

Mother Earth News

HARVEST
MEDICINAL
TREES
IN YOUR
BACKYARD



**From Gardener to
Farmer: A Story for
Seedling Season**
By Jodi Kushins

**Experience a Sensory
Deprivation Float**
By Tonya Olson

**Help Chickens Beat
the Winter Blues**
By Rebecca Harrold

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APRIL 2019 | 1



12 **Trench Log and Log Raft Cultivation**
Grow mushrooms on logs for the simplest way to cultivate edible and medicinal forest mushrooms. By **Tradd Cotter**



23 **What is a Contemporary Ecovillage?**
Learn about the history of this type of American intentional community, which focuses on sustainability and meshing people on a small scale. By **Timothy Miller**



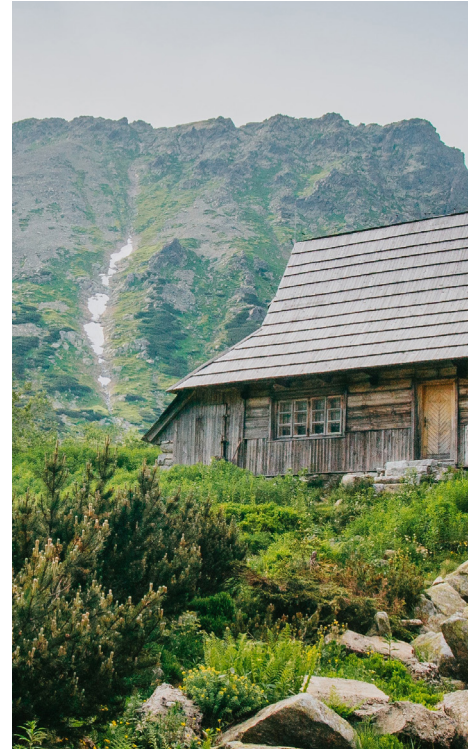
30 **Egg-cellent Preserves**
Brined, cured, or pickled eggs make unique additions to any pantry, and their distinctive flavors can be enjoyed for weeks to come. By **Karen Solomon**



38 **Climate-Savvy Alternatives to Lawns**
Learn how communities and local environments benefit from replacing expensive-to-maintain lawns with natural meadows, rain gardens, and community gardens.
By Sue Reed and Ginny Stoibolt



45 **Use Herbal Products Safely**
A lack of oversight in the herbal supplement industry puts the burden of checking the contents of dietary supplements on consumers.
By Amanda Sorell



57 **How You Can Benefit from a Cool Roof**
Learn how cool roof designs are used to reduce the heat absorption of conventional roofs and how they can help save money on your electric bill.
By Sue Reed and Ginny Stoibolt



HARVEST MEDICINAL TREES IN YOUR BACKYARD

Look up to find healing remedies in the canopy overhead.

Story by Juliet Blankespoor

As a child, I spent many afternoons scaling the white pines my father had planted in our backyard. Decades later, when I bought my first home, my dad set to planting trees right away, including a weeping willow by the creek in our front yard. The apple doesn't fall too far from the tree: My daughter spent her youngest years learning to climb in the low branches of that willow. Those white pines and that willow are now towering giants. Watching a tiny sapling grow into a massive being is deeply satisfying.

When we think of healing plants, our minds gravitate toward the plants growing at our feet – the garden herbs, weeds, and woodland plants of the forest floor – but there's a veritable treasure trove of healing remedies towering above. Humans have been harvesting and using medicine from trees for millennia, and medicinal trees and shrubs probably already grow near where you live. Perhaps you're already able to identify the trees in your midst, and you

merely need to learn their medicinal qualities and how to harvest them.

Ethically gathering medicine from trees has its advantages – with their larger stature, it's easier to collect a sizable amount of medicine from trees without hurting them. Be sure you have permission or the legal right to harvest. Avoid roadways, railways, power lines, and any other areas that may have been sprayed with herbicide. Only harvest from tree species that are both locally abundant and widely distributed. Be 100 percent sure of your identification before harvesting! There are poisonous shrubs and trees. Two examples are yew (*Taxus* spp.) and oleander (*Nerium oleander*). Be sure to use scientific names, as common names can be misleading. For example, desert willow (*Chilopsis* spp.) is not a true willow (*Salix* spp.) – the two trees are unrelated and possess different medicinal uses.

Most folks think the medicinal part of trees is the bark. But woody botanicals have a diversity of medicinal parts, including flowers, inner bark, fruits, leaves, roots, resin, and root bark. You have to learn which parts are used for food or medicine from any given tree species. Harvest resin by looking for trees that have already released it, and then scraping it from the trunk right into little jars. Resin is much easier to gather after it's begun to harden. Gathering flowers, leaves, and fruit from trees is pretty straightforward as long as you're leaving more than half the medicine behind so the plant can still reproduce or photosynthesize, and local wildlife can share in the bounty.

Harvesting and peeling bark, on the other hand, may be new for some of you. Three pieces of information are crucial for harvesting bark. First, spring and early summer are the best times to harvest bark, because it'll peel more easily from the plant's woody portions. Second, woody plants have two layers of bark, and it's the inner bark you're after.

The outer bark is void of medicine or flavor. Third, girdling a tree – removing all the bark from around its trunk – will kill it.

You can sustainably harvest bark through a few methods. The simplest approach is to look for fallen limbs after a storm, making sure they're free of disease by inspecting the leaves and twigs. You can also harvest limbs 2 to 3 inches in diameter from larger trees using a pruning saw, and subsequently peel off the bark. Harvesting small branches is less harmful to the tree than peeling bark from the trunk. Wounded trees are more vulnerable to disease.

Once you harvest the limb, scrape off any lichens from the bark and remove dead portions. Peel off the leaves. Using pruners, cut off all the twigs under 1/2 inch and set them aside. Saw off the remaining side branches. Begin to harvest bark by placing a clean blanket or tarp on the ground to catch the peels. With the branch positioned upright on the blanket, take a compact, sharp knife, and peel the bark in long strips, slicing away from your body.

You'll know when you've reached the inert inner portion of the wood, as it'll be a lighter color and different texture than the layers of bark. Wood isn't used for medicine, but it's fine if you end up with a little bit of it in your bark peelings.

Look closely at the bark peelings. The outer bark will be like a thin, darker skin, and the inner bark will be moister, thicker, and lighter in color. There's no need to separate the inner bark from the outer bark when harvesting from a limb of this size, because the outer bark is so thin. Take up your bark shavings and cut them into 1-inch pieces using pruners. The bark can then be

dried in loose baskets or on screens, or it can be made into medicine right away.

The small twigs you set aside can also be used, but they'll be weaker medicine compared with the bark. Cut the twigs into smaller pieces with pruners, as they're too fiddly to peel, and process them like you did the bark.

Peeling bark from large trees is another matter. Enterprising foragers work with their local sawmills, gaining permission to harvest bark from recently felled trees. If you'll be harvesting trees from your land for lumber or firewood, you'll need to use a drawknife to peel the bark. Remove and discard the outer bark first, before peeling and saving the inner medicinal bark.



SPOTLIGHT ON MEDICINAL TREES

Please research herbs and check with your health care provider before ingesting, as many medicinals are unsafe in pregnancy and may interact with medications.

Linden, Basswood, Lime Tree (*Tilia* spp., Malvaceae)

Linden leaves can be eaten raw while in their peak stage.

Part used: Flowers.

Preparations: Tea, tincture, honey, and syrup.

You may be familiar with European linden, popular city trees planted for their small stature and delightfully aromatic blossoms. There are approximately 30 species in the *Tilia* genus, and they go by the names linden, basswood, or lime. The American basswoods are large deciduous trees with heart-shaped, toothed leaves.

The tender young leaves are edible raw or cooked and have a pleasant flavor and slightly gummy texture. Linden flower is one of my favorite remedies for children, as it's generally safe and pleasant-tasting. The tea is used to address coughs, fevers, sinus infections, hypertension, stress, insomnia, colds, and flu.

Linden is a natural decongestant through its soothing and anti-inflammatory properties. It's a gentle sleep aid, safe for children and elders alike.

Cultivation: Full sun to light shade; neutral to alkaline soil; Zones and size vary by species. The seeds are renowned for poor to null germination, so you may want to purchase potted saplings or bare-root trees to plant. Softwood cuttings can be made in early summer.





Hawthorn (*Crataegus* spp., Rosaceae)

Hawthorn flowers provide a remedy from hypertension.

Parts used: Flowers, leaves, and fruit.

Preparations: Tea, tincture, honey, cordial, jam, vinegar, and syrup.

Hawthorns are small, thorny trees or shrubs in the rose family, with clusters of fruit resembling miniature apples. Hawthorn berries are variable in color – they can be yellow, red, or black – but they’re all edible and medicinal, with a long history of use. The berries have long been a staple famine food, seeing many people through lean winters.

Contemporary herbalists use hawthorn’s flavonoid-rich flowers and fruit as remedies for hypertension, atherosclerosis, congestive heart failure, and angina pectoris. The flowers and berries are also used by people suffering grief and loss. Hawthorn is a “food herb,” and thus can be ingested in a wide variety of mediums, including teas, tinctures, honey, jam, syrup, cordials, elixirs, and vinegar from the fruit. Hawthorn-infused honey is a beautiful rose color and fruity in flavor. Consult your health care provider before combining with cardiac medications.

Cultivation: Full sun; well-drained soil; zones and sizes vary by species. The seeds need to be stratified and are slow to germinate, so you may want to purchase potted saplings or bare-root trees to plant.



Spruce (*Picea* spp., Pinaceae)

Parts used: Springtime tips, resin.

Preparations: Tea, honey, beer, salve, and syrup.

Spruce trees are familiar conifers, with distinctive evergreen foliage and pendant cones. There are 35 species of spruce worldwide, primarily distributed in colder forested regions. Some varieties are striking landscape trees with glacial blue needles. Many species of spruce have been used for medicine throughout North America and Eurasia.

The fresh growing tips of spruce are helpful in tea, honey, or syrup for expelling thick lung congestion. The resin is antimicrobial and used topically like pine resin. Don’t use internally during pregnancy.

Cultivation: Full sun; cooler, acidic soil; size varies by species. Slow to germinate from seed. Purchase balled and burlap-wrapped trees, and transplant in spring.



Pine (*Pinus* spp., Pinaceae)

Pine is a traditional remedy used globally for coughs, colds, allergies, and urinary tract and sinus infections.

Parts used: Springtime tips, resin, and bark.

Preparations: Tea, honey, syrup, salve, and oil.

There are more than 100 species of pine worldwide, and most have recorded medicinal uses. Cultures around the globe have used the needles, inner bark, and resin for similar ailments. Internally, pine is a traditional remedy for coughs, colds, allergies, and urinary tract and sinus infections. Topically, pine is used to address skin infections and to lessen joint inflammation in arthritic conditions.

Cultivation: Full sun; acidic, well-drained soil; Zones and size varies by species.

Stratify seeds and scarify them if they're winged. Select species suited to your region.

Willow (*Salix* spp., Salicaceae)

Parts used: Bark and twigs.

Preparations: Tea, tincture, compress, wash, and poultice.

Willow bark and twigs can be dried for tea or prepared as a tincture. Willow is antimicrobial, anti-inflammatory, astringent, and analgesic, and is used to assuage headaches, muscle strain, arthritic pain, and menstrual cramps. It's a traditional topical first-aid remedy for cuts, scrapes, and bruises because of its astringent and antimicrobial qualities. White willow is often cited as "the medicinal willow," but dozens of other species have been used similarly throughout Europe and North America.

Cultivation: Full sun to partial shade; moist, fertile soil; size and Zones vary by species. Plant the seed immediately after it ripens in spring, as it doesn't tolerate dry storage. Softwood cuttings and hardwood cuttings, taken from November through March, will root readily.