

Herbs for Health

by Candis Cantin

Herbal Baths for Better Health

How often have you purchased or picked herbs but not known what to do with them? This is a common dilemma in the herb world. Here's an idea—take a bath!

When you go to the natural foods stores there are numerous herbs in pill, tincture (alcohol extract) or tea form. These are fine ways to administer herbs but another good, though often neglected, way is in the herbal baths: hand, foot and whole-body baths.

There was a European herbalist named Maurice Messague whose main application of herbal remedies was with hand and foot baths. He would give dietary and lifestyle guidelines, pick various herbs growing in the fields and then instruct his client to make a strong tea, put it in a basin and then soak his feet in the concoction. He would do the same for the hands if he thought that was necessary. He had such great success that he became renowned throughout Europe.

Our skin is a major organ of absorption and elimination. When we put herbs on our skin in the form of herbal baths, we absorb the herb! This is why most herbalists will instruct their clients not to put anything on their skin that they wouldn't be able to eat.

I have instructed my clients to do herbal bathing quite often for various reasons. Sometimes clients need their whole circulation stimulated—thus I will recommend a whole-body herb bath. Others have poor hand and foot circulation. Some have arthritis, broken ankles, aching shoulders, aching muscles; others have poor circulation due to diabetes, illnesses, accidents or possibly because they are constitutionally cold in general.

One precaution, though: If someone has any numbness of their limbs or any part of the body, it is best for the person to test the temperature of the water with a body area that is not numb. This is to ensure that they do not burn themselves. Diabetics can have this problem with their feet in particular so they would have to test the bath water with their elbow to ensure that it is the right temperature.

Herbal baths are great for children. Over 20 years ago, one of my teachers said, “If you can't get the herbs in the child, put the child in the herbs.” I always loved that quote and have instructed parents to give their kids herbal baths when they are ill, cranky, have stomachaches, fevers, coughs and so forth. A bath of chamomile is so soothing to a child who is gassy, feverish or anxious.

Take about one ounce of the herb and place it in two quarts of boiling water. Let the herb steep for 20 minutes, strain it out and add the tea to the bathtub.

One of my favorite herb baths is made with ginger. For an adult, you can put 1/4 cup of ginger powder in the bath with 1/4 cup sea salt or Epsom salt. Stir it around and let the person luxuriate in the warmth. Put less in for children, depending on their age.

For a foot or hand bath, add one tablespoon of powdered ginger to a foot basin; add the salt and enjoy. This foot bath will relax you and warm you up all over. This is a good bath for women who have menstrual cramps. It helps to warm and circulate the blood, and ginger is also an anti-spasmodic herb.

Other foot baths can be made with lavender, peppermint, spearmint, chamomile, sage and many other herbs. You can make herbal combinations that have various therapeutic actions for certain conditions. For example, to help heal sprains and strains, a bath can be made from chamomile, comfrey, sage and ginger. Or to cool off hot feet make a tea blend of peppermint and chamomile and make a tepid foot bath.

There are also bath salts. Here are the instructions on how to make them.

Bath Salts

Bath salts are economical, popular and simple to make. Experiment with different combinations but don't forget to record the blend and name it for future reference. If you use essential oils, a glass container is best because the oil will etch high-density plastic. Keep your container tightly closed so that the scent will remain longer.

Basic recipe

Put one cup of salt in a container with a lid. Drop essential oil onto salt. Twenty drops per cup creates a nice fragrance. Stir or shake well. If more fragrance is desired add a few drops at a time.

Note: You can use different kinds of salts such as rock, sea and Epsom salts in layers.

Combination Recipe for Bath Salts

1/2 c. sea salt
1/2 c. Epsom salt
1/2 c. fresh herbs or flowers with woody parts removed
1/4 c. baking soda

Shake well or blend the above in a food processor. Add a few drops of food coloring to the mixture for desired hue. Add essential oil(s) and stir well. Store the mixture in glass jars with tight-fitting lids. There are many different essential oils that you can use in this fashion such as spruce, lemon, lavender, rose geranium, rosemary, orange, eucalyptus and lots of others. Get a book on aromatherapy from the Co-op to help you make your choices.

Precaution: Do not put the essential oils directly in the bath. Many of them just sit on top of the water and will actually burn the skin.

Here is a variation: Leave herbs or flowers whole and mix or layer with the salts. Remember, bath salts make wonderful holiday gifts for just about everyone.

I hope that you will try using hand/ foot/ whole-body herbal baths or bath salts. I know you will be delighted with the results.

Candis Cantin is an author and teacher of integrative herbology; integrating Ayurveda, Chinese and Western herbal traditions. At her school, EverGreen Herb Garden and School of Integrative Herbology, she offers classes, apprenticeship programs and private consultations. The Integrative Herbology Correspondence Course is available for home study as well! Candis also offers classes at Soil Born Farm in Sacramento and at SNFC. For the current schedule go to www.evergreenherbgarden.org or call 626-9288 or write P.O. Box 1445, Placerville, CA 95667.