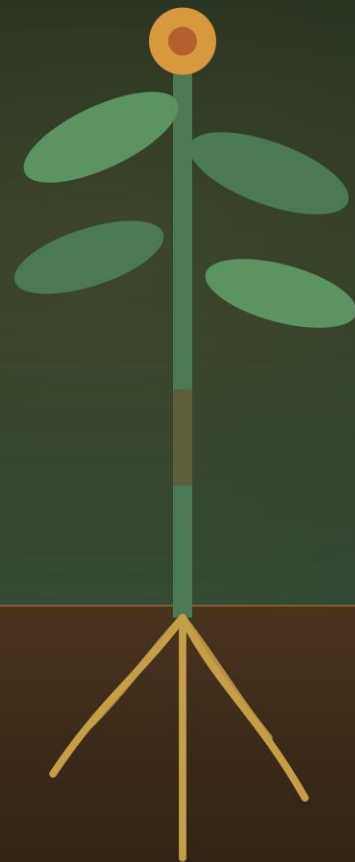


HERBAL PRACTICE

How Herbs Are Identified & Prescribed

From root to leaf: taste, action, plant part, and how it all becomes a formula



Why correct identification matters



Safety first

Look-alike plants can be inert, or genuinely toxic — misidentification is one of the most common causes of herbal harm.



The right part

The same plant's root, bark and leaf can have completely different, even opposite, actions.



The right potency

Season, part and preparation all change how concentrated the active constituents are.

Two layers of identification



Botanical ID

- Genus & species (Latin binomial) — common names vary, botanical names don't
- Morphology: leaf shape, flower structure, growth habit
- Habitat & growing region
- Cross-checked against a trusted flora or herbarium reference



Organoleptic ID

- Sight: colour, texture, cut surface
- Smell: aromatic vs. earthy vs. absent
- Touch: woody, fibrous, resinous, brittle
- Taste: the herbalist's most-used diagnostic tool

What taste tells you about action

Bitter

Stimulates digestion, supports liver — cooling, drying

Gentian, wormwood, dandelion root

Pungent

Warming, stimulates circulation, disperses stagnation

Ginger, cayenne, horseradish

Astringent

Tightens & tones tissue, checks discharge or bleeding

Oak bark, witch hazel, raspberry leaf

Sweet

Nourishing, moistening, demulcent — soothes irritation

Licorice root, marshmallow root

Sour

Contracting, stimulates digestion, cooling

Hibiscus, rosehip, sorrel

Bitterness: the herbalist's workhorse taste

Why bitter matters so much

- Bitter taste receptors trigger a reflex: saliva, stomach acid, bile and pancreatic enzymes all increase
- "Bitters" are traditionally taken a few minutes before meals to prime digestion
- Many bitter herbs also support liver and gallbladder function
- Herbalists taste fresh material directly — intensity and character of bitterness is a quality check

Familiar bitters

- Gentian root — among the most intensely bitter herbs used
- Wormwood / African wormwood (*Artemisia afra*) — bitter and aromatic
- Dandelion root — mild bitter, gentle on most people
- Yellow dock root — bitter with a mineral-rich character

Adaptogens: a specific, defined category

Three traditional criteria (Brekhman & Dardymov)

1. Non-specific: increases resistance to a broad range of stressors, not just one. **2. Normalizing:** helps restore balance regardless of which direction the imbalance runs. **3. Innocuous:** non-toxic and doesn't disrupt normal function at typical doses.

Ashwagandha

Withania somnifera — root, traditionally calming and restorative

Rhodiola

Rhodiola rosea — root, associated with resilience to fatigue

Eleuthero

"Siberian ginseng" — root, one of the original researched adaptogens

Holy Basil

Ocimum sanctum — leaf, unusual as a leaf-based adaptogen

Catalyst herbs: the formula's messenger

What a catalyst herb does

- Added in small amounts — not for its own primary effect, but to enhance or "drive" the other herbs
- Often improves absorption, circulation or delivery to a target area
- Sometimes called a synergist, or in Chinese herbalism a "messenger" (shi) herb
- A formula without a catalyst can still work, but often less efficiently

Common examples

- Ginger or cayenne — added to warm and circulate a formula outward
- Black pepper (piperine) — paired with turmeric to improve absorption
- A small amount of alcohol itself acts as a delivery vehicle in a tincture
- Aromatic herbs (fennel, cardamom) — added to carry bitters more comfortably



Roots

PLANT PART

What to look for

- Taproot vs. fibrous root architecture
- Colour and texture of the cut cross-section
- Smell when freshly cut or scraped
- Snap (brittle) vs. bend (pliable) when dry

Common actions

- Nourishing / tonic
- Bitter / digestive
- Adaptogenic

Examples

- Dandelion root — bitter, digestive
- Marshmallow root — demulcent, soothing
- Ashwagandha root — adaptogenic

Roots are typically harvested in dormant season (autumn or early spring), when the plant has drawn its energy and constituents down into storage.



Bark

PLANT PART

What to look for

- Outer corky bark vs. inner cambium/phloem — the inner layer is usually the active one
- Colour and smell when scraped
- Taste: often astringent or aromatic

Common actions

- Astringent / toning
- Anti-inflammatory
- Warming (aromatic barks)

Examples

- Wild cherry bark — traditionally for coughs
- Oak bark — strongly astringent
- Cinnamon bark — warming, aromatic

Sustainability note: stripping bark all the way around a trunk ("girdling") kills the tree. Ethical harvest takes partial strips, prunings, or fallen material.



Stems & Stalks

PLANT PART

What to look for

- Hollow vs. solid stem
- Ridged, square or round in cross-section
- Colour and jointed nodes

Common actions

- Vascular / carrying constituents between root and leaf
- Some species use stem specifically, not leaf
- Often harvested with the whole aerial part

Examples

- Horsetail — whole silica-rich aerial stem
- Ephedra — green stems are the medicinal part, not the leaves
- Oat straw — the green, milky stage stem



Leaves

PLANT PART

What to look for

- Leaf margin (smooth, toothed, lobed)
- Venation pattern
- Smell when crushed — aromatic oils are concentrated here
- Opposite vs. alternate arrangement on the stem

Common actions

- Nervine
- Diaphoretic (induces sweating)
- Expectorant
- Often rich in volatile oils, flavonoids, vitamins

Examples

- Lemon balm — calming nervine
- Yarrow — classic diaphoretic
- Mullein — soothing expectorant

Many leafy herbs are harvested just before flowering, when volatile oil content tends to peak — though this varies by species.

How it all becomes a prescription

1



Read the person

Case history reveals the pattern: hot or cold, deficient or excess, which system is involved.

2



Match taste to pattern

A "hot", inflamed presentation often calls for bitter/cooling herbs; a depleted one for sweet/nourishing herbs.

3



Choose the right part

Deep, chronic issues often lean on root or bark; acute, fast-moving issues often lean on leaf or flower.

4



Build the formula

Primary herb(s) + supporting herbs + a catalyst to enhance delivery + a corrigent to make it palatable.

5



Prescribe & review

Dose, form (tincture, tea, glycerite) and follow-up review complete the process.

Know the plant.
Know the part.
Know the person.

A craft and educational overview — always verify botanical identification and herb-specific safety with a trusted reference before use.

