

The top herbs you need in stock to stay well

These are the cabinet keepers of natural medicine

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Susan Dam of Rising Tide Natural Foods says an important herb to keep stocked is slippery elm. “It’s been called one of the most valuable in herbal practice, because it’s a nutritive, it provides sustaining food.”

Courtesy photo



“Ginger makes your stomach sit up and take notice,” says Jennah Granwick of Nature Path. “It’s also a big time anti-inflammatory so it’s good for anybody with sore joints or arthritis.”



Mint is cooling and therefore good for fever, says Yuri Belopolsky of Family Acupuncture and Holistic Medicine.



Courtesy photos Jennah Granwick, herbalist manager at Nature Path in Portsmouth, says nettle is king. (at top) “It should be in every blend. It’s high in protein and nourishing and it really supports the other herbs. You can’t go wrong adding it to anything.”

Ginger for a cold; mint for fever? Slippery elm for a flu; mint for upset tummy? Is any of it even effective?

For millennium humans used herbs to aid health. Then plant medicinals lost general favor with the development of modern medicine and chemical treatments. But since the mid 20th century interest and use have made a healthy comeback. Some have come into common use.

So what, if anything, should you keep stocked?

While there's no definitive top 10 list, there are those generally viewed as heavyweights, cabinet keepers so to speak. Here are a few top contenders offered by people with a working knowledge willing to weigh in on the issue.

Jannah Granwick, herbalist manager at Nature Path in Portsmouth, says green tea is one of the heroes. "It's an antioxidant; it's all about counteracting the oxidation process in the body. It helps the immune system ...; helps the body fight off stuff in the environment."

She also puts chamomile at the top of her list, an effective and safe plant. "It's simply an herb that can be taken by anybody, any age, a two-hour-old baby on," she says. "It's soothing, calming, nourishing and helps people relax and get a good night's sleep too."

Ginger is another heavy lifter. "It's enormously beneficial for nausea and appetite," says Granwick. Ginger tonifies the stomach, she explains. It's a muscle and requires exercise like any other. "Ginger makes your stomach sit up and take notice. It's also a big time anti-inflammatory ...; so it's good for anybody with sore joints or arthritis."

Granwick considers echinacea an important herb as well. It can actually help the body fight off colds and flues she says. It's also a natural anti-viral herb. It's both strong and, used right, safe. "As soon as they can sit up and hold a tea cup, they can use it." Another one that comes heavily into play this season is goldenseal, a strong antibacterial, she says. It can either be taken orally or used in a neti pot (for the nose) to help with a sinus infection. "It's also good for spider bites," she says. "If you have a field-stone basement you likely have black widows in New England. I've been bitten twice and in both cases golden seal cured the problem and there was no scarring."

While honey isn't an herb, she does recommend it as an antibacterial as well, but warns if you put it in a hot tea it's reduced to a sweetener. "Heat it and you kill its medicinal properties."

Finally the herb she considers king, nettle. "It should be in every blend. It's high in protein and nourishing and it really supports the other herbs. You can't go wrong adding it to anything. ...; Straight nettle is fantastic for everything or you can put it in any compound and increase the value you're adding it to."

Working the Rising Tide Natural Foods in Kittery, Maine, has taught Susan Dam a lot about herbs over the year. She sees what's popular and anecdotally knows which ones prove themselves.

She's in agreement with Granwick. Nettle should be at the top of everyone's list. "It just has the ability to address so many things," says Dam. Another important one to keep stocked is slippery elm.

"It's been called one of the most valuable in herbal practice, because it's a nutritive, it provides sustaining food," says Dam. "I think it has as much nutrition as oatmeal. It works on just about anything, numerous (ailments) including inflammation and wounds."

There are two that stand out as most popular. Elderberry outsells everything else — during the flu season. "It's great for the immune system," she explains. "The other, for the same season is chizandra, it's bi-directional ...; helps you balance things out."

Chinese and Western medicine approach herbs differently, says Yuri Belopolsky, licensed acupuncturist, at Family Acupuncture and Holistic Medicine, Kittery Maine. Before being trained in Chinese acupuncture he took a more Western view. After his studies "I understood I could do harm. In the Chinese (system) herbs are much more profound; it looks at many more levels," says Belopolsky, who notes he is not an herbalist. "In general, as a rule, they should be prescribed by a professional."

It's simply a matter of not assuming any one herb fits all bodies, even with the apparently same illness. An herb might prove beneficial to most people, but not all. Without guidance from a professional a person using an herb generally indicated for their problem may find it counterproductive in their case.

Belopolsky uses ginseng as an example, an herb commonly used in his native Russia. "But there are many different ones. It's dangerous to use without knowledge. So in Russia it's prescribed by doctors," he says. Types include Chinese, Korean, American and Russian. Most are commonly found in natural food stores and in some pharmacies today.

That said, he lists ginseng as a very beneficial herb, used correctly by an "average healthy person," he says. "But I am emphasizing it can be used moderately for a short period of time in critical situations such as in the fall before the cold season. It's helpful if they don't have a contradictory health problem. ...; But I would warn anyone to talk to a specialist."

Once you are sick, ginseng should not be used. "You get the opposite effect."

There are herbs that are "more innocent" and can be used more readily, which have proven their value. One of them is St. John's Wort. In Russian it is referred to as "the herb for 101 diseases," he says. St. John's is effective for inflammation of the nervous system.

Ginger is another important herb, an anti-inflammatory and a natural antibiotic. "But again you have to be careful ... ginger is very warm so if you have a fever you should not use it; or if you have hot flashes. ...; Mint is cooling and therefore good for fever, but again if you feel cold and chilly you're going to feel more cold and chilly."

Bottom line, don't read a simple article and go off and self medicate, because herbs do work. And that's the point.

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