

# Immune Boosting Herbs

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I had a cold early in February and used herbs steadily to improve my condition as well as taking to my bed for several days of rest. Then, with an event I needed to attend, the drug store product cleared up my nasal system in one day! Well maybe the rest and herbs had helped too! Thank heavens I had just read that having a cold or two a year is a good way to build up body immunity, and it got me thinking about immune boosting herbs for this month's herbal column. I have four suggestions for you and ME – two to watch out for on your outdoor walks, and to get to know how they have been used, and two that are more commonly found in your kitchen.



*Usnea wirthii* is a medium-sized hanging **shrub lichen** found on conifers in open lowland forests. It is identified by a tough threadlike pale yellow central cord. Hold a piece of *Usnea* in your two hands--like a Christmas cracker--and slowly put your hands apart. The top layer of the branch will separate to reveal an elastic inner thread which is a storage area for energy-rich polysaccharides, rich in antioxidants and immune boosting qualities. So it is off to the woods and you will surely find *Usnea* on branches blown down in the wind. Do the stretch test to find the inner elastic cord, and take it home to use in an infusion or to dry for future use. The elasticity does not appear after drying. A spoon of honey with this tea will add some flavour. My father used to visit a herbal gardener and ask for her swamp water tea, knowing he was getting *Usnea* and building his immune system.

The second herb to watch for on your walks is the sticky resinous bud of the **Black Cottonwood**, *Populus balsamifera* ssp. *trichocarpa*. The buds can be made into a tincture, which is then known as Propolis, which you may have seen in a health food store. The reference book, *Plants of Coastal British Columbia* by Pojar & MacKinnon has a page of First Nation use of these buds and I do know that they are often collected in the fall, kept in a small cough-drop-like container and chewed when a need for immune boosting occurs. With my herbal course, we found a branch blown down in October and collected the buds to make a tincture which is a process using an alcohol medium to extract plant constituents, too detailed to give instructions here. The *Herbal Medicine-Makers Handbook* by James Green is a good reference.



Now to the kitchen. **Shiitake mushrooms**, *Lentinus edodes*, native to Japan, China and other Asian countries are now grown world wide. Their use as immune boosters is well known in Asian medicine. They too contain the polysaccharides (complex sugars) that boost the immune system, and have been used because of this immune-stimulating capability in cancer

treatments. Tablets, syrups and tinctures are made, but for us, using the shiitake mushroom in cooking is a good idea. They are more expensive than button mushrooms but perhaps are worth the price to use occasionally. I have adapted a recipe for a Vegetable Soup suggested by Dr. Oz in the March issue of Oprah Magazine.

Finally, **garlic**, *Allium sativum*, is the herb to prevent colds and influenza with its antibacterial, antiviral and antifungal activity. Raw is best. My aunt Dehlia always had sliced raw garlic on apple slices, and they are very palatable this way. My mother would put raw garlic in her bed socks overnight. By morning, the smell of garlic is on the breath. I didn't do that this time – perhaps that is what I was meant to do.



## Recipes

### **Usnea Tea**

Pour 4 cups boiling water over 1/2 cup fresh *Usnea* or 2 tablespoons dried herb and let sit for 20-30 minutes, keeping warm. Drink 1 cup, 3 times a day. May stir in a spoonful of honey for taste.

### **Dr. Oz's Vegetable Soup**

(Quantities adapted slightly)

- 1 quart water
- 1 red onion, chopped
- 1 stalk celery, chopped
- 1/2 fennel bulb, fronds and stalk, chopped
- 2 cloves of garlic, sliced
- 1 cup **shitake** mushrooms, sliced
- 1/2 cabbage, chopped
- 1 teaspoon caraway seeds
- 1 tablespoon fresh oregano, chopped OR 1 teaspoon dried
- 1 tablespoon paprika
- 1 teaspoon sea salt
- Freshly ground pepper
- Cayenne pepper to taste
- 2 whole parsley sprigs
- 8 sprigs parsley, chopped, for garnish after soup is cooked.

Bring the ingredients to a boil, cover and simmer for 1/2 hour. You may need to add more water while cooking. Remove cooked parsley sprigs and serve with chopped parsley garnish. Adequately serves 2 with some left over for another day.

### **Garlic and Apple Slices**

Peel and slice garlic in length-wise slices. Slice unpeeled organic apples in lengthwise slices. Place garlic slices on apple slices and enjoy.