

Fire Cider!

When the colder, darker months envelop us and colds and 'flus start going around, fire cider is a wonderful remedy to have on hand. Fire cider is a warming, immune-stimulating, virus-fighting blend of herbs extracted into an apple cider vinegar base. There are alternate names and closely related tonics, too, like cyclone cider and thieves' vinegar. And fire cider itself morphs from herbalist to herbalist and season to season, adding and subtracting ingredients depending on availability and taste. This allows for tons of creativity!

The main ingredients tend to be spicy and heating, stimulating to both blood flow and white blood cell activity. Garlic? Heck yeah. Horseradish? You betcha. Cayenne pepper? But of course! Ginger, oregano, black pepper? Bring it on! Another component often added is aromatic herbs – thyme, rosemary, marjoram, cinnamon, or whatever strikes your fancy. Lastly, a bit of fruit or sweetener can be a boost of vitamin C or a soother to dry throats. Think oranges, pomegranate seeds, elderberries, or honey.

We'll get to the method in a moment. But first, a detour into politics.

Free Fire Cider!

Politics? Yes, politics. Herbalist Rosemary Gladstar coined the term “fire cider” back in the 1970's, and has used it in published books in the decades since. It has become, in large part thanks to her, a popular and well-understood term in the North American herbal community. Virtually any herbalist that can define “tincture” and describe the medicinal uses of calendula or nettles can also tell you what fire cider is (and perhaps share with you her favorite recipe for it!). So it came as a surprise to the entire plant medicine community when we heard in early 2014 that a company, Shire City Herbals, had filed to trademark the words “fire cider” in 2012. Even more unexpected was that they started enforcing their trademark and going after small herbal businesses that sold fire cider. An uproar ensued. From freefirecider.com:

“Many people feel this is a dangerous precedent to anyone who creates and shares recipes anywhere on the web or in books and this led to a filing with the US Patent and Trademark Office asking that the mark be deemed generic. Until the company [Shire City] agrees to freeing Fire Cider from trademark restriction, a boycott of their product has been launched.”

As of early 2018, the boycott is still on. And, as though the above actions weren't bad enough, Shire City Herbals has taken the additional step of suing three herbalists involved in the anti-trademark movement for \$100,000 in damages, claiming that their business has suffered. Oddly, they also claim online that their business has improved because of the boycott.

Where does that leave us, the community herbalists and home remedy crafters? We are still legally allowed to use the term in non-commerce ways (like this handout). Rosemary Gladstar, in the Free Fire Cider Summer 2015 newsletter, has this advice: “The greatest way you can continue to support the case for Free Fire Cider is to continue to educate your communities about pirated herbal products, supporting those 'vinegar tonics' that are ethically made, and by making your own Fire Cider and teaching others to make it as well.”

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Making Fire Cider

Making fire cider is quite simple. Choose your herbs from the list below, or add your own flair! Chop up, grind, grate, or juice your ingredients. Loosely pack them into a clean glass jar until the jar is 1/2-3/4 full. Pour some apple cider vinegar on top (a “live” vinegar, with the potential to grow a mother culture, is often favored for its probiotic benefits) and cover the herbs thoroughly. Cap with a clean, well-fitting top. You can choose a plastic lid, or use wax paper to line the inside of a metal lid (the vinegar will corrode the metal without a buffer).

Write a label right away listing all of your ingredients, then shake your fire cider up! You’ll want to give the jar a shake daily for 2-6 weeks. After that, simply strain through a cheesecloth; the resulting liquid should be spicy and delicious! (It’s okay if it has a cloudy layer that settles to the bottom when left to sit.) You can nibble on the now-pickled herbs, or simply compost them. If you’d like to add some honey to sweeten things up a bit, now’s the time! Warm a bit of honey and add to the strained vinegar.

Your spicy creation should last 6-12 months if stored in a cool, dark place. I highly recommend the refrigerator; while the infused vinegar will be fine on the counter for a few weeks, it’ll keep much longer in the fridge. Don’t forget to label with all ingredients and the date!

Some Possible Fire Cider ingredients:

Ginger	Turmeric	Lemon
Cayenne	Oregano	Orange
Horseradish	Cinnamon	Pomegranate
Garlic	Rosemary	Elderberry
Onion	Holy basil	Hibiscus
Burdock	Thyme	Cranberry

Using Fire Cider

You can swig fire cider daily during cold season, if you like, or just take a small shot when you want to up your immunity game. “Dosage” is very personal here – some like a teaspoon, others like an ounce or two at a time. You can also utilize fire cider in cooking: Sprinkle it on your greens! Add it to salad dressing! Use it to make mustard! You’re only limited by your imagination.

Fire cider makes a fabulous gift. Just make sure it’s thoroughly labeled; you don’t want to addle your garlic-averse grandpa or sicken the neighbor with a ginger allergy. It also makes a great excuse for a party: organize “potluck” fire cider parties using whatever ingredients are brought along. (Don’t forget to provide the vinegar!) It’s fun, it’s healing, and making it yourself is a great way to stick it to The Man.

Useful Texts:

Gladstar, Rosemary. *Rosemary Gladstar’s Family Herbal*. Storey Books, 2001.
Phillips, Nancy & Michael. *The Village Herbalist*. Chelsea Green, 2001.
Cech, Richo. *Making Plant Medicine*. Horizon Herbs, 2000.
Green, James. *The Herbal Medicine-Maker’s Handbook*. Crossing Press, 2000.

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