Thinking Like an Herbalist

by Janice Marsh-Prelesnik

To think like an herbalist one must come to know the ways that herbs interact with human physiology. Which herb will support the body’s healing process? Which herb is the best choice for nourishing the part of the body in need of healing? Which one relieves tension, thereby eliciting the relaxation response? How do the energetics of the herbs interact with the energetics of the human being?

To think like an herbalist, one must first consider the herbs that nourish the body and soul. Without proper nourishment, our bodies can't work optimally.

“Nourishment encourages expansion and growth. Nourishment includes Nourishment supports each being as a unique, holy, individual. Nourishing our problems encourages love for all parts of ourselves” (Weed 1989, 15).

Each herb has its own individual personality and each plant’s behavior, while in or on the human body, responds in specific ways.

Deciding on which herb to use based on its actions, or properties, is a time-honored approach to herbalism. “Herbal actions describe the ways in which the remedy affects human physiology. Plants have a direct impact on physiological activity and by knowing what body process you want to help or heal, the appropriate action can be selected” (Hoffman 1992, 1:26).

After learning about the categories of herbal actions, one can then learn the subtle differences among the system affinities of various herbs.

As an herbalist, I am interested in the action of the herb, rather than the chemicals in the plant. The chemicals in plants work synergistically, not only within the plant, but also within the human body. For example, an herb that has astringent properties, such as plantain (Plantago major), yarrow (Achillea millefolium) or Shepherd’s Purse (Capsella bursa-pastoris), may assist in shrinking hemorrhoids.

The following is a list of herbal actions and the herbs in each category that I have used in my midwifery practice:

**Alterative**—Cleanse congested, stagnant blood and tissue fluids, gradually increase vitality through nourishment. Alfalfa, Burdock, Dandelion, Nettles, Red Clover, Yellow Dock

**Anti-catarhal**—Mucus is the body’s way of protecting mucous membranes from foreign bodies. Anti-catarhals thin mucus that has become so thick that it congests the membranes. Peppermint, Thyme, Yarrow

**Anti-inflammatory**—These herbs don’t take away the inflammatory response, but soothe and cool the inflammation, which in turn reduces pain. Calendula, Comfrey, Hawthorn, Marshmallow, Peppermint, Plantain, St. John’s Wort, Shepherd’s Purse, Yarrow

**Anti-microbial**—These herbs make the surrounding tissue uninviting to unwanted bacteria, viruses and parasites. They can also stimulate the immune response by activating lymphocytes. Calendula, Echinacea, Garlic, Peppermint, St. John’s Wort, Uva-ursi, Yarrow

**Anti- spasmodic**—These ease cramps in smooth or skeletal muscle and relax the autonomic and central nervous systems. Black Cohosh, Catnip, Motherwort, Peppermint, Red Clover, St. John’s Wort, Valerian

**Astringent**—Used to stop bleeding or to bind tissue, which then forms a protective coat. Comfrey leaf and root, Plantain, Shepherd’s Purse, Yarrow

**Bitter**—Herbs with a bitter taste stimulate and jump-start digestive juices. Dandelion, Yarrow

**Carminative**—They calm the lining of digestive tract and help to eliminate gas. Catnip, Motherwort, Peppermint, Valerian

**Cholagogue**—Stimulate flow of bile from the liver. Dandelion root, Yarrow

**Demulcent**—Sooth and protect irritated tissue in the digestive and respiratory tracts, aid in healing wounds. Comfrey leaf and root, Marshmallow leaf and root

**Diuretic**—Increase kidney output and rid the body of extra interstitial fluids. Burdock, Dandelion leaf, Yarrow

**Diaphoretic**—These are heating herbs that increase circulation and perspiration. Yarrow

**Galactagogue**—Stimulate breast milk production through nourishment. Alfalfa, Nettles, Raspberry leaf, Red Clover

**Hepatic**—Tone and nourish the liver. Burdock, Dandelion leaf and root

**Hypotensives**—Reduce systolic and blood diastolic pressures. Black Cohosh, Blue Cohosh, Garlic, Hawthorn, Motherwort, Nettles, Valerian, Yarrow

**Nervines**—May be tonic, relaxant or stimulant; many nervines are anti-spasmodic, as well. Black Cohosh, Catnip, Motherwort, St. John’s Wort, Peppermint, Valerian

Another time-honored approach for learning which herbs to use is searching through old literature that contains the wisdom of our ancestors. After all, can a plant that has been used for the same purpose for hundreds of years be dangerous or wrong?

**Comfrey**—A case in point is the herb comfrey (Symphytum officinalae). In recent years comfrey has gained a reputation for causing liver problems, specifically veno-occlusive disease (VOD), due to pyrrolizidine alkaloid contents. After careful consideration and study, I continue to use comfrey unproblematic in my practice.
Three plant species in the genus *Symphytum* are relevant to the crop known as comfrey. Wild or common comfrey, *Symphytum officinale* L., is native to England and extends throughout most of Europe into central Asia and western Siberia. Prickly or rough comfrey (*S. asperum* Lep. *x uplandicum* Nyman [S. *peregrinum* Lebed.]) originated as a natural hybrid of *S. officinale* L. and *S. asperum* Lepchinh. This hybrid was called Russian or Caucasian comfrey in reference to its country of origin. Cuttings of this hybrid were shipped to Canada in 1954 and it was named Quaker comfrey, after the religion of Henry Doubleday, the British researcher responsible for promoting comfrey as a food and forage. The majority of comfrey grown in the United States can be traced to this introduction. (www.hort.purdue.edu/newcrop/afcm/comfrey.html)

Comfrey has been mentioned in herbal literature for centuries. The Greek physicians Galen (120–200 AD) and Dioscorides both documented the use of comfrey for healing wounds, mending broken bones and soothing gastrointestinal and respiratory problems. The Saxons, Cistercians and Benedictines all cultivated comfrey and wrote of using the plant (circa 1000 AD) to heal soldiers' wounds. The Middle Ages found comfrey in most gardens, from royalty to peasants. Nicholas Culpeper, the famous seventeenth-century herbalist, recommended comfrey for all "inward hurts... and for outwards wounds and sores...." Not native to North America, comfrey was brought by European immigrants for transplantation. They must have thought highly of this healing plant to bring it across the seas with them!

The genus name *Symphytum* comes from the Greek *symphyo*, “to make grow together.” *Phytum* means plant and *officinale* means an official medicinal plant. Indeed, this plant does its name justice. Boneset, kniwtwort and bruisewort are common names for comfrey. Several years ago my children gave comfrey their own common name: green goo.

The current controversy regarding this plant began in the 1980s when five cases of hepatic toxicity and VOD related to consumption of comfrey were reported in the medical literature. Further investigation determined that pyrrolizidine alkaloids (PA) in the comfrey could not be proven to cause the toxicity. Other factors may have been involved, such as presence of underlying illness and concurrent use of allopathic hepatotoxic drugs. While the conditions of each of the affected people may have been of unknown etiology, what is known is that each of them had used comfrey internally for prolonged periods.

Many herbalists now recommend that comfrey be used externally only, or internally in small amounts for only short periods of time. Studies that concluded that comfrey is harmful used the root, which has a higher PA content than the leaves. These studies were also performed with extremely concentrated extracts or constituents of the herb that contain a higher PA content and were injected into rats—a far different situation than consumption as a tea.

I have seen comfrey leaf and root soaks work beautifully for sprained ankles, dislocations and bruises. (I prefer to use herbs that I can grow in my home gardens in Michigan, so I use comfrey instead of Arnica, since Arnica grows only at high altitudes.)

Continued on page 64

Tried-and-true remedies I’ve shared with women I assisted in my midwifery practice

**Morning Queasiness**
- Two-parts Peppermint
  - 1 part Catnip
  - 1 part Red Raspberry
  Infusion/tincture

**Nourish and Nurture Tea**
(Tastes like green tea without the caffeine)
- Equal parts: Red Raspberry, Nettles, Alfalfa, Red Clover
  Infusion

**Augmenting a stalled labor**
- 1 part Red Raspberry
- 1 part Black Cohosh
- 1 part Blue Cohosh
- 1 part Motherwort
  Tincture 10-15 drops every hour

**Hemorrhage**
- 2 parts Shepherd’s Purse
- 1 part Blue Cohosh
- 1 part Motherwort
- 2 parts Yarrow
  Tincture up to two drappersful

**Postpartum Sitz Bath**
- 2 parts Comfrey root and leaf
- 1 part Calendula flower
- 1 part Plantain leaf
  Make a strong infusion, strain and place in peri bottle or sitz bath

**Iron Deficient Anemia**
- 2 parts Yellow Dock root
- 1 part Nettles
- 1 part Alfalfa
- 1 part Dandelion root
  Decoction/Infusion, tincture

**Cystitis**
- 1 part Uva-ursi
- 1 part Yarrow
  Mix with unsweetened cranberry infusion
  Infusion/Tincture

**Heartburn**
- Marshmallow root
  Cold water infusion (let root sit in cool water overnight)

**Hemorrhoids and Varicose Veins**
- Plantain leaf poultice—bruise leaf and place on hemorrhoid
- Plantain, Shepherd's Purse, Yarrow, Calendula Salve

**High Blood Pressure**
- 2 parts Hawthorn berries and leaf
- 2 parts Motherwort
- 1 part Garlic
  Decoction/infusion, tincture
Marion Toepke McLean has a long career as a midwife in home, hospital, and birth center; as a woman's health practitioner; and has taught extensively in the US, Mexico and, most recently, Afghanistan. She is an anti-war activist, wife, step-mom and grandmother. She enjoys gardening, and cooking and eating the produce of her land. Marion will be teaching "The Complete Physical Exam" at the Eugene 2009 Midwifery Today conference, March 11-15, 2009.

References:

Thinking Like an Herbalist

Continued from page 11

I make a strong infusion of comfrey leaf and root, with plantain leaves and calendula flowers for wound healing. I strain the herbs from the water and have the person soak in the infusion or apply the infusion as a compress.

To make a compress, place a clean cloth in the infusion and then place the cloth on the wound. Let it sit for as long as possible. It is extremely important that the wound be cleaned first, with no infection in the tissue. I also combine a comfrey leaf oil infusion with St. John's wort oil infusion and use as massage oil for sore muscles. Sometimes I add peppermint or wintergreen essential oils to the massage oil as well.

I have seen fresh comfrey root applied topically, immediately healing an angry, red, blistering eczema. I also have seen comfrey infusions of root and leaf aid in the healing of a third-degree burn without a scar. Comfrey also soothes surgical wounds. A friend who used a Comfrey infusion on her second cesarean wound was amazed at how much more quickly it healed than the first one had. I am constantly amazed at the properties of this plant.

I make a salve, the famous "Granny Janny Green Goop Salve," which can be put on a wound that needs to be covered or cracks with movement. This amazing healing salve contains comfrey leaf and root, plantain and calendula leaves infused in olive oil, beeswax and lanolin. I also make lanolin-free Green Goop for those who are sensitive to wool. This salve has worked wonders on sore, cracked nipples. I advise moms to wipe off the excess before her baby nurses.

Comfrey is most commonly used in midwifery practice during the postpartum period. It is a true friend to a hard-working perineum and will assist in the healing of torn tissue. Instead of ice on a perineum, try soaking menstrual pads in a comfrey infusion and placing them in the freezer.

Comfrey also works well to soothe diaper rashes.

I have had mothers with premature rupture of membranes insert an infusion of comfrey leaf and root in their vaginas to seal the membranes. In both cases the membranes sealed up, as evidenced by a gush of fluid just as pushing began. The boiled roots are extremely mucilaginous and sticky and were used as glue for paper in the Middle Ages.

An interesting note is that allantoin—which is found in amniotic fluid—is the constituent of comfrey that is responsible for cell proliferation. Allantoin works by being a catalyst for the proteins that create new cellular membranes and tissue.

Comfrey also is rich in silicon, has a high protein content and takes vitamin B12 from the soil. It is rich in carotene, a substance that is known as a liver builder and cleanser. The carotenes, along with allantoin, are instrumental in the wound-healing properties of comfrey.

Janice Marsh-Prelesnik has practiced and taught traditional midwifery, massage therapy and herbalism since 1981. She has four home-birthed, home-school children and lives in rural southwest Michigan near Kalamazoo. Janice loves to watch her students grow, develop their intuition and integrate midwifery and the natural healing arts into their lifestyles. During the summertime Janice can be found in her organic gardens preparing herbal remedies for her business, Granny Janny Herbs. Her book, Natural Mothering through the Seasons of Pregnancy, was published in 2005.

References:
2. Hoffman, D. 1992. Therapeutic Herbs. A Correspondence Course in Phytotherapy. (Available through the California School of Herbal Studies, P.O. Box 29, Forestville, CA 95436.)

Humor as Natural Medicine

Continued from page 12

help people feel seen and heard. I look for opportunities to develop this connection during prenatal contact. Inside jokes often take the form of teasing and exaggerating issues. This type of humor isn't without risk, so careful assessment and accurate dosing must be considered.

Once when a mother who was having a VBAC was lamenting that her uterus was the world's most ineffective, I launched into a spontaneous bit about calling the people at the Guinness Book of World Records so she could take her rightful place in history. Both she and her husband cracked up, and I went on a little longer wondering what time it was in London and whether they had a category for the uterus, fretting about there not being enough time to get verification, etc. Four hours later she gave birth vaginally to a 9 lb baby.

A safer way to use exaggeration is to depersonalize it with a story. Midwife Martha Roth told me this joke: A man is out on his back porch all night wringing his hands, pacing and chewing his fingernails while his wife is in labor upstairs. Finally, near morning the midwife comes out and says, "The man exclaims "Oh, thank goodness it's a girl so she won't ever have to go through what I just went through!" This joke is remarkably effective at re-routing energy that is being siphoned off by a husband who is unable to fully grasp that the birth is not about him.