

Summer Medicinal Flowers

by Karen Unruh

This month I am enjoying some summer medicinal flowering plants in my garden and thought I would tell you about three of them. Each is quite different botanically and can add colour and structure if you are thinking of using medicinal plants in your garden design.

Skullcap or *Scutellaria laterifolia*, I notice, has subtly seeded itself around the single plant I planted 5 years ago. At first I did not mind finding the yellow green leaves and spires of purple flowers in several places – now it is across the driveway so I have decided to pull up the distant cousins to dry for infusions and leave a small mass where the first plant had its home. I hadn't dried my own aerial parts of the plant but now is a good opportunity. I have used skullcap as a nervine adaptogen. An adaptogen is a plant that supports the body in the way the body needs supporting. For skullcap, this means it can be used to relax and calm down nervous tension or build up exhausted or depressed conditions by renewing the central nervous system. Adaptogens are always safe to use as they are more like tonics for the body than medicine. Skullcap is often mixed in a tincture (alcohol mixture) with Valerian, Passion Flower and Lemon Balm and used to calm the mind and body before bedtime. I will tell you how to make a simple skullcap infusion. (See Page 5.)

Calendula officinalis is a perennial that also will seed itself willingly in your garden. Because I use it medicinally to make a healing salve for skin conditions, I grow a 6 foot by 4 foot patch in the vegetable garden. Some of the flowers have double petals and are quite attractive – but it does need deadheading to keep it tidy, a task I do not have to worry so much about in the vegetable garden. Here it attracts the pollinating insects which is an advantage to the garden. Calendula is one of the best herbs for treating skin conditions, taking down inflammation, healing bruising and slow-healing wounds, good for minor burns and scalds, and gentle enough for using with babies.

I make a calendula oil in the same way as I described last month for the St. John's Wort oil, placing the petals in a jar and covering with organic extra virgin olive oil and letting it sit as an open jar but covered with a cloth for 6 to 8 weeks. Then I have the oil ready to make a skin cream or just use as an oil. I will give you the recipe for a skin salve, a mixture of dried herbs, organic extra virgin olive oil and beeswax which has a moist consistency so that it flows on skin easily without irritating the skin condition you wish to heal. For my salve I combine dried calendula blossoms with dried plantain leaves and dried chickweed leaves for excellent first aid healing.

The third flowering plant I want to share with you this month is elecampane or *Inula helenium*. The plant is quite spectacular with thick downy stems bearing basal rosettes of oval mid-green leaves 1 to 2 feet long, smaller bright yellow flowerheads, just 3 to 4 inches across, and standing 5 to 6 feet tall. I have a 4-foot row of them against a sturdy fence and they bloom a

little later in the summer. For this plant we use the root, an excellent expectorant recommended for coughs, bronchitis, asthma, and chronic lung ailments. Several times a year, and especially in the early winter when the plant dies back and the energy of the plant goes to the roots, I get out my trowel and search out several long shallow but spreading roots. I wash these roots and make a cough medicine using honey. The taste is somewhat acrid and bitter but, mixed with honey, is easy to take and certainly eases a cough.



Scutellaria laterifolia



Calendula officinalis



Inula helenium

Skullcap Infusion

To make a skullcap infusion, pour a cup of boiling water onto 1 to 2 teaspoons of the dried skullcap leaves and flowers and let infuse for 10 to 15 minutes. You could drink 1 cup, two or three times a day or when needed. Add half a teaspoon of honey if you wish.

Calendula, Plantain and Chickweed Salve

Instead of waiting 6 weeks for a fresh petal-infused oil, the herbs can be dried by laying them out in a shallow pan and letting them air dry. Then make an infused oil using the double boiler method. For one cup of organic extra virgin olive oil, stir in 1 to 2 ounces of dried herb. I use a mixture of dried calendula flowers, dried plantain leaves and dried chickweed. Just using calendula flowers would work well too. Place the herbs and oil in a double boiler and bring to a very low simmer. Slowly heat for 30 to 60 minutes. The lower the heat, the longer the infusion, the better the oil. Strain the oil through cheesecloth and when the oil has run through and the cloth is cool enough, wring thoroughly, squeezing all the oil from the plant material.

To make the salve, add 1/4 cup of shaved beeswax for each cup of herbal oil. Heat gently until the beeswax is completely melted. To check for consistency, place 1 tablespoon of the mixture in the freezer for just a minute or two. If it's too soft, add more beeswax; if too hard, add more oil. It should be moist to coat the skin. Remove from heat and pour into small glass jars. Store in a cool, dark place. It will last well for months, even years.

Elecampane cough candies

Wash elecampane roots well and dry off any moisture. Cut fresh roots into 1/4 inch 'coins'. Place in a jar, cover with honey and secure with a lid. Keep in the refrigerator. Use as needed. They keep well in the refrigerator for up to a year