



ALI ENGLISH  
WILD MEDICINE

*Spring*

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Spring

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# WILD MEDICINE

Spring



*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: Spring* is her third book, with many more to follow.



# Acknowledgements

For Matt, my Viking – as always an unconditional pillar of support and love.

And for the plants – those friends and neighbours who bring such delight and who provide pretty much everything we really need in life, as well as giving such beauty to the world.

# Preface

Welcome to *Wild Medicine: Spring*. Spring herbs are an absolute delight, coming through as they do after an often long, monotonous winter and bringing with them vibrant greens and yellows; and even though damp, rainy and often chilly weather may often preclude gathering and drying herbs at this time of year, nonetheless a plethora of useful and tasty recipes can be made with what you can pick. It is a particular joy to walk the countryside at the very threshold of spring, falling as it often does during late February in the UK, though late snow can often laugh at us for being deceived. Watching the world slowly stretch awake, one bud and sprout at a time, defying snow and late frosts, is a constant delight, and our native herb life is well equipped to deal with these challenges. Early spring light on the first mornings without frost seems redolent with promise, lying in golden swathes across the land, lifting and heartening the spirit and slowly calling the earth back into life again. Slowly the sun regains its warmth, the birds begin to sing, and the season gathers pace, bringing us meadow flowers, hawthorn and the onset of the greener season.

This book is meant to give you a starting point for learning to know and appreciate the herbs of spring, from the sunny flowers of dandelion – intrepid explorer and denizen of vegetable beds, flower beds and gravel areas – across to the rampant scramblings of cleavers and the juicy leaves and starry flowers of chickweed. Later in the spring there will be cowslips and violets to delight the eye and soothe the body, and later still, on the cusp of summer, there will be hawthorn flowers, all of which make wonderful medicine, alongside many others.

It is my hope that these 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. Plants have long been a passion of mine, ever since a bespectacled girl child of 13 asked for a garden and was given a small, round plot with four herbs and a sundial in it, plus a copy of Culpeper's *Complete Herbal*. Three years on, that small plot boasted more than 40 herbs, and I was badgering my mother for more space. The obsession went on from there, and, many years later, I graduated from university and began building a career working with the plants that had delighted, inspired and enchanted me for so long. It is difficult to ever feel alone in the world if you cultivate a friendship with the local wild plants – everywhere you look, you will see them eking out a living for themselves: the wily and determined dandelion tucking himself into cracks between paving slabs, the tall, elegant willow and balsam poplar by the river in my home city of Lincoln, hawthorn in the hedgerows, poppies in brilliant red swathes across farmland in late summer. Plants are all around us, and over time they have become a true need for me, like water and food, air and freedom. Indeed, they are deeply entwined in my very blood and body, as they are for all of us – we inhale as they exhale, and we exchange breaths with plants constantly, sharing the same air.

It is my aim that these books will provide hedgerow travel companions to inspire and console you through the winter and, perhaps, to tuck into a pocket and take along with you in the warmer seasons. 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, and happy foraging!

*North Lincolnshire, 2020*



Spring





# Introduction: *foraging and medicine making*

Spring can be an exciting though sometimes frustrating time of year for medicine making, starting off slowly with mists and frosts and soggy days, then suddenly speeding up as the sun gains warmth. Nevertheless, even as early as February, there are quite a few wonderful plants that are well worth making the trek for through rain, chill, early fog and wet ground. Here are a few things to remember if you would like to spend time gathering herbs in the spring for drying, or for medicine making in general.

## Foraging

In the dampness of very early spring, the likelihood of being able to find surface-dry herbs is extremely low, so I recommend having a dehydrator handy, if possible, plus a selection of old tea towels to wrap herbs in. A salad spinner can be a handy gadget too if you bring in herbs that are very wet indeed. Hanging surface-wet herbs up to dry is, sadly, pretty much impossible in the spring as they tend to mould instead of drying, so the



dehydrator is a handy alternative. Dry your herbs in a single layer, on a low to moderate setting, and keep track of any water trapped in pockets on the leaves – I find that the best bet is to get as much water off as possible on a tea towel before you lay the herbs out in racks, and possibly even use a salad spinner to remove the worst of the water first. Also consider other ways of preserving the early spring herbs: make tinctures and vinegars, freeze them, or incorporate them in soups and stews.

I rarely gather aromatic herbs in the early spring for drying, not least because their scented compounds haven't usually come through enough yet to make it worth while. Wait until at least late April or early May for scented herbs, in order to let the plants get more sun and produce more volatile oils: by this point you should also find that there is a greater likelihood of getting a dry day to pick them.

There are some plants that can be gathered for roots in the spring, most notably wood avens (*Geum urbanum*) – which rather goes against everything we know about root gathering generally. These roots can be gathered in late March, April or early May, ideally in full or partial sun, so that the scented compounds in the roots have more time to gather strength. Wood avens is an annual, so if you wait until autumn, you will find that most of the nutrients in the roots have been used to produce flowers and seeds. Digging them up in early April guarantees the best possible harvest. Just use the same principles as any other root harvest – dig them early in the morning or late afternoon, cut off the green tops and bunch them up for drying, then scrub the roots clean, pat them dry and chop them up. They should dry quite readily on saucers or put into the dehydrator if they aren't too small – and can then be stored for use later in the year, or tinctured.

Flowers are often picked in the spring, often independently of the leaves; wide, shallow wicker baskets or hydroponic hanging drying trays can be useful pieces of equipment if you want to

preserve some of the delicate fragrance often found in spring blooms. Gather the flowers on a warm day and spread them out in a single layer in the basket, flicking the basket in the air every other day to turn the flowers over, or brush your fingertips over them to turn them over. Some of the smaller flowers will shrink considerably as they dry: for these, you may want to line the baskets with squares of muslin so that you don't lose half of your harvest in the nooks and crannies of the basket. Flowers are ready for storing when they have retained their colour but are considerably smaller – unlike leaves, they rarely dry to the point where they can be easily broken. In order to enjoy the flowers year-round, store them in glass jars, out of direct sunlight, carefully labelled with their English and Latin names. For the best possible perfume retention, dry them away from any direct heat, as heat and sunlight will evaporate off the volatile oils that cause the fragrance.

## Medicine making

### *Infused oils and balms*

One important thing to remember when making infused oils or balms in the spring, particularly if you will be using flowers, is that water will often lurk between petals and in the creases of flowers and leaves. Try, where possible, to pick dry flowers and leaves, but if this really isn't feasible, don't despair – you can use a dehydrator to partially dry your plant matter prior to medicine making. Alternatively, simply make the oil as you would normally; once the infusion is finished, decant the oil through kitchen paper into a clean Pyrex glass jug, preferably a clear one, and let it sit for at least two days. In many cases you will find that any water content in the oil will sink, and you can pour off the clean oil and throw away the murky stuff at the bottom. The same

applies to leaf oils. It is important not to bottle murky oil, as this will send the whole batch rancid. The only possible exception to this rule is oil made from chickweed: I have often found that chickweed oil stays stubbornly cloudy and yet will, despite this, remain stable for quite a number of months. The best oils for medicine making, I have found, are organic seed oils, like sunflower, mainly because they are more stable. Sweet almond is lovely but expensive, and will often go rancid quite quickly. It is perhaps better suited to the making of skin creams and more delicate cosmetic and skin-care products.

As the drying season often really doesn't get off to a good start until late April, it is important to get to grips with some of the multitude of other ways in which you can use and store your spring herbs. Here are a few suggestions for you to try.

### *Infused wine, brandy, or vinegar*

Herbs infuse very readily into all sorts of liquid mediums. Indeed, Culpeper often prescribed herbs digested in wine as a useful way of carrying their virtues, which is well worth remembering today and is certainly a precursor to our considerably stronger tinctures. If you are going to make medicinal wine, it is a good idea to let the herbs dry overnight first, as most wines don't have a particularly high alcohol content. With wines, spirits, or vinegars, try to use mostly surface-dry plants – they don't need to be bone dry, but use a clean, dry cloth to absorb the worst of the water on them.

Infusions in spirits, or tinctures, will last quite a considerable amount of time, whereas infusions in wine will need to be drunk fairly quickly, or they will turn to vinegar. If this happens, don't get rid of them: consider using them in salad dressings, as ingredients in cookery, or as topical applications. Vinegar infusions tend to be a great deal more stable.

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

### *Decoctions and infusions*

Straight-up infusions can be made and then either drunk, added to bath water or frozen in ice-cube trays. Short-term decoctions can be made by boiling the herb in water until the quantity has reduced by half, then either taking smaller doses of it throughout the day or freezing it in ice-cube trays. Long decoctions often don't need to be stored in the freezer. These are made by finely chopping whichever herbs or roots you want to preserve and boiling them up in plenty of water – assume 570 ml (20 fl oz) of water to 2–3 tbsp (30–45 g) of chopped herbs, topping the water level back up as it reduces down, and keeping the whole lot simmering for up to 4 hours. After 4 hours, simmer without topping up until the quantity has reduced down by at least a half – by this point you will sometimes notice an almost petrol-like skin on top of the water. I've certainly noticed this when I've made nettle long decoction – it gained a rainbow iridescence on the top of the inky coloured decoction, and the whole thing lasted months out of the fridge. Long decoctions can be taken in tablespoon doses, and can be rather fun to make, especially if the idea of cackling over potions appeals to you – it certainly does to me!

### *Freezing herbs*

Those more delicate spring plants that really don't dry down well can be frozen for storage. Gather the herbs when they are at their best, make sure they are clean, then finely chop them and pack

them into ice-cube trays. Put them in the freezer, and once they have fully frozen, you can put them into jars or boxes with labels on, and simply remove a cube when you need one.

### *Spring herbs for the medicine garden*

Many of the herbs found in spring tend to be wild, so if you can possibly manage it, it can be a wonderful idea to have a little corner of your garden that you plant up with wildflowers, leaving gaps for some of our native plants to self sow. You never know which beautiful and useful plants may pop up, given room and a quiet invitation! Here are a few of my favourite wild plants found in the spring, with a very brief introduction to what you can use them for. Longer and more detailed articles on each are found throughout this book, along with some recipes and instructions for use.

**Violet** (*Viola odorata*) – flowering twice a year, in April and often again in October, pretty violet gives delicate and tasty flowers in the spring, which can be used along with the leaves to cool an over-hot disposition, acting on the lungs, digestive system, and nervous system – a very useful multi-purpose remedy.

**Cowslips** (*Primula veris*) and **primroses** (*P. versicolor*) – these pretty plants provide a plethora of sunny yellow flowers. If the weather permits, primrose will often begin flowering in late January or early February; the flowers can be picked and eaten or added to salads. Cowslips flower from April through to late May and give apricot-flavoured flowers that make a delicious snack. Medicinally, both plants act as a sedative, with benefits for anxiety, headaches and insomnia, and, additionally, with actions on the lungs and circulatory system.

**Hawthorn** (*Crataegus monogyna* / *C. laevigata*) – flowering in May and traditionally signalling the end of spring and the beginning of summer, hawthorn's scented flowers are a wonderful

circulatory system tonic as well as being gently relaxing. This lovely tree is a common hedgerow plant in the UK, and there are quite a few varieties, all of which are used in a similar fashion. (For full details on hawthorn, see *Wild Medicine: Autumn and Winter*.)

**Chickweed** (*Stellaria media*) – providing both an edible salad plant and a medicine for lymph, skin, liver and kidneys, chickweed is a more difficult plant to grow, but if you leave space, there's a good chance she will show up and provide you with a juicy green patch of leaves that can be used both as food and for making medicine. Chickweed likes to grow in disturbed soil and often sneaks into my raised vegetable beds alongside the kale and the spinach.

**Birch** (*Betula pendula*) – growing quite happily in a large pot, birch will give you a huge yield of tender green leaves within a year or two of planting, providing medicine for a wide variety of ills. If you have space, you can always plant birch direct into the ground, and it will grow into a slender, elegant tree.

**Herb robert** (*Geranium robertianum*) – also known as stinky bob because of the fragrance of the leaves, herb robert often pops up where he is least expected, giving swathes of ferny green and red foliage and a fantastic array of mauve flowers. Herb robert is a wonderful wound healer, making really useful balms when combined with plantain, and also has a range of medicinal uses internally.

**Plantain** (*Plantago lanceolata*) – sometimes found in the wild-flower section at garden centres, plantain grows readily in the grass and in verges and by the wayside. A great member of the medicine garden, this wonderful little plant will heal all sorts of skin wounds, cuts, grazes, bites and stings, as well as providing internal soothing of lung issues, stomach problems, and sinus- and head-cold-related discomforts.

**Ground ivy** (*Glechoma hederacea*) – another of the wild plants, this dainty little member of the mint family provides a great

ground cover, so if you want to keep cleavers to a manageable number, this can be a great one to plant. Ground ivy also provides topical treatment for a variety of conditions; and it can be taken internally to improve the digestion and boost lung health, aiding and improving a wide range of lung issues including hay-fever, bronchitis and repeated chest infections.