Herbal Ointments

What is an Ointment?

An ointment, also called a salve or balm, is an oil based herbal mixture used externally on the skin. They soften with contact with our body temperature and provide a healing, softening, protective, nourishing or counter-irritant effect. The skin can quickly absorb the plant's medicinal constituents through the oil. Ointments come in all consistencies - from wet and oily mixtures, to hard and waxy balms. Most ointments are made from a mixture of a wax and a fixed oil.

There are some key differences between ointments and creams that may influence your choice. Ointments are made up of oils. Some are liquid at room temperature for example Almond oil and some that are solid at room temperature for example Beeswax. These oils form a protective layer on the skin whilst they are being absorbed.

Creams on the other hand are made up of a mixture of oils and water. This results in a preparation with a thinner consistency, which is more readily absorbed into the skin. Water based mixtures help to cool irritated and inflamed skin which may also be a desirable effect.

There are literally endless ways of making ointments! Here is a quick and easy way:

Ingredients:

- Herb infused oil
- Beeswax (or an alternative wax)

The basic principle of ointment making, is to infuse your chosen oil with herbs, and then to add some beeswax to the hot oil to firm up the mixture.

Infusing your oil:

1. Pour several inches of warm water in the bottom of a big pan.
2. Add your chosen, chopped up herbs to to a sturdy glass bowl or jar and cover them liberally with oil.
3. Put the jar in the water pan to make a double boiler/ban marie
4. Allow the water to simmer gently for up to an hour and a half
5. Strain the spent herbs out of the oil and return oil to a clean jar

6. At this stage you can repeat with fresh herbs for another hour and a half if you wish

Making your ointment:

1. Return your infused oil after straining to the ban marie and re-warm.
2. Add shaved beeswax to the infused oil - one part wax to ten parts oil e.g. 25g wax per 250ml oil
3. Allow the beeswax to melt into the oil, and then give it a stir
4. You can drop a small amount of the mixture onto a plate to judge the finished consistency
5. Take your ointment off the heat and add an *optional* couple of drops of essential oil. If you add the essential oil whilst heating it will evaporate.
6. Pour the mixture into glass storage jars.
7. Allow to cool, and label.

Common Problems

If you're ointment is too runny or too hard, the ratio of beeswax to oil may be slightly off balance. Remelt it and add more oil or wax.

If the surface of the ointment looks messy and uneven, you can remedy this by saving a small bit of mixture, melting this and pouring it over the top once your ointment has cooled. Alternatively, use a hairdryer to melt and re-cool the top.

If your ointment goes off, or becomes mouldy after a time, it may have had too high a water content. Wilting or drying herbs will help this.

Alternatives to Beeswax

There are many alternatives to beeswax that are not derived from animals. Examples include Candelilla wax, Carnauba wax, Soy wax and synthetic beeswax. Note that it is worth sourcing both beeswax and vegetable waxes with care as there are a range of ethical issues to take into account such as animal welfare, air miles, genetically modified plants and the support of large scale agri-business.

Preservation & Storage

Ointments store well in dark coloured glass and tightly capped jars. Wide openings are useful so you can have easy access to the ointment. They will not keep as well in environments where they are subjected to continual melting and re-cooling.

Herbs Commonly Used in Ointments

- Comfrey leaf and root- an excellent deep acting wound healer
- Meadowsweet – relieves a variety of aches and pains, anti-inflammatory
- Yarrow - wound healer and stimulates circulation
- St John's Wort – soothes nerve pain, bruises and inflammations
- Plantain - antimicrobial, relieves itching, insect bites, soothes mucous membranes
- Rose - soothing, calming, anti-inflammatory. Lovely massage ointment
- Daisy - excellent for bruises and sprains

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