

*Digging Deep with Cynthia Brian*

## Garden pharmacy

By Cynthia Brian

*"Hope and faith flower from the cheerful seeds of the old year to the sprouting garden of the New Year's dawn." ~Terri Guillemets*



*Navel oranges and ginger root.*



*A tree filled with delicious and healing Meyer lemons.*



*Spearmint will freshen your breath when chewed. Photos Cynthia Brian*

For the past few weeks it seems that everyone I encounter has been sick with a cold or flu or has been nursing a loved one who is suffering from such malaise. The drastic change in weather conditions plus the excitement and multiple engagements of the holiday season have exacerbated this time of illnesses. To help aid in the symptoms that are bothering you, the closest pharmacy may be your garden.

Food has always been the best medicine. What we eat and how we eat it determines our vitality and our health. Culinary herbs and spices such as basil, mustard, oregano and thyme enjoy both flavor enhancing and digestive benefits. Using echinacea or goldenseal, both bitter herbs, can be helpful in clearing congestion and boosting your immune system. Chamomile or passionflower tea helps you relax and unwind, quieting your body and your mind.

A natural remedy to soothe a sore throat and still a cough that I have been using for decades in my work as an actor is a hot tea brewed with a combination of grated ginger, torn mint leaves, the juice, rind and leaves of a Meyer lemon mixed with honey. (If you are fortunate to be a beekeeper as our Lamorinda Weekly publishers are, the most valuable honey in the world is derived from the bees in your garden!) This herbal tea tastes delicious and really helps with clearing my sinuses. For an extra boost of vitamin C, add the juice and rind of a naval orange to the concoction. Pair almost any herb with ginger and lemon for an extra healing enhancer. If you have an upset stomach, motion sickness, or feel nauseous, chewing on a slice of ginger root relieves the symptoms rapidly.

Herbal medicine, herbalism, or phytotherapy have been utilized for centuries around the globe in many cultures for the prevention and treatment of illness. Powerful chemicals that can assist with natural healing are contained in many plants. How-

ever, before ingesting or using any plant as a medication, make sure you are certain of its identity and be aware that allergic reactions can occur. If in doubt, leave it out. Always consult your physician for any ailments that worsen. Pregnant and breast feeding women need to err on the side of caution by always discussing any new remedies or herbal concoctions with their doctor before using.

Here are a few of the botanical medicinal plants that many people already grow in their gardens that I have safely used.

**Basil:** Besides being extraordinarily flavorful in just about everything, adding basil leaves or flowers to your salads, sauces and stews aids digestion, alleviates anxiety, and reduces gas. As an annual herb, basil grows vigorously in the warm weather and is slowly dying back at this time of the year. Harvest the leaves now to freeze or dry.

**Bee balm** is a bergamot with edible flowers. The leaves are spicy and the shoots can be made into a pesto just like mint or basil. Dry the bergamot leaves and flowers to use in a steam bath to loosen phlegm and coughing. Make an herbal compress of the plant to treat bacterial or fungal infections. Bee balm spreads vigorously by runners just like mint. It is a pollinator attractor and can be harvested all year long.

**Calendula** has been used for centuries to heal burns, wounds and rashes. It can be used topically or ingested. The edible flowers are filled with antioxidants and I love adding them to salads and frittatas. Dried flowers can be added to stews and soups to enhance your immune system. Calendula spreads by seeds and in my garden, it flourishes yearround because as a plant dies I scatter the seeds elsewhere and within a short time new plants emerge that flower quickly.

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