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Making Springtime Wild Herb Vinegars

by Corinna Wood

“Chickweed is back! Spring is here!” My three-year-old delightedly munches the luscious green shoots, and offers me a handful. Chickweed’s return means it’s time to make medicines again, starting with vinegars in April and May.

Many wild plants can be extracted into vinegars, but chickweed, nettle, and mugwort are my favorites, both for medicinal value and sheer flavor. You can easily make these vinegars yourself, with one or all three of these plants.

Chickweed is the most widespread of these three beauties. If you have garden beds, you probably know that chickweed loves rich garden soil and thrives in the cool, wet weather of Spring and Fall. But many gardeners don’t realize that this “weed” is nutritious and delicious in wild salad or herbal vinegar.

You can tell chickweed by its tiny, white, star-shaped flowers, which give it its botanical name, Stellaria media. Also look for opposite leaves. When harvesting chickweed for vinegar, set aside some for wild salad!

When it comes to wild medicinals, Nettle is one of the easiest to identify—if you’re not sure you have the right plant, just brush your hand against it! The nettle sting, which is mild for most people, is felt immediately, and usually wears off within a few hours. The benign sting is actually used as a treatment for arthritic joints!

There are two species of nettle in our area: “Barn Nettle,” Urtica dioica, and “Wood Nettle,” Urtica camadensis. Long used as an iron and adrenal tonic, Urtica dioica is the species widely recognized for its medicinal value, but either species can be eaten (and Wood Nettle stings much less). Nettle can be gathered with gloves anytime from when it peeks out of the ground until just before it flowers.

Mugwort is a fragrant, magical herb that is traditionally used in dream pillows to make dreams more vivid and more memorable. It can be harvested for vinegar until it is one foot tall. After that, it becomes bitter and somewhat toxic.
Mugwort can be confused with other plants, so check for its fragrant smell when crushed as well as the silver sheen to the back of the leaf. In fact, this silver color, associated with the moon goddess Artemis, is where Artemisia vulgaris gets its name. Try some in your pillow tonight!

To use your springtime harvest, follow these easy steps:

1. Fill the jar to the top with apple cider vinegar. (raw, organic vinegars give you beneficial microorganisms much like yogurt does.)

2. Since vinegar rusts metal, a cork or plastic top is preferable. Placing a piece of waxed paper or plastic between a metal lid and the jar works too.

3. Label your jar with the plant name and date harvested.

4. The next day, the plant may have absorbed enough liquid to end up uncovered, so top off the liquid level. Check the liquid level once or twice over the first week.

5. Six weeks later, strain out the plant material, and you have your own wild herb vinegar!

Herbal vinegars are delicious in salad dressing, on cooked greens, in marinades, or in sauces. Some people prefer to take a tablespoon in water as a daily tonic.

Our soils and our bodies in these times are chronically depleted of minerals, contributing to many health challenges, especially in the hormonal, nervous, and immune systems. It is much easier for the body to digest and absorb minerals from a wild plant, which our ancestors evolved with, than from a tablet! Because of its acidity, vinegar is the best medium for extracting the minerals from these nutritious wild plants.

Corinna Wood is director of Red Moon Herbs in Black Mountain, NC, and has been teaching herbal medicine and women's health for over ten years. She can be reached at 828-669-1310, or at www.redmoonherbs.com.