

SECRETS FROM A HERBALIST'S GARDEN

JO DUNBAR

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I would really like to thank Adam Gordon for making this book possible, for without you, I know it wouldn't be. My thanks too to The Ink Hermit, a beautiful soul, whose drawings are so sublime and perfectly reflect my impressions of the delicate nature of plants. And I would like to thank my partner Adrian Rooke for his support and enthusiasm in helping me to collect my herbs, press the tinctures and talk through aspects of this book. The retreats which we have run together over the years have given much inspiration for this book.

Secrets from a Herbalist's Garden

Jo Dunbar

First published in the UK and USA in 2022 by Watkins, an imprint of Watkins Media Limited Unit 11, Shepperton House, 83-93 Shepperton Road London N1 3DF

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Commissioning Editor: Adam Gordon

Editor: Hayley Shepherd

Managing Designer: Karen Smith

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Production: Uzma Taj

A CIP record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-78678-662-3 (Paperback)

ISBN: 978-1-78678-703-3 (eBook)

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Typeset in Cera Pro

Printed in the UK by TJ Books

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Note:

Do not mix metric, imperial and US cup measurements: 1 tsp = 5ml, 1 tbsp = 15ml, 1 cup = 240ml



FOR THE ANCIENT ONES,
EVER YOUNG



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INTRODUCTION

Breathing hard as I climb the steep side of the wooded slope, it is a relief to reach the contour path, and catch my breath as I walk under the yew boughs. Prisms of sunlight piercing the dark forest, light captured in spider's webs, I walk silently on soft needle-covered clay, then through a tunnel of prickly brambles with wild roses catching on my clothes, and suddenly, I burst, blinking, out of the forest and into the sunlight, high up in the hills.

Up here are ancient meadows, yellow with St John's wort, sweet-smelling lady's bedstraw, lofty agrimony and wispy dandelions. Mounds of wild purple thyme, the hot summer air fragrant with *origanum*. Flying creatures whip past my ears as wild roses tear at my jeans and spiders creep under my shirt. Lonely winds blow, butterflies spiral around each other, birds cry and the ghosts of ancient chiefs buried in the tumuli above watch me perform the other oldest profession in the world: gathering herbs for medicine.

Down from the hills and back in the village which I call home is my herb garden, alive with birds, a few voles, a grass snake and raised beds of herbs. A small kitchen is hung with more herbs, scented with boiling berries and the sharp tang of thyme. I am making medicine for the winter.

There is no greater alchemy than collecting healing plants from your garden or the wild, transforming them into medicine through a simple method of extraction, giving that medicine to someone in need and letting the herbs do their healing work by the grace of Mother Nature.

The entire process is magical: the collecting, alone amongst the hills on warm sunny days with only the buzzards swirling above in clear azure skies as your witness. Here I walk, high on the hills above a flock of swifts, where the lonely winds blow with echoes of past herbalists doing the same as I am now. Even on cold, bracing days with a wild wind battering your face, or gently caressing your garden plants as you harvest them – it is almost ethereal, like stepping into another dimension.

INTRODUCTION

Then the hammering of conkers, shaving of roots, chopping of soft herbage, the stirring, boiling, straining, and finally – the healing. It is a beautiful way of life. Much forgotten, but now a great remembering is stirring. People want to reconnect with the land again. They want to tap into the wisdom of it, and they want to use plants in their homes for medicine.

Herbal medicine is traditionally women's work. Although there have been plenty of excellent and famous male herbalists, by and large, it has always been women's work. They used what was available. Not that long ago, doctors were far too expensive for most folk, plus their medicine was as likely to kill as to cure. Like organic farming, plants do not dominate the body, but work with it to restore health. The plants which grow on these lands have powerful healing qualities and are perfectly disposed to being used for home herbal remedies. This is how the women of old would heal – not with expensive exotic herbs, but just the plants which they grew in their gardens, which grew in the fields, and we can do the same. They also used some rather gruesome and bizarre recipes, but we won't go into snail-oil cough mixture or earthworm love potions here.

This is a book of plant remedies, born of over 22 years of my personal experience as a medical herbalist. I have chosen to write only about herbs which you can either grow or collect, or find in your kitchen cupboard, and so we save air miles, carbon and money. These remedies work.

