

Herbal Medicine for Horses

ALTERNATIVE VETERINARY MEDICINE CENTRE

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EQUINE HERBALISM

Since time immemorial, man has turned to the plants in his environment, for medicine. The tradition of [herbal medicine](#) predates history. All ancient human civilisations depended upon it, where plants were available (but deserts and ice caps present problems!) and many more traditional peoples still do.

Even modern medicine is a direct descendant of this vast natural and instinctive medical armoury. A large and surprising proportion of modern drugs have been derived, more or less remotely, from plant material. These have been modified by chemists and patented to provide the great commercial gains intrinsic to modern medicine. At the same time as providing profit, sadly this method of adapting plant materials to create powerful modern drugs takes them out of their holistic context and brings to the fore the spectre of side effects.

Many readers will have heard that even horses are able to practise their own instinctive and effective form of herbal medicine ([zoopharmacognosy](#)) but only if given a sufficient roaming range over a natural environment, populated with a proper variety of herbs. Such a 'perfect' environment would be their natural prairie homes of North America. Native ponies on the moors or in such islands as the Shetlands are able to roam and select their 'medicines' as they go, even taking seaweed when it suits them. However, such natural habitats are being spoiled and polluted by modern man and the natural balance is in danger of being lost, worldwide. Furthermore, it is just not available to the average riding horse.

Herbs provide us with a vast variety of pharmacological capabilities: demulcents, calmatives, laxatives, purgatives, vulneraries (treating wounds and injuries), stimulants, febrifuges and astringents to mention a few. Different herbs can be mixed together to produce a balanced effect, suited to the patient in question. Some herbs are not compatible with others and should not be mixed; some are unsuitable for long-term usage. Equine herbs are best prepared freshly and tailored

to the individual horse and its own special requirements, not made into off-the-shelf products to be sold as a 'cure all' by unqualified commercial organisations. As a result of enthusiastic, energetic and emotive marketing of herbal products, your natural desire to help your horse as best you can is in danger of being exploited and converted into manufacturer's profit, at your horse's expense.

The horse's need for herbs arises out of several factors. Firstly, as a herbivore, the horse is evolved to obtain his nutrients (including minerals and vitamins) from *plant* material. It goes without saying therefore, that the best source of nutrients for him is from plants. Modern pastures are bereft of the traditional variety of plants so essential to horse health and wellbeing. Fertilisers and other chemicals finish the job, by depleting the soil (and therefore grass) of its proper mineral and nutrient content and by reducing pasture biodiversity. Grass which has come from intensively managed modern pastures has the benefit of being green but has few long-term attributes for the horse. It can even be toxic. Many modern compound [diets](#) are high in molasses and contain other unsuitable ingredients. It is therefore hard work, in modern times, to obtain a proper [balanced diet](#) suited to the horse's hereditary needs. Herbal medicines, properly and individually formulated for your own horse and his needs (i.e. not 'off-the-shelf'), go a long way towards redressing those undesirable trends. Herbs which have been harvested as far away from modern pollution as possible, are rich in both content and diversity of nutrients vital to your horse. Spring and Summer are a real joy, for there is medicine for free, all around you. However, be careful not to harvest from roadsides or on the margins of 'non-organic' arable land. Valuable indigenous [pasture herbs](#) include *Comfrey*, *Willow*, *Goosegrass*, *Selfheal*, *Meadowsweet*, *Burdock*, *Rosehips*, *Seaweed*, *Dandelion* and *Garlic*.

It is best to consult a veterinary surgeon well-versed in [herbal medicine](#) (vet herbalist), when trying to treat health problems, for two reasons. One is the law ([Veterinary Surgeons Act 1968](#)), which forbids the diagnosis or treatment of horses by non-veterinarians; the other is the need to avoid the pitfalls of long-term toxicity or incompatibility. Always go via your own veterinary surgeon in the first instance, as he or she should be able to access expert veterinary help for you.

Written by Christopher Day (veterinary herbalist) – May 1996

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