Herbal Infusions and Decoctions

Terminology

*Tea:* Technically refers to an infusion of the prepared leaves of the tea plant, *Camellia sinensis,* but often used interchangeably with herbal preparations

*Cold Water Extract/Cold Infusion:* An infusion in which heat has not been applied in order to *avoid* certain constituents, such as bitter principles, to come out into the solution or finished product. Cold extraction is also utilized to *enhance* extraction certain constituents, such as mucilage.

*Hot Infusion:* Steeped preparation of herbs in just boiled (hot) water, usually made with dried leaves and/or flowers, sometimes fresh leaves and flowers

*Decoction:* Simmered preparation of herbs in water, usually with roots, fruits, seeds and/or barks

*Tisane:* Herbal beverage made of infusing or decocting plants other than *Camellia sinensis*

*Simple:* Preparations made with a single species of herb. Chamomile and mint are examples of plants often taken in as “simples”.

*Herbal Formula:* Terms used to describe the “recipe” in which more than one herb is blended together to create an infusion or decoction

Advantages of water based preparations

- Simple to make, inexpensive raw ingredients
- Ingredients can often be grown close to home
- Plants store easily in dried form
- Water is an “empty solute”, meaning that it has the least “bound” molecules, allowing for most possible saturation. Water is also the most versatile solvent of any known liquid and is inexpensive and abundant.
- Some constituents are not easily water soluble such as resins, balsams, camphors, some alkaloids, and some glycosides.
- Temperature can be used to control extraction of some constituents. For example, safrol from sassafras root bark, which has been found to be carcinogenic, does NOT extract in cold water.
- Best for people who cannot take alcohol

Disadvantages of Water based preparations

- Water does not offer any antimicrobial effect, allowing for growth of bacteria and fungi. Not shelf stable.
- Some constituents are not easily water soluble such as resins, balsams, camphors, some alkaloids, and some glycosides.
- Many herbs have a disagreeable taste that is difficult to “mask” in water extract form.
- Difficult to quantify doses when using stronger herbs, such as those described as “drop dose” herbs
Making an Herbal Tisane (Tea)

Generally, herbal beverages are more pleasurable when made with 1 teaspoon of herb to 1 cup of water. This varies by type of herb. Bitter or pungent herbs may be best with smaller amounts. Leafy or floral herbs with very delicate flavor may require more.

For medicinal or therapeutic effect, as in cases of acute illness or management of chronic disease, up to 1 ounce of herb per quart of water may be needed.

**General guidelines for therapeutic preparations**

**Hot infusion:**
- Leaves: 1 ounce dried herb to 1 quart water. Steep up to 8 hours or grind in grinder and steep up to 1-2 hours.
- Flowers: 1 ounce dried herb to 1 quart water. Steep up to 1 hour or grind herbs and steep 20 minutes.
- Berries, some seeds: 1-2 ounces herb to 1 quart water. Steep up to 1 hour or grind and steep 20 minutes.
- Root, Barks, some seeds: 1-2 ounces herb to 1 quart water. Steep up to 8 hours or grind in grinder and steep up to 3-4 hours.

**Cold infusions/Cold water extract:**
Using above ratios, pour COLD water over plant material and steep 8 hours or overnight, then strain.

**Decoctions:**
Using above ratios for most roots, barks, berries and seeds, place herbs in pan and bring to a simmer. Usually simmering is required at least 10-15 minutes but may require longer simmer as with mushrooms. Rieshi, maitake, chaga and other mushrooms require a long period of decoction (45 min to 1 hour) for best extraction.

**Blending/Formulating:**
To create a blend that tastes agreeable, choose a “flavor” herb as a base for the blend, then add desired “medicinal” herbs based on energetic and extraction qualities. For example, if making a cold infusion, then choose herbs appropriate for that method unless you are willing to do a “two step” extraction. Use your palate. Perhaps you want an herb that tastes horrible alone, but in small doses within a larger blend it adds nuance and depth.

Generally, herbs can be classified generally with terms such as drying, moistening, cooling, sedating, warming, stimulating, neutral, tonic. Using these terms in mind when learning about herbs helps in creating balanced formulas and understanding herbal actions.

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