such as burdock and angelica, need to be gathered in the first year, when the plant is in its basal rosette stage before it has flowered, as by the second year any nutrients stored in the roots will have been used to produce the first year's flowers and seeds.

Use a nail brush or an old toothbrush to scrub the surface of any gathered roots thoroughly – this is best done outside, using an outdoor tap if possible, as herb roots can harbour surprising amounts of soil and small passengers, not to mention tiny secondary roots, which will often need to be stripped off and disposed of before preparing the main collection of roots. These threadlike roots have the tendency to block kitchen sinks if prepared indoors. Once the roots are completely clean, chop them into smaller pieces, around 4 mm square, or into thin discs up to 2 mm thick, and use either a dehydrator or an oven on the lowest setting to slowly dry them down for storage. Roots toughen as they dry – if, for example, you dry dandelion roots whole, you will often find them almost impossible to break up again afterwards, as I learned the hard way on one of my first root-gathering expeditions. Once the prepared roots have dried thoroughly and shrunk a bit, they should be ready to store in jars. Remember to label them carefully, with the English and Latin names and the date stored. Roots will usually last quite a bit longer than dried herbs will – up to three years or more, depending on the kind of root. Good-quality dried roots should pack

a decent punch of flavour and still have a good colour to them. Angelica and elecampane roots, for example, should still be pungent and punchy; if, though, they have become wishy-washy and bland, it is time to compost them and gather fresh roots.

Roots can also be tinctured fresh, using the strongest alcohol you can obtain (a minimum of 40% proof is ideal, stronger is even better). Simply repeat the first steps of cleaning and finely chopping the roots, leave the surface to dry overnight if you have slightly weaker alcohol, then pack the chopped roots into a Kilner jar, and cover with alcohol, allowing an extra couple of centimetres on top of the herbs, then put the lid on. Leave the whole lot to infuse for at least two weeks – four is often better, as roots will take longer to infuse than leaves do. Remember that the smaller you get the root pieces, the better they will infuse into the alcohol to make a tincture.

Seeds

Seeds often need to be gathered before they are fully ripe. Gather the top 25 cm (10 in.) of the plant and suspend this upside down in a bundle, with the tops covered by a paper bag or a close-weave cloth bag, fastened in place with an elastic band. As the seeds ripen, they will fall off the plant and land in the bag, after which they can be stored and used as needed. Nettles can be hung to dry in bunches, and the seeds pinched off and rubbed through a sieve once dry.

Barks

Remember that ringing a tree – removing bark in a ring encircling the trunk – will kill it. However, trees are generally very capable

of repairing small patches of missing bark, so taking palm-sized amounts often works well, but do check first that the tree in question looks healthy, and also check those growing locally to it. If any neighbouring trees look unhealthy, or you had noticed that they looked unhealthy earlier in the year when they had leaves, don't take bark from trees in that area as it will weaken them and allow any local diseases to get into the bark and trunk. I generally prefer to prune off small branches and strip the bark from them for medicine-making purposes, but many herbalists have their own preferred methods for this. A paring knife or small bushcraft knife should work well for stripping bark – remember to peel away from yourself in order to avoid cutting your hands. Do be aware that in many countries, including the UK, you cannot legally carry a knife in the open, so if you are foraging for bark, take a bag with you and store your small bushcrafting blade well wrapped and at the bottom of the bag. Alternatively, take some secateurs with you, harvest small branches and bring them home for preparation.

At home, it is time to strip the bark from the branch. I find that a small paring knife works well for this – braced at a 45-degree angle against the twig or branch and pushed firmly away from you, it should take off strips and pieces of bark, including the inner pith, without too much difficulty. Once you have stripped the bark off, it can either be used as it is, or chopped down into much smaller pieces and dried in much the same way as roots, as described above. When dry, store the bark in clean glass jars that have been carefully labelled. Remember when peeling bark to ensure you get as much of the inner pith as possible, as this is usually the part that contains the highest medicinal values.

Fruit

Many fruits can be gathered when ripe, but some, such as sloes and rosehips, often benefit from freezing overnight as a way to break down the skins and allow their beneficial properties to be released more easily into water or other fluid. This is a useful step if the fruit has been gathered before the first proper frost of the year and is still very hard to the touch. Fruit can be more difficult than other parts of the plant to dry, though some fruits will do very well in a dehydrator.

Hawthorn is usually best gathered from September onwards – you will often find tiny fruit grubs inside the fruit, especially when gathered later on. These are not poisonous and can be picked out of any recipes you've used hawthorn berries in, such as ketchup. Rosehips need to have the irritating seeds and hairs in the centre stripped out before drying, which is a time-consuming job; it is definitely worth at least partially freezing the rosehips first to make it easier to chop them in half. Freshly picked before the first frosts arrive, the skins are so smooth that knives have the bad habit of sliding off, which is how accidents can happen. Many people prefer to just freeze the rosehips whole and use them as needed, but small quantities of rosehips can be prepared, chopped and dried for adding to teas and infusions.

Medicine making

Roots, bark and seeds need to be bashed up in a mortar and pestle before using them. Seeds should break down fairly well this way – they don't need to be powdered to extract properly, merely thoroughly bruised. For both dried and fresh roots and seeds, a good pounding with a mortar and pestle begins to break down their tough outer layers and will therefore allow better

access of water, alcohol or oil during medicine making, which will result in a more effective preparation. Roots and bark are easier to work with when pounded thoroughly using a good heavy mortar and pestle, which will help them extract more efficiently into water. My preferred technique for bashing up seeds is to partially cover the mortar with one hand and give the seeds good, firm taps with the pestle, used through the space left open between hand and mortar. This reduces the likelihood of the seeds ricocheting around the kitchen. Once the seeds have been roughly broken down, you can work the pestle in circles around the mortar, grinding the seeds more firmly against the sides.

Decoctions are the preferred water-extraction method for tougher plant parts, such as seeds, roots and bark, and there are two different methods you can use. Short decoctions can be made by allowing 1 tbsp of the chopped roots to 570 ml (20 fl oz) of water, and then simmering the lot on a moderate heat until the liquid quantity has reduced by about half. Long decoctions are simmered for several hours, with equivalent amounts of herbs and water, but the water level is topped up from time to time to really give the water time to get the best out of the roots. This process can be fascinating to watch as an almost oily layer forms on top of the liquid over a period of hours. Short decoctions can last up to three days when stored in a fridge, and are taken in approximately half-cup (120 ml) doses, while long decoctions can last months when kept in the fridge, and are taken in 1 tbsp (15 ml) doses.

Tinctures need to be made using the strongest alcohol you can get, and I tend to prefer to let them steep for twice as long as leafy tinctures to really allow them to extract properly into the alcohol. If you are using dried roots or seeds, leave for at least four weeks before straining out the spent herbs, and use at least 35% proof alcohol, if at all possible. You can use vodka, brandy, gin, rum or any kind of alcohol you prefer, but remember that

tinctures are made to act as medicines – they are taken in small doses.

If you choose to buy a tincture, this will be specified as a ratio followed by a percentage, such as 1:3 40%. Here, the ratio signifies that 3 ml of liquid contains 1 g of the herb, and 40% indicates the percentage of alcohol in the liquid.

This is only a very brief introduction to medicine making with roots, seeds, barks and fruits – further hints and tips will be included with the herbs covered in this book, as needed.

Autumn and winter herbs for the medicine garden

There is a range of herbs that make great additions to the medicine garden and are suitable for gathering in the late summer, autumn and winter. Here is a very brief, but by no means exhaustive, list – why not grow a few of these beauties yourself?

Angelica (*Angelica archangelica*) would have to be first on the list. This beautiful and statuesque plant gives warming medicine for the stomach and circulation and produces masses of bright-green leaves, huge flower heads of pale-green flowers in its second year of growth, and plentiful amounts of seeds in the autumn. Remember to plant some of those seeds straight from the flower head if you would like to propagate your plant.

Blue flag (*Iris versicolor*) is a water-loving plant and makes a beautiful display in a water garden – but if you don't have a pond or an aquatic environment for it, why not grow it in a large pot instead? Don't drill any holes in the bottom of the pot, but keep the plant well watered and it will reward you all summer with masses of beautiful leaves and a flowering season of purple flowers followed by fascinating seed heads.

Calamus (*Acorus calamus*) root gives valuable medicine as well, and can be planted alongside blue flag plants if you like, although they can sometimes be drowned out by them. If you are worried that your calamus root may not survive the battle with the blue flag, give it its own separate water pot and it will reward you with masses of fragrant roots.

Chicory (*Chicorium intybus*) gives beautiful blue flowers all summer, followed by bitter, but tasty and nourishing roots in the autumn. If you'd like to make your own chicory coffee, you might want to consider growing a whole patch of these handsome plants.

Cramp bark (*Viburnum opulus*) makes a beautiful hedge and a very lovely, showy plant in the garden as well, with masses of snowy flowers in the spring leading to autumnal shows of red and purple foliage punctuated with semi-translucent, glossy red berries much beloved by birds.

Marshmallow (*Althaea officinalis*) flowers all summer, and the flowers and leaves can be gathered then for medicine making. The root of this perennial can be dug up in the autumn for its soothing properties.

Sweet cicely (*Myrrhis odorata*) produces filmy, fern-like foliage all summer, with a flowering season of delicate white blooms in May. Later in the summer and autumn, substantial seed heads are produced, which start out green and turn a glossy black over time. Both these and the roots make great food and equally good medicine.

Last, but not least, would have to be **yarrow** (*Achillea millefolium*). There are several brightly coloured cultivars of this wonderful medicinal plant, but for the useful sorts, go for the traditional variety (check the Latin name, to be sure that is what you've got). Plant it in a place that gives it not particularly good soil, and you should get plenty of aromatic flowers from late summer through most of autumn.