

Herbal Actions

Western herbalists today often study the way in which an herb affects the body—the nature of its action—which helps bring about balance and relieve symptoms for certain ailments. As you look at the following list, you will see that herbs have many different activities. A knowledge of these particular actions, along with a sense of the organs and tissues where they primarily act, is a great way to effectively choose one or several herbs among many.

For instance, if you have a cold, begin putting together a formula to help relieve symptoms and perhaps assist what your body is trying to do during the process of a cold. Look at the "Herbal Actions Chart" which will give you a summary of the major action types and the top 3 herbs for each. We leave a blank under "Herb 4" so you can write in your own favorite herb with that action type.

As you go down the list, you might recognize some well-known herbs, such as echinacea, ginger, elder flower, and yarrow, often recommended by herbalists to treat colds. You can then determine the action type for each and look at other possible herbs to use in the same category. For instance, if you know echinacea is used for colds (who doesn't), then you can see that other immune stimulants are wild indigo and wild ginger. Either herb can be added to an herb formula to enhance its immune-stimulating effects. Make sure to use only small amounts of wild ginger for short periods of time because it can be toxic otherwise. If you think of yarrow for colds, then check the category with yarrow, diaphoretic, which is an herb that assists the body in cleansing, bringing immune force up to the surface of the body, and gently reducing fever. Other herbs that can be substituted or added if you desire more of this action in your formula include elder, peppermint, boneset, and cayenne. Choose herbs in each category that you desire by taste, strength, and how they might blend with the other herbs in the formula.

For colds, look at action types like antitussive, antiinflammatory, antibacterial (to prevent secondary infections such as sinusitis), antiviral, demulcent (to soothe a sore throat), and perhaps anodyne (to relieve muscle aches). See how a knowledge of the action types simplifies formulation and choosing the right herb for the right condition and person?

I recommend spending extra time with this chart. This is one area to focus and even commit the list to memory. You will find a knowledge of action types extremely helpful in many instances.

Herbal Action	Herb 1	Herb 2	Herb 3	Herb 4
Adaptogen	Eleuthero	Schisandra	Ashwagandha	
Aquaretic	Pipsissewa	Parsley rt.	Uva ursi	
Alterative	Echinacea	Sarsaparilla	Yellow dock	
Antibacterial	Tea tree	Garlic	Bloodroot	
Antiinflammatory	St. John's wort	Chamomile	Yarrow	
Anticholesteremic	Garlic	Artichoke	Psyllium	
Antidepressant	St. John's wort	Ginkgo	Lavender	
Antidiarrhetic	Blackberry root	Black walnut	White oak bark	
Antiemetic	Ginger	Lavender	Peppermint	
Antifungal	Garlic	Barberry	Coptis	
Antimicrobial	Garlic	Goldenseal	Oregon grape root	
Antinauseant	Ginger	Lavender	Chamomile	
Antioxidant	Rosemary	Basil	Lemon balm	
Antiplatelet	Garlic	Ginger	Yarrow	
Antipyretic	Willow bark	Meadowsweet	Peppermint	
Antiseptic	Bloodroot	Usnea	Tea tree	
Antitussive	Coltsfoot	Mullein	Licorice	
Antiviral	St. John's wort	Shiitake	Garlic	
Aphrodisiac	Damiana	Muir puama	Yohimbe	
Aromatic	Peppermint	Fennel seed	Cumin seed	
Astringent	Green tea	White oak bark	Rhatany	
Bitter	Gentian	Artichoke	Barberry	
Blood Purifier	Red clover	Burdock	Yellow dock	
Bronchodilator	Ephedra	Green tea	Lobelia	
Calmative	Catnip	Lemon balm	Linden	
Cardiac	Hawthorn	Motherwort	Cactus	
Carminative	Anise	Caraway	Fennel	
Cathartic	Rhubarb	Senna	Cascara	
Cholagogue	Artichoke leaf	Fringetree	Dandelion	
Decongestant	Eyebright	Ephedra	Magnolia	
Demulcent	Marshmallow root	Slippery elm	Flaxseed	
Depurative	Red clover	Wild indigo	Burdock	
Diaphoretic	Yarrow	Elder	Peppermint	

Digestant	Ginger	Gentian	Cardamom	
Diuretic	Cleavers	Uva ursi	Buchu	
Emmenagogue	Black cohosh	Pennyroyal	Yarrow	
Emollient	Comfrey	Chickweed	Malva	
Expectorant	Grindelia	Yerba santa	Elecampane	
Febrifuge	Elder	Honeysuckle	Peppermint	
Galactagogue	Fennel	Vitex	Blessed thistle	
Hemostatic	Shepherd's purse	Agrimony	Yarrow	
Hepatic	Milk thistle	Centauray	Boldo	
Hypnotic	Valerian	California poppy	Hops	
Hypotensive	Garlic	Hawthorn	Mistletoe	
Hypothyroidal	Bugleweed	Blue vervain	Lemon balm	
Immune Stimulant	Echinacea	Thuja	Osha	
Laxative	Psyllium	Flaxseed	Senna	
Lymphatic	Poke root	Red clover	Red root	
Nephritic	Parsley root	Dandelion root	Marshmallow root	
Nervine	Valerian	Skullcap	Lavender	
Oxytotic	Beth root	Partridge berry	Black cohosh	
Pectoral	Elecampane	Licorice	Horehound	
Purgative	Aloe	Buckthorn	Castor oil	
Refrigerant	Barberry	Ginseng	Goldenseal	
Restorative	Ginseng	Dong quai	Gentian	
Rubefacient	Ginger	Horseradish	Camphor	
Sedative	Valerian	Skullcap	Passionflower	
Sialogogue	Prickly ash	Echinacea	Cayenne	
Stimulant	Cayenne	Horseradish	Ginger	
Stomachic	Lavender	Lemon balm	Ginger	
Styptic	Yarrow	Goldenseal	Cayenne	
Thyrogenic	Bugleweed	Blue vervain	Guggul	
Toni	Ligustrum	Siberian ginseng	Reishi	
Vasodilator	Garlic	Ginseng	Hawthorn	
Vermifuge	Garlic	Quassia	Wormwood	
Vulnerary	Plantain	Goldenseal	Calendula	