Herbal Syrups

What are Syrups?

A syrup is very simply a sugary solution, and if you add herbs to it, it is a herbal syrup! Syrups are really simple, and there are endless variations you can make once you are comfortable with how it is done. The essence of it is making a herbal sugary solution which can be done with water and sugar, or other natural syrups like honey, date syrup, maple syrup or birch syrup. Sugar is a preservative ingredient so syrups can be a good way of preserving fresh herbs to take later on when they are no longer in season.

Why Make A Syrup?

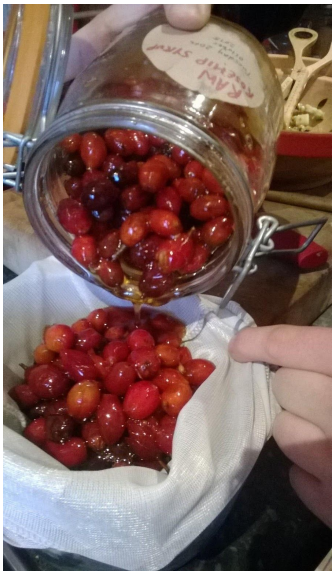
In herbal medicine syrups are commonly used to improve the taste of medicine, to make herbal medicine appeal to children, or as excellent cough medicines in their own right. They can be a great way of encouraging somebody to use herbs as medicines by giving them something delicious but also beneficial to take. They can also be used as an ingredient in cooking, just for their delicious flavour – try putting them on your porridge, on pancakes or ice cream, in refreshing summery drinks, home made cocktails or a warm winter tea. They are best used in moderation as too much sugar is counterproductive to the health giving properties of the herbs.

Syrup Making Methods

There are a lot of variations of methods for how to make a syrup. The most common method is the 'Heated Method' where you create a sugary solution with water & sugar, and add herbs into the mix at different stages depending on how delicate your chosen herbs are e.g. if you are using a tough ginger root, you would boil this in water (decoct it) to extract the properties of the ginger before adding any sugar to create a syrup. However, if you were using very delicate rose petals you would first boil up a sugar syrup and then add the petals to the solution once it had already cooled slightly. This would let you extract the delicate rose fragrance in as gentle a way as possible.

An Example of The Heated Method: A Pine Needle Syrup

1) First gather your pine needles and then boil them in a pan of water for roughly one hour to extract the flavour and properties of the pine.
2) Strain out the pine needles, and measure how much infused pine liquid is left
3) For every 1ml of liquid at this stage, add 1g of sugar, so if you have 750ml of liquid, add 750g of sugar.
4) Then put your mixture of pine liquid & sugar back on the stove, and bring it back to the boil, stirring a few times to allow all the sugar to dissolve.
5) Once the sugar has dissolved, turn the heat down and simmer for another 20 minutes or until the syrup has thickened. To test its thickness, put some on the surface of a spoon you have cooled in the fridge to see how it behaves when cooled.
6) Store in clean, sterilised, labelled bottles & enjoy



An Example of the Raw Method: Raw Rosehip Syrup
It is also possible to make syrups without any heating at all. Raw syrups are simply made by layering plant material and sugar in a jar and leaving it for a number of months. Over time the sugar will slowly extract the properties of the herb, and create a syrup. This works best with juicier plant material like berries, and has the added benefit of preserving the nutrition of the plant by avoiding damage to the constituents from heating. Infused honeys are also made this way.

Herbs Well Suited to Making into Syrups

Experimentation & creativity with syrup making is to be encouraged! But generally speaking herbs which are aromatic, have a delicious or unusual flavour, or have a particular affinity to the respiratory system make for effective syrups.

Wild Cherry Bark (*Prunus avium)* – great for dry, tickly & irritating coughs
Elderflowers & Elderberries (*Sambucus nigra)* – the flowers make a delicious summer cordial, and the berries a warming autumnal immune booster
Sea Buckthorn Berries *(Hippophae rhamnoides)* – these bright orange berries have a strong sour flavour and make a potent immune tonic & cough medicine
Scot's Pine Tips (*Pinus sylvestris)* a delicious honey-flavoured anti-microbial syrup for clearing the chest, and pouring over porridge
Gorse Flowers *(Ulex europaeus)* – a subtle coconut flavour which combines well with lime juice
Rose *(Rosa spp.)* Rose petals make a delicate flavoured syrup for cooking & baking with, and Rosehips can be made into a wonderfully delicious raw, immune boosting syrup
Himalayan Balsam Flowers – *(Impatiens glandulifera)* these pink flowers have little fragrance but can be added to syrups for their colour

Preservation & Storage:

As mentioned earlier, sugar is a preservative, but you only make a truly preservative syrup if you use the right concentrations of sugar. This is because sugar is a carbohydrate, so when mixed with water, it provides food for tiny micro-organisms to feed on and grow. This can lead to the growth of moulds and yeasts.

However, as the concentration of sugar increases, there is less 'available' water for these organisms to grow in. A sugar syrup needs to reach saturation to be a totally effective preservative that you don't need to store in a fridge and which may keep 'indefinitely' on your shelves. *Pharmacists have discovered the perfect sugar to water ratio for this* - 85gm of white, refined sugar to 47ml of pure water.

For general, home herbalism purposes, using a 1:1 ratio of sugar to liquid is usually good enough for a syrup to keep for a number of months. If kept in the fridge, and stored in clean, sterilised containers syrups can last up to a year. If you have any doubts, or it begins to ferment, throw it away and make another one!

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