"Popularity," said Will Rogers, "is the easiest thing in the world to gain and it is the hardest thing to hold." Ask 10 herbalists to list the top 10 healing herbs and you'll get 11 different answers.

Herbalists' criteria vary, and the field of natural health, as with all endeavours, is subject to fads and fashions. Yet there are some herbs with enduring status. For instance, garlic, I hope, would be on everyone's list.

So, there is some confessed subjectivity in the following list. In addition to their healing qualities, the following herbs have been chosen for their availability; versatility (culinary and adaptogenic use); proven history versus trendiness; and therapeutic value versus symptom reduction.

**HERBAL COMPENDIUM**

The magnitude of plants with therapeutic properties is astounding. Some 70,000 species, from lichens to towering trees, have been used throughout history for medicinal purposes. About 500 herbs are still employed in conventional medicine, although the whole plant is rarely used, often at the sacrifice of the synergistic qualities of the herb.

Choosing the top 10 herbs is not an easy task, but those chosen have proven their worth through efficacy and popularity. Herbal medicine boasts demonstrated usefulness and effectiveness. We must nurture and propagate this knowledge for the benefit of future generations.

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**Astragalus**  
(Astragalus membranaceus)

**MEDICINAL QUALITIES**

Known in China as *huang qi*; energy tonic and adaptogen, which some herbalists regard as superior to ginseng.

**AILMENTS TREATED**

Although not used for acute illnesses, it is a powerful immune booster; prevents viral infections such as the common cold.

**EFFECT ON BODY**

Chinese herbalists maintain that the herb warms and tones the *wei qi* (a protective energy that circulates just beneath the skin), helping the body to adapt to cold and physical exertion.

**HOW IT IS USED**

The root can be used in soups, teas, extracts, or capsules; can also be used with other herbs, such as ginseng, angelica, and licorice.

**CAUTIONS**

None.
**Chickweed**
*Stellaria media*

**MEDICINAL QUALITIES**
Effective for a variety of ailments; can be taken internally or applied topically.

**AILMENTS TREATED**
Take internally for chest ailments and migraines and as a digestive aid; apply topically for irritated skin, eczema, and varicose veins.

**EFFECT ON BODY**
Contains vitamin C, vitamin B, magnesium, beta carotene, iron, manganese, zinc, omega-6, and flavonoids.

**HOW IT IS USED**
Can be applied liberally several times a day to rashes and inflammatory skin conditions or for internal use as a tea.

**CAUTIONS**
Avoid if pregnant; may cause diarrhea and vomiting if taken to excess.

**Dandelion**
*Taxaxacum officinale*

**MEDICINAL QUALITIES**
Dandelion leaves are more nutritious than spinach.

**AILMENTS TREATED**
High blood pressure; general detoxifier; liver and gall bladder cleanser.

**EFFECT ON BODY**
In addition to its nutritional qualities, is a powerful diuretic; used as a cleanser and to treat high blood pressure by reducing the volume of excess body fluids.

**HOW IT IS USED**
Leaves and roots, or the whole plant, are used fresh or dried in teas, capsules, or extracts. Leaves are used in salads or as a cooked green, and the flowers are used to make wine.

**CAUTIONS**
None.

**Cayenne**
*Capsicum frutescens*

**MEDICINAL QUALITIES**
A warming herb; taken internally or applied topically, is the purest and safest stimulant known.

**AILMENTS TREATED**
Gas and colic; stimulates the secretion of digestive juices.

**EFFECT ON BODY**
Improves circulation and helps prevent infections in the digestive tract; applied topically to the skin, is mildly analgesic.

**HOW IT IS USED**
Can be taken as a powder in boiling water or in pill form or as a tincture in rose water.

**CAUTIONS**
Avoid if suffering from peptic ulcers or acid indigestion; avoid touching the eyes or cuts to the skin after handling cayenne.
**Ginger**
(Zingiber officinale)

**MEDICINAL QUALITIES**
Well researched, therapeutic benefits are largely due to its volatile oil and cineol resin content.

**AILMENTS TREATED**
Digestive problems; motion sickness; morning sickness; and dysmenorrhea (painful menstruation); gastrointestinal infections; some types of food poisoning; and some forms of dysentery.

**EFFECT ON BODY**
As a digestive aid, relieves nausea and stimulates the circulation; effective in the early stages of a cold or flu by inducing sweating and helping the body to eliminate waste.

**HOW IT IS USED**
Common forms, used in cooking, baking, and for health purposes, include fresh or dried root, tablets, capsules, liquid extracts (tinctures), and teas.

**CAUTIONS**
Do not take ginger essential oil internally, and avoid ginger in medicinal doses if you suffer from peptic ulcers.

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**Holy basil**
(Ocimum sanctum)

**MEDICINAL QUALITIES**
As an adaptogen, enables the body to adapt to and manage nonspecific mental or physical stress.

**AILMENTS TREATED**
Stress, anxiety, overwork, and diabetes.

**EFFECT ON BODY**
In traditional Ayurvedic medicine, this sacramental herb is an anti-inflammatory, antioxidant, antiparasitic, and a nerve tonic; also reduces fever, purifies the blood, suppresses coughs, strengthens the immune system, aids digestion, enhances mind and memory, and lowers cortisol and blood sugar levels.

**HOW IT IS USED**
Capsules are made from extracts from leaf oils, whole dried leaves, or seed oils; teas often referred to as "tulsi."

**CAUTIONS**
None.

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**Ginkgo**
(Ginkgo biloba)

**MEDICINAL QUALITIES**
One of the oldest trees on the planet, dates back some 150 million years; though long used as a medicine in China, its therapeutic properties have only recently been researched.

**AILMENTS TREATED**
Poor circulation; dementia; age-related memory loss; and some forms of asthma.

**EFFECT ON BODY**
Boosts circulation, especially to the brain; anti-allergenic and anti-inflammatory properties make it useful in treating asthma.

**HOW IT IS USED**
Extracts from ginkgo leaf are used to make tablets, capsules, or teas; may also be used in skin products.

**CAUTIONS**
May cause toxic reactions if taken to excess; avoid if taking blood-thinning medication.

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Lemon balm
(Melissa officinalis)

MEDICINAL QUALITIES
Member of the mint family; a cup of lemon balm tea after dinner aids digestion and promotes sleep.

AILMENTS TREATED
Amenorrhea (lack of menstruation); chronic fatigue syndrome; hypothyroidism (underactive thyroid); Graves disease (overactive thyroid); headache; herpes virus; insomnia; shingles; viral infections.

EFFECT ON BODY
Relaxes the mind and body; promotes digestion; fights infections, especially viral infections.

HOW IT IS USED
Available as dried leaf in bulk, as tea, in capsules, extracts, tinctures, and oil; and as homeopathic remedies and aromatherapy (essential oil).

CAUTIONS
None.

Garlic
(Allium sativum)

MEDICINAL QUALITIES
Cultures that ingest high amounts of garlic have significantly lower incidences of cancer, especially cancers of the gastrointestinal tract.

AILMENTS TREATED
High blood pressure; bronchial problems; digestive infections; yeast and fungal infections; candida, and late-onset diabetes.

EFFECT ON BODY
Lowers high blood pressure and high blood sugar; has antibacterial, antiviral, and antifungal properties.

HOW IT IS USED
Cloves can be eaten raw or cooked; may also be dried or powdered for use in tablets and capsules; raw cloves are used to make oils and liquid extracts.

CAUTIONS
None.

Bruce Burnett, CH, is a chartered herbalist and author of HerbWise: growing cooking wellbeing (Ocean Cruise Guide, 2002).
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