

HERBAL TINCTURES

GENERAL INFORMATION—ALCOHOL AND VINEGAR TINCTURES

The liquid medium into which the herb is placed to make a tincture is called the menstruum; the herb is known as the marc. For internal use, the menstruum can be alcohol, apple cider vinegar, or vegetable glycerine. A good rule of thumb for beginners is, “When in doubt, use alcohol.” The medicinal properties of most herbs are pulled out best in an alcohol tincture. If the alcohol content concerns you, place the drops of tincture you need into very hot water to administer them. The heat will dissipate the alcohol entirely. (There is more alcohol in over-the-counter cold medicine, even ones meant for children, than you will typically ingest when taking herbal tinctures.)

One hundred proof Vodka (50% alcohol/50% water) is ideal for herbal tinctures, especially herbals that are the root of the plant. The less expensive eighty proof vodka (40% alcohol/60% water) is acceptable for most herbs. When you need to add water to any tincture, distilled or filtered water is absolutely essential. Vinegar is used, undiluted, in the strength commonly sold. (Dairymen use a much stronger variety!)

Some herbs, especially kidney/bladder herbs, do not tincture well in vinegar. The finished tincture looks, and tastes, bad. Some people have reported that these vinegar tinctures make them nauseous. A tincture that is part vinegar and part alcohol is often more palatable. When using vinegar, always use an all-natural apple cider vinegar. Western Family makes one that is excellent and cheaper than the ones in health food stores. It must not say “apple cider flavored distilled” on the label.

The proportion of the herb (marc) to liquid (menstruum) is known as the weight/volume (w/v) ratio. Standard ratios are:

Tinctures of dried, intense botanicals are 1:10. This means 1 part herb, an ounce for instance, to 10 parts liquid, also measured in ounces. Examples of this type of herb are cayenne and the resins such as myrrh and propolis. Most of these herbs require a higher proportion of alcohol to water for maximum potency. I would recommend 50% (100 proof) Vodka.

Tinctures of dried, fluffy, absorbent herbs such as mullein, yarrow, and hops should also be 1:10. Always check your tincture after 24 hours to make sure all of the herb is still covered with liquid. Any exposed parts will probably mold and ruin the entire batch.

Tinctures of other dried botanicals are made with a 1:8 ratio. For example, if you have 3 ounces of herb you would multiply the 3 by 8 and use 24 oz of whatever liquid you have chosen.

Over the last several years, growers have begun employing more sophisticated methods of drying and preserving herbal products. These methods remove more of the moisture. The advantage of these new methods is that you rarely receive an herb that smells musty or has molded. The disadvantage is that super dried plant material absorbs much more of your menstruum (liquid). It takes more vodka, vinegar, or glycerine to make a tincture now than it did in the past and much of that liquid remains in the herb no matter how well you strain it afterwards.

In spite of the additional cost, this is not an entirely bad thing, since the new drying methods seem to be preserving much more of the medicinal properties of the herbs. The finished tincture is so much stronger, and better balanced medicinally and nutritionally, that required dosages are smaller. I used to take full dropperfuls of most tinctures. Now I rarely need more than 8 to 10 drops at a time. With remedies like BBL that I have been using for years, the difference in potency is very apparent.

Tinctures of fresh plants are made on a 1:3 ratio, if you are using vodka. This is because the plant still contains so much water that the menstruum would become too diluted to pull the medicinal properties from the herb. Without sufficient alcohol, the tincture will mold. I have found that a higher ratio of alcohol to water (about 75-80%), and using a 1:4 ratio works better. This kind of alcohol is expensive unless you have a source coming out of Mexico. Always use the least amount of alcohol that you feel is effective when making a tincture.

BASIC INSTRUCTIONS FOR MAKING ALCOHOL OR VINEGAR TINCTURES

Measure your herb into a glass jar with a well-fitting lid. Add your menstruum (alcohol or vinegar), put on the lid and then stir very well. Set in a cool place out of direct sunlight—but not “out of sight, out of mind”. You will need to stir this concoction at least once per day for the next 10 to 14 days. Add more liquid at any time if the mixture looks dry or if some of the herb is sticking up out of the liquid. When the 10 to 14 days have passed, strain your tincture and discard the herbs. I find the herbs, in spite of the alcohol left in them, to make excellent compost material for my flower beds.

You can strain a tincture using an ordinary kitchen strainer. This leaves a lot of the menstruum behind, leaving you with less tincture than you might expect from the amount of alcohol or vinegar that you used. Straining the herbs through a cheesecloth works well, but is messy and stains your hands badly unless you wear gloves. This method, though a little more effective at removing the liquid, also leaves quite a lot of the menstruum still clinging to the herb. A centrifugal juicer, such as the Juice Man or the Omega, works very best. You will get back a much higher percentage of your expensive alcohol, vinegar, or glycerine.

A tincture stored in a cool place in a glass jar will keep indefinitely, remaining as potent as the day you made it. Evaporation and corrosion of the lids are the major enemies. The lids on the tincture bottles need to be watched closely and the lids should be changed regularly. This is especially true of vinegar tinctures. Use a plastic lid, rather than a metal one, if possible. Amber glass bottles with phenolic caps (used for essential oils and other commercial products) work very well and eliminate this problem altogether.

GENERAL INFORMATION—GLYCERITE TINCTURES

For making herbal glycerite tinctures, it is recommended that you use non-synthetic vegetable glycerine. Never use a glycerine made from animal by-products for your herbal remedies.

Glycerine has the capacity to break down and remove certain chemicals and preservatives from the body. It is an excellent medium for herbal tinctures. The sweet flavor makes it especially appropriate for children. When diluted, glycerine is demulcent, emollient, soothing, and healing. Undiluted, it is an irritant and a stimulant and difficult to use because it is so thick. Glycerine tinctures do not have the indefinite shelf life that alcohol tinctures do.

In almost all glycerine tinctures, you will need to dilute the glycerine to a 60% glycerine/40% water solution. Distilled or filtered water is best. In other words, if you need 10 ounces of liquid for your tincture, you would mix 6 ounces of glycerine with 4 ounces of water.

A word of caution: some books will tell you that 50% glycerine/50% water solution is good enough. Experience has shown me that this is not always the case. 60% to 70% glycerine is more reliable. If some alcohol is tolerable, 10% added to 50% glycerine/40% water formula is ideal. The alcohol acts as an additional preservative.

A few drops of the essential oil benzoin, added to the finished and strained glycerite at a ratio of 4 drops to each 8 cups of tincture as a preservative, is helpful. The benzoin does not interfere with the medicinal properties and greatly improves the length of time the tincture can be stored. In fact, benzoin has some good medicinal qualities of its own. A glycerite without alcohol or benzoin has a shelf life of 1 to 3 years. Benzoin adds at least an additional 2 or 3 years to the time the tincture can be stored and still be an effective remedy.

On occasion, glycerite tinctures are applied topically to help keep skin surfaces moist. Glycerine does not evaporate at either body or room temperature, and it produces a sensation of warmth to the skin or the tongue. Glycerine is very emollient and is useful for really tough dry skin problems. Glycerin is quite sticky, and since it does not evaporate, can be a little bit annoying for a few minutes until it absorbs into the skin.

Skin rashes that are caused by a bacterial or fungal infection should be treated using the herbs in tea form. Glycerine and carrier type oils contain protein molecules which are “food” for the fungus. These remedies may actually make the condition worse.

BASIC INSTRUCTIONS FOR MAKING A GLYCERITE TINCTURE

Use a 60% glycerine, 40% distilled water menstruum (as described above) and a ratio of 1:8 to 1:10. This means that you will use 8 to 10 ounces of menstruum (combined glycerine and alcohol) for each 1 ounce of herb. Stir the glycerine and water together thoroughly first, then place the herb and liquid in a canning jar. Place a tight lid on the bottle and cold pack can it, much like you would do for fruit. The water need only come to the neck of the jar. Leave in the canner with the water lightly boiling for 2 hours. Remove the jar from hot water and allow it to cool. You will need to take off the lid a couple of times while it is cooking so that you can stir the mixture. Try to get all of the herb under the liquid as soon as possible.

I have done this with a variety of herbs, including peppermint, and the heat does not destroy the medicinal properties of the herbs. Glycerine is a heavy medium, even diluted, and with a tightly fitting lid, the medicinal properties cannot dissipate into the air. Tinctures made this way are very potent and effective. In making peppermint tea, perhaps the loss of the volatile oils and their properties is due to diffusion into the air rather than destruction by heat. Perhaps we should make all our teas with lids on.

Glycerites (glycerine tinctures) have the added advantage of being ready to use in a few hours instead of in two weeks. This can be a very great advantage.

***Note: Wild Cherry Bark cannot be heated under any conditions. In the Wild Cherry Cough Syrup Recipe the Wild Cherry is placed in the glycerine/water mixture 24 hours before the batch is going to be processed. It is simply allowed to sit. It is not heated with the rest of the ingredients. Strain the wild cherry bark when you strain the rest of the batch and mix them together.

TINCTURE DOSAGES

An alcohol tincture is taken 12 to 20 drops in a little bit of water. It is usually advisable to take tinctures along with a meal. The nutrients are more likely to be absorbed that way. With something in your stomach, the tincture will be less likely to cause an upset tummy. Depending on the severity of the problem, tinctures should be taken 2 to 5 times a day.

Tinctures are administered in drops, and at least half of those few drops are just water if you used vodka to make the tincture. The alcohol consumed when taking an herbal remedy is negligible. It is far less than that contained in over the counter remedies such as cold and cough remedies, even those for children. In fact, you will be consuming less alcohol taking herbal remedies that you consume when adding vanilla to your favorite frosting recipe.

Alcohol dissipates very rapidly with heat. Since you will be adding the tincture to a couple of tablespoons of water to take it anyway, just make sure the water is very hot when you put the tincture into it. The alcohol will dissipate instantly. You will have completely eliminated the alcohol with this simple step.