Herbal Tinctures

What is a Herbal Tincture?
A tincture is an extract of herbal constituents into alcohol. Tinctures are the most common kind of preparation used by medical herbalists in the UK today. Alcohol is an excellent solvent for extracting plant constituents, and a mixture of water and alcohol will dissolve nearly all the constituents in a plant making tinctures a strong and efficient herbal medicine. Tincturing is also a very simple preservation method, especially for fresh herbs to be used later out of season. To make sure that your tincture will keep, you need to use an alcohol with a strength of at least 25%. Most alcohol that is available to us to buy in the UK is a mixture of alcohol and water e.g. 40% strength vodka contains 40% alcohol and 60% water.
Herbal tinctures will keep for years if you store them in dark bottles away from the light, so they make effective medicines for a long time. A small dose of tincture is all that is needed for an effect to be felt from that herb. A standard dose is just 15-30 drops taken one to three times a day. The ease of taking herbal medicine in tincture form makes it very popular way of using herbs.

How to Make a Herbal Tincture:
The easiest method to use to make tinctures at home is called simple maceration, or the 'folk method'.

Tincturing By 'The Folk Method'
The 'folk method' is a very simple, DIY method which just involves mixing your chosen herb with alcohol and leaving it to macerate for a few weeks. Maceration is the floating time, when the alcohol and water gently draw out the essence of the plants into the solution. An important consideration with this or any other tincturing method is whether or not to use fresh or dried plant material.

Fresh vs Dried Herbal Tinctures
Until recently all commercial herbal tinctures were made using dried herbs. This is because the water content has been removed and many people believe this makes both a stronger tincture, and one where you can easily measure the 'tincture strength' - the ratio of herb to alcohol. However, traditional folk tinctures were made using fresh herbs and many herbalists favour these today for their delicate flavours. Fresh herbs contain roughly 85% water though, and so it is an idea to be careful that the final alcohol content in the tincture doesn't drop below the preservative level of 25%. A way to avoid this is to use a higher strength alcohol e.g. 60% or above.

How to Make a Tincture Using the Folk Method

1. Take your chosen herb and chop it into small pieces. You can use a knife, a mortar and pestle, or even a blender. Pack it into a jar or other wide mouthed container with a lid
2. Cover it completely with your chosen alcohol e.g. vodka, brandy, gin, whisky
3. Put the lid on, give it a big shake and store in a dark place
4. Shake it vigorously every day for a minimum of 14 days until the herb appears ‘spent’
5. Decant and filter it
6. Store it in a dark bottle and label

Preservation and Storage

Tinctures can keep for up to years, if the alcohol concentration is over 25%. Store them in airtight, light-resistant containers (e.g. brown bottles) and avoid exposure to direct sunlight and excessive heat.

Doses

The dosage for tinctures is much smaller than with herbal teas, but can vary greatly from herb to herb. Mild tonic herbs like Dandelion, Nettle and Oats can be taken multiple times a day for long periods; strong herbs like Echinacea might be taken intensively for a short period, or a herb like Cayenne might be taken as just a single drop. It is important to learn about each herb you are tincturing and work out the right dose for the situation you wish to use it in.

More Advanced Tincture Making

Professional tinctures are made using specific ratios of herb weight to alcohol to ensure standardisation and a suitable strength of tincture for that particular herb e.g. An Elderflower tincture might be made with 25% alcohol and a ratio of 1:3 – one part Elderflower in weight to three parts solvent (25 % alcohol & 75% water). Professional tincture makers also have alcohol licenses which enable them to have access to pure alcohol which can then be diluted with water to create the exact end product desired. By keeping the water separate from the alcohol, herbs can be infused, distilled or decocted and then macerated in alcohol for a more nuanced and potent end result.

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