

HERBS TO HELP MAINTAIN A VITAL AND HEALTHY OLD AGE

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SAGE (SALVIA OFFICINALIS)

From salvia 'to save'. Sage is a corruption of salvia but I like the idea that it also means 'strengthens sages'. "He that would live for aye must eat Sage in May" is a traditional English saying, a variant of a rhyme that was found across Europe in the middle ages. In Greece and Turkey the wild Sage is still gathered before sunrise on the 1st of May. Traditionally many plants were gathered before dawn on Mayday which is the old festival celebrating the start of summer - in celtic areas Beltaine.

The virtues of Sage from various authorities

Physicians of Myddvai (c12th cent)

"They are useful when boiled to strengthen the nerves. If an infusion sweetened with honey is drank, it is useful for the lungs... Let some thereof be taken pounded small and the juice mixed with white wine, or the pounded herb macerated in white wine, strong wort or old mead for night... It is good for those in health to drink half a draught in the morning fasting (ie before breakfast) in order to preserve health and prolong life."

Sage from the Grete Herbal 1526

"Sage is hot in the first degree and dry in the second. The leaves and flowers be good in medicine. . . Sage is good in medicines green and dry but ye green is best... The tame comforteth more than the wild but the wild unstoppeh the pipes more than the tame. The wine that Sage is sodden in is good for them that have the falling evil. Lathe (a thin gruel) made of water that it is sodden in is good to help let of the urine (diuretic) and cause flowers to run (emmenagogue) and to cleanse the matrix (womb). The sauce made of Sage, Parsley and vinegar with a little pepper is good to comfort the appetite that is febled by cold humors in the stomach."

Culpeper (1652)

assigns Sage to Jupiter - expansive and promotes good functioning of the liver and, hence, the growth of healthy tissue. He adds, "Sage is excellent use to help the memory, warming and quickening the senses."

Mrs Grieves (1930s)

mentions that in southern Europe, where the Sage grows wild it was traditionally prepared in vinegar and this was regarded as the most tonic of all Sage medicines.

WHY IS SAGE SO USEFUL IN OLD AGE?

CLEARNS EXCESS PHLEGM; In humoral terms the dominant element of old age is phlegm, cold and damp. Old age is phlegmatic. The benefits are being steady and reliable, solid but not fixed, more flexible than when middle aged and less liable to fly off the handle than younger people. It is a period of personal contemplation, review of life and respect. A time when the Sage in everyone should be cultivated. Phlegm is also cold and damp. In excess it promotes catarrh and lung disease, slows down digestion, muddles thinking, weakens the heart and diminishes circulatory and sexual force. All things that Sage treats.

ADAPTOGENIC; helps the body to cope with ongoing stressful situations, working on balance within the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis. Michael Moore puts the subject in perspective, "To me, endogenous adaptogenic activities would be meditation, good sleep, moderate exercise, nurturing sex and a good diet. If those things don't work, you step outside the body and apply things TO it, since it has proven incapable of adjustments from within". Adaptogens are the main class of herbs used to promote health in old age (Panax, Withania etc). Julian Barker classifies Sage with the adaptogens which is reasonable considering its traditional use (convalescence) and its modern use (restoring neuro-endocrine balance).

NOURISHING THE VITAL SPIRIT & RESTORING CENTRAL HEAT; for example after debilitating fevers (post viral exhaustion). Also reducing Menopausal hot flushes.

CLEARNS MUCUS; for example in Respiratory tract infections (the big killer in Elderly people).

TONIC NERVINE; for depression, confusion, memory loss, anxiety, fatigue and added to sedatives for insomnia with early waking. Vertigo (Bartram). With Ginkgo in early Alzheimer's disease.

DIGESTIVE; weak digestion, wind, bloating and Liver cleansin; "especially suitable for weak, pale & atonic patients" (Priest). Inflammations of the mouth (eg from false teeth).

TOPICAL USES to darken hair and for Rheumatism (topical & internal) and tumors.

CHEMISTRY

1-2.5% Essential Oil including; 30% Thujones (stimulant, mucolytic, anti-mitotic), 3% pinenes (circulatory stimulant), 9% cineoles (mucolytic). Also resins (topical healing, stimulate immune system). 8% Tannins (astringent, potentiate antiseptic action of volatile oils). Bitters, Saponins and Fruit acids (digestive, kidney & liver cleansing). The Oestrogenic and Endocrine balancing actions of Sage have not been pinned down to any particular constituent. Minerals; 1 cup of Sage tea (soaked overnight) contains all the Iron and Magnesium you will need that day (RDA) and useful levels of Potassium, Calcium and Zinc (source James Duke, Herbs for Health 1998).

Toxicity and Dosage

Thujone is a neurotoxin (convulsions, long term nerve damage, green fairies, Kyle Minogue etc). It is an emmenagogue. It is sedative in small quantities but irritant in large doses (rather like green fairies). The theoretical toxic dose of the EO is of the order of 5-15ml (extrapolated from James Duke's data base) equivalent to around 400gm dried herb or 2 litres of tincture. There may, of course be cumulative toxicity, especially as thujone is fat soluble but Sage may be considered to be safe in general use, even at the high doses sometimes needed to control hot flushes (3 cups of cold tea daily for a few weeks). The traditional dosage for maintaining health in old age is 2 or 3 fresh leaves a day .

CHINESE or KOREAN GINSENG (PANAX GINSENG)

WHY IS GINSENG USEFUL IN OLD AGE?

ADAPTOGEN; Fatigue, weakness from severe, long term or recurrent illness. Helps the body cope with ongoing stress. Anti-oxidant; premature senility. Activates metabolic processes and cell proliferation (in vitro).

NERVE TONIC; depression (especially from suppressed fire), poor concentration, recovery from stroke. Anxiety, mental restlessness, confusion, manic behaviour, easily startled, palpitations, obsessions, breathlessness, insomnia with waking early or frequently. Dreamyess (brings people back to their bodies)

APHRODISIAC; sexual dysfunction, loss of libido (from endocrine problems, stress and old age).

DIGESTIVE; poor appetite, weight loss, malabsorption.

CARDIOTONIC; hypotension, shock, some arrhythmias. Lowers blood sugar and cholesterol.

CHEMISTRY

Triterpenoid saponins (4% ginsenosides - adaptogenic, adrenal restorative, radio-protective, anti-oxidant), Sterols (androgenic). Flavonoids and Polysaccharides (mucilaginous, sweet).

Toxicity and Dosage Well tolerated but open to abuse (mainly by young, fit people). Generally best in small doses added to the prescription (between 5 and 20ml per week of tincture). In severe debility and near death I use larger doses. Drop doses (5gtt. under the tongue, repeated every hour or so) to help focus on a task that has been put off (such as sorting out the paperwork left by the death of a partner).

LEMON BALM (MEILSSA OFFICINALIS)

This herb has a long and distinguished history. It was an ingredient of Paracelsus' Elixir of youth (unfortunately the full recipe has been lost). Protects the Heart from Melancholy.

WHY IS BALM USEFUL IN OLD AGE ?

NEUROPSYCHOIMMUNOLOGY; A gentle nervine with an adaptogenic action, generally used in combination. Anxiety & Depression with low energy. Bartram says, "strengthens the Brain in its resistance to shock and stress, low spirits, restlessness, fidgety limbs, cold and miserable, anxiety neurosis. Julian Barker says, "Depression with a tendency to weep". John Evelyn says, "sovereign for the Brain, strengthens the memory powerfully and drives away Melancholy". Very suitable for weak constitutions and for weak. Fear associated with dementias.

CHEMISTRY

Volatile oil rich in terpene aldehydes (gently stimulating). Tannins (the tannin fraction shows the most anti-viral action). Trace of Resin and Bitters.

COMBINATIONS & PREPARATIONS

Add a pinch of Nutmeg for Migraine & Neuralgia. With Peppermint as a sedative nervine (Weiss).
Tea from the fresh herb or fresh plant tinctures are the best preparations.

CAYENNE (CAPSICUM SPP)

To 'pepper up'. A strong stimulant yet gentle enough in its action to be suited to even the most feeble constitution. In old age the Vital force diminishes - Capsicum arouses the Vital force.

"It acts mainly upon the circulation, but also upon the nervous structures. It first shows its power upon the heart and the large and central blood vessels; but finally traverses from the centre to the very capillaries. It thus slowly gives increased tone to the circulation – not so materially increasing the *frequency* of the pulse, as giving *power* to each pulsation. William Cook, M.D., 1869

WHY IS CAYENNE USEFUL IN OLD AGE?

CIRCULATORY STIMULANT; anybody suffering from cold, running cold, with cold areas or as an adjunct in cardio-vascular disease. Feeble circulation & Hypothermia. Cold feet (local). Counter stimulant for Bronchitis, Sinusitis, Arthritis etc.

ANALGESIC; for aches and pains, leg aches, arthritis, back pain (local and internal). Topical use for sciatica and post shingles neuralgia.

DIGESTIVE; lack of appetite, weak digestion, liver congestion. Atrophic constipation.

ANTISEPTIC; add to gargles for persistent sore throats.

As an **ADJUNCT** to other remedies, helping them to work better where the Vital force is low.

CHEMISTRY

Volatile oil and a soft Resin including; 0.14% Capsaicin (irritant, analgesic - blocks pain transmission).

Edgar Jones' Life Drops to revive and rouse the Vital force.

Capsicum tincture 70%, Peppermint water 20%, Elderflower tincture 5%, Hawthorn tincture 3%, Cola vera tincture 2%. (Quoted in Bartram).

Toxicity and Dosage Generally well tolerated and not irritant. Can be poorly tolerated by people with Gastritis (ALWAYS ASK before popping it in the tincture!). Prolonged, high dosage has been shown to damage mucus membranes in the upper digestive tract (local fibrosis). People who can't tolerate Solanaceous foods (Arthritis) some can take Capsicum and some can't - usually the amounts involved are too small to cause a reaction. Avoid when the skin is hot and dry and when the pulse is full and bounding. Dosage 1 or 2 ml a week of tincture or 1 or 2 drops in a warm drink often repeated.

GARLIC (Allium sativum)

Garlic is one of the established herbs in the European Tradition for maintaining longevity. It keeps the body healthy and strong. In French folk medicine fieldworkers chewed Garlic to get them through a hard day, especially in hot weather. Garlic is hot and somewhat dry, but also (as the bulb) somewhat mucilaginous (it balances excess Phlegm without frightening it away). It is also a brilliant antibiotic and gentle immune stimulant useful for a wide range of infections, topically and internally.

WHY IS GARLIC USEFUL IN OLD AGE?

CARDIOVASCULAR DISEASE is a big killer these days (diet, lack of exercise). Garlic lowers blood cholesterol & sugar, reduces platelet stickyness and helps lower blood pressure (vasodilator). Long term use is needed for the full benefits.

ANTISEPTIC with particular application to Respiratory tract infections, also a big killer of the Elderly. Regular use lowers the risk of infection. Higher doses will stop lung infections from getting deeper into the lungs and will potentise antibiotics, if they are needed.

CHEMISTRY

Volatile Oil with Sulphur containing compounds inc allicin (antiseptic, antiviral, anti-allergenic). Mucilage (soothing - takes the edge of the EO & drawing - as in compresses). Vitamins (A, B, C).

Toxicity ad Dosage

Some people find it hard on the stomach but enteric coated tablets are available. The best way of taking it for cardiovascular health is long term in the diet. The larger doses needed for dealing with infections require eating the bulb raw or lightly baked, with the skin on.

OAT STRAW (AVENA SATIVA & SPP)

Strengthening Nerve tonic nourishes and relaxes the Brain and so releases energy (otherwise caught up in worry). This makes the overall action somewhat stimulating without the remedy being a stimulant.

Priest and Priest; "gently stimulating nervine tonic and cerebral trophorestorative especially for weakly and anaemic conditions. Indicated for reflex nervous irritation from other disorders... hysteria, nervous exhaustion (with Skullcap or Damiana)." Thomas Bartram, "Cardiac tonic, headache with pain at the back of the neck, shingles, nervous tremor, combines well with Betony and Valerian (not so well with Passionflower leaf)." King's Dispensatory,; "It ranks amongst the most important restoratives for conditions depending upon nervous prostration, weak heart, *strengthens resistance to rheumatism*... dose 10-30 drops every 2 or 3 hours."

WHY IS OAT STRAW USEFUL IN OLD AGE?

TONIC NERVINE/ TROPHORESTORATIVE NERVINE

Insomnia, especially with early waking (+/- more relaxing herbs such as Skullcap). Fatigue with Depression. (Very useful when withdrawing from tranquillisers or addictive drugs). Has a good reputation for strengthening sexual energy in old and tired persons. Debility following illness. Aids recovery from surgery (often a problem in the Elderly). Essential tremor

WARMING

Oats are not warming of themselves but, like all mucilaginous remedies, they hold the warmth of the preparation (tea, porridge etc) in the body for a long time. Think of the advert with the glowing kids! Oats improve resistance to the cold and diseases of cold weather.

AS FOOD

Oats, preferably groats soaked overnight as part of a museli, help lower cholesterol and balance blood sugar.

CHEMISTRY

Starch (Mucilaginous) and Protein (low gluten). Vitamins & Minerals (lots). Traces of Indole Alkaloids (Facilitate Serotonin).

DOSAGE, PREPARATIONS & COMBINATIONS

I prefer the whole Oats (Straw and Seed) picked as soon as the seed begins to ripen (Milky stage) tinctured fresh or dried for use as a infusion. For severe stress take little and often (say 20gtt of the tincture every 2 hours). For insomnia 5ml tincture or a cup of tea before bed.

SHORT NOTES

HAWTHORN (CRATAEGUS SPP)

The main herb for keeping a healthy heart and arteries. Useful in connective tissue diseases. Good for fearfulness and as an adjunct to nervines (the vital spirit resides in the heart). Hawthorn Berry Vinegar seems to be of especial benefit to Elderly people. Thomas Bartram recommends Vinegars for treating elders.

LILY OF THE VALLEY (CONVALLARIA MAJALIS)

Any form of Heart Failure, or simply to keep the Heart strong in old age. Lifts and calms the spirits. A tincture of the fresh flowers is effective in confusion and distress from dementia.