

Making an Elderberry Syrup or Elixir

Herbal syrups are water extractions of herbs (usually decoctions—see below) that are concentrated with a sweetener (preferably organic white sugar or raw honey). This sweetener provides a bit of nutritional support as a carbohydrate and also acts as a preservative. The concentration of sugar is particularly important when making syrups and elixirs; when in water, sugar acts as a food source for micro-organisms (especially molds and yeasts). However, at a high enough concentration, the sugar actually restricts the growth ability of micro-organisms. So we are aiming to get our syrup to be saturated enough to preserve, but not so saturated that the sugar overwhelms the liquid and causes crystallization.

When preparing a syrup, one of the following ratios should be used:

1 part decoction : 1 part sweetener
1 part decoction : 2 parts sweetener

I tend to follow the **1 part water : 1 part sweetener** suggestion, as the 1 : 2 ratio is too sweet for me. But I have access to a refrigerator, which will also help with preservation. If you are keeping your syrup at room temperature, the 1:2 ratio is best.

Syrups are a great, palatable method for delivery of herbal medicines (especially for children), and are also a great way to mask the flavor of less tasty tinctures--just combine the tincture and the syrup and you get the medicinal benefits of both. Preserving syrups with honey is also a great way to combine the medicinal benefits of the honey with the herbs that are being used. Do not give syrups preserved with honey to children under the age of one.

The serving size generally used for syrups is 1 Tbsp. (adult) or 2 tsp. (children) up to 5 times daily. Because of their sugar content, syrups are not good for people with gut dysbiosis or hypoglycemia, or issues such as diabetes or chronic fatigue syndrome. Syrups keep best in the refrigerator, and will last for 4-12 weeks if properly stored. If your syrup has for some reason fermented or develops any moldy growth (it happens), it should not be consumed.

Elixirs are usually a strong herbal decoction that is sweetened and preserved with honey and brandy. They are most often made with dried plant material. One of the benefits of using brandy is that it targets the lung tissue, so this adds another medicinal benefit (in addition to the many benefits of honey). Because elixirs contain brandy, their shelf life is about a year.

When preparing an elixir, the following ratio should be used:

1 part decoction : 3/4 part sweetener + 1/4 part brandy

What is a decoction?

Herbal teas may generally be classified as infusions or decoctions. Infusions are appropriate when using aerial plant parts such as leaves, flowers, and soft berries (like rose hips). These materials are more delicate and require less time in water to extract the desired constituents—which is why we just pour water over the herbs. Tougher plant parts such as roots, seeds, dried fruit, and bark are best prepared as a **decoction**—the herbs are covered with water and then simmered, usually for at least 15-30 minutes.

- Gather herbs in a saucepan, add cool water and stir. If you have time, let the herb macerate (soak) for a few hours before applying heat.

- COVER the pan and bring the water to a boil before reducing to a simmer for 15-30 minutes. We are trying to concentrate the decoction when making a syrup or elixir, so we will simmer over low heat with the lid slightly ajar so that steam can escape, until the water is reduced by half.
- Remove from the heat and strain. After pressing and straining the marc (herb material), be sure to allow the decoction to cool before using. Don't forget to compost your herbs.

Honey as Medicine

Honey is the method by which bees store nectar in their hives. The chemical composition of nectar varies and includes vitamin C and some B vitamins, as well as water, but it is primarily sugar (up to 80%). Plants in the Fabaceae (Pea family) and Asteraceae (Sunflower family) are prominent sources of nectar.

Honey is also a great source of protein (up to 35%) which, when coupled with the high carbohydrate content, is a great energy booster. These proteins also promote internal and external healing. Raw honey also contains pollen, another great source of proteins and minerals that is also a reputed treatment for allergies.

Honey has a very soothing and demulcent effect on the mucous membranes, and as such it is very appropriate for use with respiratory herbs. The Smith Papyrus (1700 BC) and Ebers Papyrus (1500 BC) contain descriptions of the packing of wounds and burns with a paste made of honey and coagulated milk, covered with a bandage made of muslin. The traditional Chinese pharmacopeia also mentions the use of honey for wounds and burns, as do the records of the ancient Aztecs.

Varying nectar sources have been found to affect the properties of honey. Manuka, buckwheat, and heather honeys are higher in protein and also exhibit greater antimicrobial activity. Sunflower and buckwheat honeys are higher in antioxidants. Some honey is derived from the sap of certain conifers and is darker in color with a higher mineral content.

How to Make Simple Elderberry Syrup/Elixir

1 quart dried black/blue elderberries (*Sambucus nigra/cerulea*)

2 quarts water

approximately 1 quart honey

1. Combine the elderberries and the water in a large pot and lightly simmer with the lid slightly ajar so that steam can escape. Your water should reduce by about half during this time—I like to use a chopstick to measure the volume of liquid when I start. Just mark a line when you start your decoction so that you can see when your liquid has been reduced to the appropriate volume. You may also consider adding other herbs like echinacea, ginger, astragalus, reishi, etc.
2. Strain into a measuring cup. Remaining marc (plant material) can be composted.
3. Add an equal amount of honey (or sugar) and stir until well-blended.
 - a. If making an Elderberry elixir, follow the first three steps. Then combine honey and brandy in a volume equal to your decoction (3/4 part and 1/4 part, respectively). Combine and stir until well-blended. Go to step 4.
4. Allow to cool, and then bottle. Be sure to label with date and ingredients! Store in the refrigerator. Lasts about 12 weeks.

The Simpler's Method

Many herbal recipes are given in parts, which allow you to use any form of measurement: cup, ounce, gram, pound, tablespoon, teaspoon, milliliters, as long as you are consistent with the measurement used. This is called the "simpler's method," and it simplifies the process of making large or small amounts of any given recipe.

For example, with today's syrup recipe:

<i># of parts</i>	<i>Ingredients</i>	<i>Tbsp</i>	<i>Cups</i>	<i>Ounces</i>
	Elderberry			
	Astragalus			
	Reishi			
	Echinacea			
	Ginger			

Herbs we will be using today:

- Black/Blue Elderberry, *Sambucus nigra/cerulea*
 - Part used: berry

- Astragalus, *Astragalus mongholicus* (or *Astragalus membranaceus*)
 - Part used: root

- Echinacea, *Echinacea purpurea*
 - Part used: root

- Reishi, *Ganoderma lingzhi* (or *Ganoderma lucidum*)
 - Part used: fruiting body

- Ginger, *Zingiber officinale*
 - Part used: rhizome