

Herbs for the Heart and Emotional Healing

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Historically, the heart has been considered a source of wisdom, courage, thought, and emotion. This was a place of instinct, of psychological and spiritual insight, and the home of our higher Self. A hand placed over the heart was a symbol of loyalty, sincerity, and truthfulness, as well as a declaration that *I am*. It wasn't until the Industrial Revolution that we began to take a more reductionist perspective, thinking of the heart as primarily a physical entity, whose function was simply to pump blood.

With its own 40,000+ neurons, the heart has the ability to independently sense, process information, make decisions, and demonstrate learning and memory. The heart is a very intelligent system—it is a highly complex, information processing center that communicates with the cranial brain via the nervous system (primarily via the vagus nerve), hormonal system, pressure waves, and electromagnetic energy. The heart is about 100,000 times stronger electrically and 5,000 times stronger magnetically than the brain. The heart also sends more signals to the brain than the brain does to the heart. Interestingly, our sensitivity to emotional threats is greater than our sensitivity to physical threats (5).

While herbs may certainly be used by experienced practitioners to treat serious physical issues like congestive heart failure, they are also outstanding allies for preventative care and emotional support. When used as part of a treatment plan that includes healthy diet, movement, and lifestyle choices, they can have a profoundly positive impact.

Cardioactive herbs (like Digitalis) rely on powerful constituents such as cardiac glycosides, and are used to treat conditions like arrhythmia and congestive heart failure (CHF). Cardiac glycosides help to increase the efficiency of the heart without increasing its need for more oxygen. They strengthen the contraction of the heart by impacting the contractile fibers. Unfortunately, they are removed from the body at a very slow rate and have a tendency to accumulate, so use of plants with these constituents should always be monitored, as high levels can be toxic. These herbs are NOT appropriate for use in folk medicine.

Cardiotonic herbs (like Hawthorn) have distinct, measurably beneficial effects on the heart and blood vessels, and are often used to help treat and prevent chronic degenerative conditions. Most of these herbs are rich in constituents called flavonoids, which are known for their actions as vascular tonics. They do not contain cardiac glycosides, and their mechanisms of action vary and may not be as clearly understood as cardioactive herbs.

Primary Herbal Actions that Affect the Cardiovascular System (2)

- Cardiotonic (Hawthorn, Linden)
- Cardioactive (Foxglove, Lily of the Valley, Scotchbroom, Figwort, Pleurisy Root)
- Circulatory stimulant (Ginger, Cayenne)
- Peripheral vasodilator (Ginkgo, Prickly Ash)
- Hypotensive (Linden, Garlic, Motherwort, Yarrow, Crampbark)
- Diuretic (Dandelion leaf, Yarrow, the cardioactive herbs)
- Vascular tonic (Witch hazel, Ginkgo)
- Nervine (Oats, Skullcap, Vervain, Motherwort, Linden, SJW)

- Antispasmodic (Cramp bark, Valerian)

Heart Healthy Dietary Recommendations

- Eat more fruits and veggies—all the colors!
- Eat more whole grains
- Consume adequate fiber
- Drink lots of water
- Consume more cold-pressed oils and fish (adequate balance of Omega 3s)
- Avoid processed foods and preservatives
- Minimize salt, avoid stimulants, limit alcohol
- Aerobic exercise (as much as possible!)
- Incorporate meditation/chanting into your daily routine

Time spent outdoors in nature has positive effects on the heart as well. The term *Shinrin-yoku* was coined by the Japanese Ministry of Agriculture, Forest, and Fisheries in 1982, and is defined as making contact with and taking in the atmosphere of the forest (6). They conducted several studies on physical effects of this exposure and concluded that forest environments promote:

- Lower cortisol concentrations
- Lower pulse rate
- Lower blood pressure
- Greater parasympathic nerve activity
- Lower sympathetic nerve activity

Allium sativum, Garlic

Family: Liliaceae

Parts Used: cloves

Actions:

- Antioxidant
- Reduces platelet aggregation
- Inflammation-modulating
- Supports healthy gut flora
- Antimicrobial

Uses:

- prevention of atherosclerosis, thrombosis, hypertension, heart attack, and stroke
- reduces blood pressure, total cholesterol, LDL cholesterol, triglycerides
- increases HDL cholesterol
- can play a curative role in the treatment of atherosclerosis

Cautions/Contraindications:

- Be careful when taking large doses before and after surgery.
- Therapeutic dose may potentiate anti-inflammatory medications like aspirin.
- Large doses may irritate gastric mucosa.

Zingiber officinale, Ginger

Family: Zingiberaceae

Parts Used: rhizome

Actions:

- Peripheral circulatory stimulant
- Anti-inflammatory
- Antioxidant
- Antimicrobial
- Antispasmodic
- Anti-nausea
- Stomachic
- Fibrinolytic

Uses:

- Normalizes blood pressure (hyper/hypotensive)
- Anti-hypercholesterolemia
- Reduces platelet aggregation
- Rheumatoid arthritis—internal and external; supports oxygenation of tissues and elimination of waste
- Seasickness, morning sickness

Cautions/Contraindications:

- May enhance effects of anticoagulants and platelet aggregation inhibitors.
- Consult a physician if you have gallstones; consume only in small amounts.
- No large doses in pregnancy.

Crataegus spp., Hawthorn

Family: Rosaceae

Parts Used: leaf, flower, berry

Actions:

- Cardiotonic
- Cardioprotective
- Antioxidant
- Trophorestorative to the heart
- Diuretic
- Hypotensive

Uses:

- Specific for all heart-related ailments.
- It is not recommended for acute illnesses, as it is slow acting and nutritive, and should be taken long-term (for at least 3 months).
- Helps to improve nutrition, activity, and energy reserves/release of the heart muscle. Particularly indicated as we age, acts to prevent and reverse age-related damage even when no pathological issues are present.
- Affects most chronic heart diseases: cardiovascular degenerative disease, hypertension, post-myocardial infarction, coronary artery disease, angina pectoris, mild CHF. Also

normalizes arrhythmias.

- For irritable, nervous conditions, heart conditions related to an emotional heartache or spiritual heartache from a disconnection with the spirit, helps open heart to forgiveness of others or forgiveness of life events that may be keeping a person from healing (7).
- Young Hawthorn leaves can be harvested in Spring and used fresh in salads or dried for tea. Flowers should be collected just as they begin to open. They are pollinated by flies and other carrion-lovers, and smell accordingly.
- It's best to gather berries when they're plump and juicy—usually around late September/early October. (After the first frost, they get too mushy and are best left for wildlife.)

Cautions/Contraindications:

- None. Hawthorn **DOES NOT** contain cardiac glycosides. Lacks toxicity, accumulation, and habituation—can be used long-term safely by anyone.
- Monitor use with other cardiac medications, as it may increase the effectiveness of the medications, therefore reducing the dosage needed.

Tilia spp., Linden/European Lime

Family: Tiliaceae

Parts Used: flowers and bracts, leaves

Actions:

- Cardiotonic
- Nervine/calmative
- Hypotensive
- Anti-inflammatory
- Diuretic
- Diaphoretic
- Antispasmodic
- Expectorant
- Antimicrobial

Uses:

- Specific for high blood pressure with arteriosclerosis—also useful in prevention of arteriosclerosis
- Hypertension and palpitations due to stress
- Nervousness and insomnia; relaxing for nervous tension
- Can protect against stress-induced ulcers and act as an anti-stress remedy
- For coughs, upper respiratory infections, GI issues, and genitourinary issues
- Shortens duration of infectious conditions like the cold and flu

Cautions/Contraindications:

- None reported

Leonurus cardiaca, Motherwort

Family: Lamiaceae

Parts Used: aerial parts in bud stage

Actions:

- Cardiotonic
- Nervine/sedative
- Hypotensive
- Slows elevated heart rate
- Digestive bitter
- Antispasmodic
- Emmenagogue

Uses:

- Strengthens the heart emotionally and physically without straining.
- Specific for tachycardia (rapid heartbeat) brought on by anxiety or stress.
- Insomnia, heart palpitations, heart weakness.
- Hypertension; can increase contractility while still lowering blood pressure.
- Heart action is mild, take for at least 3 months for best results.
- Bitterness stimulates digestion and also targets uterine tissue to stimulate menses; amenorrhea, dysmenorrhea, menstrual pain.
- Menopausal syndrome.
- Motherwort calms and protects the heart, especially when there is anxiety driven by unsettled emotion.
- The connection between these two organs was discussed in the ancient Chinese text *Yellow Emperor's Classic of Internal Medicine* with reference to a specific heart-uterus meridian called *Bao Mai* (3). The heart and the uterus are closely connected through this meridian, which explains the profound effect that emotional issues that affect the heart can have on the uterus (4).

Cautions/Contraindications:

- Motherwort **DOES NOT** contain cardiac glycosides
- Should not be used in pregnancy
- Monitor use with other cardiac medications, as it may increase the effectiveness of the medications, therefore reducing the dosage needed

Ocimum sanctum/tenuiflorum, Tulsi (Holy Basil)

Family: Lamiaceae

Parts used: aerial parts

Actions:

- Adaptogenic
- Nervine
- Antimicrobial
- Antispasmodic
- Expectorant

Uses:

- Classified as a rasayana, meaning it nourishes a person to perfect health and promotes long life.
- Drinking tulsi tea daily is a great way to cope with stress, environmental or internal, which may arise during the day (cortisol sparing).
- Tulsi impacts both the throat and heart chakras. The throat chakra is an important point of energetic expression, linked closely to your heart and soul. It is one of the greatest tools we have to express our inner light and wisdom in third dimension.
- The throat chakra is the tool that helps to amplify the love and truth of the heart. Tulsi helps to ensure that both chakras are working in unison.
- Helps to restore balance and healthy functioning to the lungs, especially with bronchial mucus.
- Dispels mental fog and enhances cerebral activity.

Inula helenium (Elecampane) Indicated for people who tend to take on grief and hold it in, pushing it down into the lungs. There is often a fear of release and need to identify with the sadness. Great for homesickness and loss due to separation.

Oplopanax horridum (Devil's Club) Covered with a spiny outer bark, this plant is a guardian and defender of the heart in all aspects (1). This plant asserts its presence and right to be in the world. Excellent for highly sensitive people with porous energetic boundaries; Devil's Club will protect you as you grow into the person you were meant to be.

Ganoderma lucidum/tsugae (Reishi) This adaptogenic fungus brings the stillness and calm of the forest, and helps with processing a backlog of emotions stored in the body (1). As we internalize our fears, anger, and other emotions, the stories that we tell ourselves can take on a life of their own and manifest as chronic illness. Combines well with **Hawthorn** for general long-term repair. Pairs particularly well with **Schisandra** for anger and other intense, unchecked emotions.

Prunella vulgaris (Self-Heal, Heal-all) Often overlooked, Self-Heal is used to enhance our own healing powers, physically and spiritually. It increases our confidence in our ability to heal ourselves, and is specific for people who have turned their power over to doctors, gurus, and other guides. Never forget your own power; honor your ability to heal yourself physically, emotionally, and spiritually.

Monarda spp. (Bee Balm, Oswego Tea, Bergamot) A beautiful member of the Lamiaceae that is a great spiritual cleanser. With a taste similar to oregano and thyme, Monarda leaves and flowers make a beautiful bath, dispelling grief and allowing death and sadness to let go of the living.

Symplocarpus foetidus/Lysichiton americanus (Skunk Cabbage, Swamp Lantern) This unique plant works with very deep, old grief that lives in the lungs. A thermogenic plant, Skunk Cabbage releases heat to melt the snow around it,

Viola tricolor (Heartsease/Pansy) This plant does exactly what it says it does—eases the heart—and the flowers look like sweet smiling faces. Excellent for any heartache, particularly when it manifests as physical illness. Like a cheerful confidant, heartsease offers comfort in times of separation and disappointment.

Borago officinalis (Borage) From the Latin words *cor* (courage) and *ago* (I bring), just looking at borage's purple-blue flowers can gladden the heart. The flowers and leaves are used medicinally, and are known to drive away melancholy and sadness. Nourishing to the heart, and a favorite of bees and other pollinators, bring borage into your life to uplift sadness and depression.

Rose (Rosa spp.) One of the best known flowers, this sweet bloom helps with softening and opening the heart. Specific for emotions that have been held in, rose allows us to gentle our thorns to allow those stuck feelings to move through our physical and emotional bodies. This can bring forth a great release of tension and emotions, so it's best taken when a person trusts themselves to feel vulnerable and allow the feelings to be felt. Rose reminds us that we can be sweet and beautiful and pokey all at once, and that it's okay to love these many aspects of ourselves.

Mimosa (Albizia julibrissin) The bark and flowers of this tree are used to help the heart to feel joy after it has been broken. Known as the "collective happiness" tree in China, mimosa is specific when a person feels so sad and broken that they just cannot stop crying. Like little pink firecrackers, the flowers look and smell incredible, as they remind you that the world is beautiful and full of love.

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