

# HERBAL SALVES

## GENERAL INFORMATION

Herbal salves are wonderful things! They are convenient to use and very powerful. Depending on the herbs used, a salve can soothe the skin, help a wound to heal rapidly, reduce or prevent scarring, and prevent or cure infection. Herbal salves are particularly effective on burns of any kind.

## BASIC SALVE INGREDIENTS

- Base / Carrier-type oil
- Herbals - fresh, dried, or tinctured
- Solidifier

## OTHER OPTIONAL INGREDIENTS

- Essential oils
- Lighteners
- Preservatives

**Salves Made with Dried Herbs:** Most herbal salves are made from dried plant material. Well-dried herbs, whose medicinal properties have been preserved, make wonderful salves. These salves cook up quite quickly and there is no water content to worry about causing your salve to mold or go rancid during storage.

**Salve Made with Tinctures:** On occasion, you may not have an ingredient that you need in dry herb form. A salve can be made from herbal tinctures. Using tinctures instead of chopped, dried herbs result in a light colored and very pretty salve. The salve will be pale tan/green instead of a dark, herbal, plant sort of green. (The addition of wheat germ oil turns even the greenest salve yellow!) When making a salve with tinctures, you must be very careful to cook off all of the liquid.

A salve made with only tinctures will not be as potent as one made from dry herbs (and certainly not as strong as a salve made from fresh ingredients). This type of salve is excellent for lotions and face creams. If you are trying to heal a burn or draw out a serious infection, you should make your salve from herbs—fresh ones if possible. Most herbal salves that you buy commercially are made with tinctures.

It is very important that the liquid, both water and alcohol, of the tincture be completely cooked out of the salve before the salve is allowed to cool. Water in the salve will rise to the top as small bubbles, popping when they reach the surface. You will know that all of the water has been removed when no more bubbles arise when the salve is stirred. Failure to get all the moisture out of your salve will likely cause the salve to mold. You may have to heat and stir the salve for quite awhile to get rid of all the moisture.

**Salves Made with a Combination of Dried Herbs and Tinctures:** If you are adding any tinctures to a salve that was made with herbs, do so while the salve is hot. Continue cooking, stirring occasionally, until all of the bubbles (indicating liquid) have surfaced and popped.

You will need approximately three dropperfuls of tincture (about 60 drops) for each part of herb that is called for in the recipe.

**Salves Made with Fresh Plant Material (All or part of the recipe):** If you are in need of a really strong drawing or healing salve, use a much fresh plant material as possible. Even if all you can get fresh is the comfrey and the plantain, the difference in potency will be well worth the effort. Since herbs are at peak medicinal quality at different times of the year, I sometimes make a soaked oil tincture from each herb when it is at its peak. At the end of the season (late fall), the oils can be combined to make a salve. Additional herbs can even be added at this time.

With a fresh plant salve, you must be sure to let the salve cook until every bit of moisture from the plants has cooked out of the salve. This can take up to 10 hours, but the result in potency is amazing!

## GENERAL INFORMATION

### BASE OILS

**ALMOND OIL** by itself or in combination with other cold pressed oils such as grapeseed and safflower, is excellent. Almond oil has very little odor, is readily available, and has a slow rancidity factor.

**OLIVE OIL** is a fairly good choice for salves. It can make the consistency of a batch of salve a little unstable, however. A batch that is just the right thickness in the fridge becomes runny on a hot day and difficult to use. No amount of beeswax solves this problem. Olive oil has a low rancidity factor and is good for the skin.

**GRAPESEED OIL** is an excellent medium; it is especially nice when blended with almond oil. Grapeseed oil has a low rancidity factor, and is reasonable in price.

**FLAXSEED OIL** is an excellent choice because it is emollient, making it excellent for skin problems. Flaxseed goes rancid easily, however; store any salve made with it in the fridge. It is also quite expensive.

**SAFFLOWER AND SUNFLOWER OILS** are often rancid when you buy them, or become rancid quickly.

**LARD** is sometimes suggested as a base. Some sources claim that lard carries toxins and impurities into the body. Dr. Christopher used lard almost exclusively for his salves. If your lard was rendered by you from a pig you raised without chemicals and drugs, it will be safe in a salve. Salves made with lard go rancid very rapidly and must be stored in the fridge. This is enough to make me choose something else.

**SESAME OIL** should be cold pressed (never use the toasted variety). This oil goes rancid very quickly at room temperatures, but when not rancid, is very emollient to the skin.

**WHEAT GERM OIL** cannot be used as the base oil—unstable, with a very high rancidity factor. You simply won't believe the smell if wheat germ oil goes rancid! A tablespoon of wheat germ oil added to the salve at the end of processing adds wonderful healing properties to the salve, as well as lightening it for easier application. Wheat germ oil is high in vitamin E and antioxidants.

**COCONUT OIL** does not make a good base for a salve. It is excellent on the skin. I use it every day!

### SOLIDIFIERS

**BEESWAX** is a natural thickener and interacts well with the skin. Beeswax allows the skin to breathe, has a low melting point so it will incorporate quickly into a salve at low heat, and softens rapidly on the skin. Beeswax is what I use most often, sometimes adding cocoa butter.

**COCOA BUTTER** has a lower melting point than beeswax. It may be used alone or with beeswax. Cocoa butter is usually quite expensive, but it gives a salve a very nice creamy texture.

**PARAFFIN** is a petroleum product and not absorbable by the skin—not recommended for salve making.

**LANOLIN**—anhydrous—is the closest lubricant to what is produced by our sebaceous glands. It is readily absorbed into the skin, and helps the skin retain moisture. (Hydrous—not the recommended *anhydrous*—lanolin is 10% lanolin and 90% water and is expensive.) Why pay big bucks for water and then have to work it out of the salve? Hydrous lanolin has a wonderful consistency if using straight on the skin, but that much water makes it wrong for use in a salve. Anhydrous lanolin is hard to find and a bit difficult to use.

### LIGHTENERS

**GLYCERINE** use only vegetable glycerine. Beat into the finished salve as a lightener or sweetening agent (very nice in lip balms). Glycerine has many healing properties of its own.

**ALOE VERA GEL** makes the salve very light and easy to apply. Aloe vera also has many healing properties. It is especially nice added to burn salves. Use caution. Allergies to aloe vera are quite common.

## PRESERVATIVES

**BENZOIN** added in essential oil or herbal form helps to keep both salves and glycerine tinctures viable for a longer period of time.

**ESSENTIAL OILS** when added to a salve, slow the rate at which the carrier-type oils go rancid. The medicinal properties of the essential oil are compromised fairly quickly by the larger protein molecules in the base oil of the salve, but the essential oil still helps with rancidity. Nothing will prevent the large protein molecules of base oils from going rancid altogether, especially if the salves experience a lot of heat, but the addition of essential oils will prolong the shelf life to quite an extent. The essential oils *must* be added after the salve has cooled.

## ESSENTIAL OILS ADDED FOR MEDICINAL PURPOSES

Essential oils, added to a salve, can bring their own amazing healing capacities. Essential oils should be added to the salve at the time of use, making no more than a couple of days worth at a time. Sometimes I will stir a couple of drops into the top 1/2 inch of salve in a jar, use it over the next day or two, and then stir a few more drops in for use over the next few days.

## BASIC INSTRUCTIONS FOR MAKING AN HERBAL SALVE

To make an herbal salve, use a 1:10 ratio, approximately, of herbs to oil. Add more oil if the salve seems too dry as it is cooking. Place the herbs in the oil. Heat in a crock pot or in the oven, allowing the mixture to get no hotter than 180° F. Once the mixture has reached 180° allow it to continue cooking for 2-3 hours. The herbs will begin to look a bit grey and become a little bit crispy when they have cooked long enough. The mixture should be stirred a few times as it cooks.

If you use fresh herbs or tinctures, you will have to cook the mixture longer to be sure the extra moisture has cooked away. The moisture from the fresh herbs, or the liquid from the tinctures, must cook away completely or your salve will mold. When the salve is hot, little bubbles will form on the surface and then pop. This is the moisture evaporating off. Keep cooking the salve until there are no more bubbles and the herbs are grey and slightly crispy as described above.

During the last hour of the cooking process, begin melting the beeswax. I use old bread pans that I bought at a thrift store. You will not be able to use the pans for anything else after the beeswax has been melted in them (unless you are willing to work very hard at getting them clean again). You must watch the beeswax closely as it heats. Overheated beeswax goes dark and smells terrible.

When the herbs have finished cooking and have cooled a little, strain them just as you would for other types of tinctures. Press out as much of the oil as you can. Place the oil back into the oven, set at low temperature, to keep warm. When the beeswax is melted and the oil and beeswax are approximately the same temperature, stir them together. The oil should be just a little bit warmer than the wax. If the oil is too cold the wax will resolidify, making little lumps, as you pour it in. The lumps are very difficult to stir out. The best solution is to reheat the entire batch, whipping and stirring it frequently as it reheats and cools again. This is not fun, so watch the temperature carefully.

The cooling process is where the real work begins. For the first hour or so the salve must be stirred frequently—every 5 minutes. The top of the salve cools more quickly than the rest. A crust forms on the top which will cause lumps that will require a great deal of effort to stir in. Attention paid here will give you a beautiful smooth salve.

For each cup of oil used, you will need approximately 1.4 ounces of beeswax as a solidifier. You will also need 1 tablespoon vitamin E oil, and 3 drops benzoin essential oil as a preservative to slow the process of rancidity. A teaspoon of benzoin tincture, or ½ teaspoon benzoin herb powder may be added, at the beginning of the salve making process, if you prefer.