

# Herbal Actions: Understanding Plant Medicine Through Medicinal Properties and Qualities

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Herbal actions are the medicinal properties of a plant and how that plant influences and alters our physiology. Learning these actions is just one way to connect to the dynamic picture of herbal medicine and give direction on how to choose which herbs are suitable for someone.

As we start to learn these actions please keep in mind that herbs have both primary and secondary actions and every plant has many actions. Taking this information into account with knowledge about a particular ailment(s) and how it presents itself in the body will direct you to the most appropriate herbs for someone.

**Herbal Action Categories** - please note these are not set but my interpretation of how they could be categorized to assist learning.

| Pain/Injury/Inflammation/Open Cuts/Burns: |                                                                           |                           |
|-------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------|
| Herbal Action                             | Defintion                                                                 | Plant Example             |
| Analgesic/Anodyne                         | Numbing, Pain Relieving both internal/external use                        | Willow, Lobelia           |
| Anesthetic                                | Reduces sensation by suppressing nerve function (can be local or general) | Clove, Passionflower      |
| Anti - spasmodic                          | Reduces muscular spasms and cramping                                      | Kava, Black Cohosh        |
| Anti-inflammatory                         | Reduces inflammation in response to injury or infection                   | Willow, Turmeric          |
| Astringent                                | Herbs that tone and tighten skin and tissues                              | W. Hazel, Blackberry root |
| Antiseptic                                | Kills viruses, bacteria and microbes                                      | Oregon grape Root         |
| Hemostatic/Styptic                        | Stops bleeding, produces blood clotting                                   | Yarrow                    |
| Relaxant                                  | Relieves muscle tension can be targeted towards smooth or skeletal muscle | Wild yam, Black Cohosh    |
| Sedative                                  | Calms the nervous system, promotes sleep                                  | Valerian, Passionflower   |
| Vulnerary                                 | Helps heal wounds and encourage cell repair                               | Calendula, Plantain       |

| Digestion/Skin/Internal/Renal                 |                                                    |                              |
|-----------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------|------------------------------|
| Herbal Action                                 | Defintion                                          | Plant Example                |
| Anti-fungal                                   | Inhibits the growth of fungus                      | Black walnut                 |
| Anti-microbial                                | Inhibits the broth of microbes                     | Thyme, Oregano               |
| Aperient/<br>Laxitive/Cathartic/<br>Purgative | Relieves constipation                              | Senna, Yellow dock           |
| Bitter                                        | Promotes digestion, bitter tasting                 | Gentian,<br>Dandelion        |
| Carminative                                   | Helps eliminate gas in the digestive tract         | Cardamon,<br>Fennel          |
| Cholagogue                                    | Promotes release of bile from the gull-bladder     | Burdock,<br>Dandelion        |
| Demulcent                                     | Soothes and protects tissues by providing moisture | Marshmallow,<br>Slippery Elm |
| Diaphoretic                                   | Increases perspiration/sweating                    | Elderflower,<br>Catnip       |
| Diuretic                                      | Increases urine production through the kidneys     | Parsley, Juniper             |
| Emetic                                        | Promotes vomiting                                  | Lobelia                      |
| Emollient                                     | Soothes and nourishes skin                         | Aloe, Comfrey                |
| Mucilaginous                                  | Soothes mucus membranes                            | Oats,<br>Marshmallow         |
| Rubefacient                                   | Produces redness of the skin, increases blood flow | Black Pepper,<br>Cayenne     |
| Sialagogue                                    | Promotes salivation                                | Prickly Ash,<br>Ginger       |
| Vermifuge                                     | Destroys parasitic worms                           | Wormwood, Black Walnut       |
| Anti-diarrheal                                | Reduces diarrhea                                   | Blackberry root              |

Notes:

| Nervous System  |                                                                           |                              |
|-----------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------|
| Herbal Action   | Defintion                                                                 | Plant Example                |
| Anxiolytic      | Reduces anxiety, calms the nervous system                                 | Motherwort, Blue Vervain     |
| Anti-depressant | Reduces depression                                                        | St.Johns Wort                |
| Herpetic        | Inhibits the production of Herpes class of viruses                        | Lemonbalm, St.Johns Wort     |
| Nervine         | Supports and nourishes the nervous system (can be stimulating or calming) | Oats, Rose, California poppy |
| Nootropic       | Plants that support mental endurance/help with memory                     | Lions Maine, Ginko           |

| Reproductive  |                                                    |                            |
|---------------|----------------------------------------------------|----------------------------|
| Herbal Action | Defintion                                          | Plant Example              |
| Abortifacient | Cause a miscarriage/abortion                       | Cottonroot, Black Cohosh   |
| Aphrodisiac   | Increases capacity for sexual arousal              | Damiana, Maca, Ashwagandha |
| Emmenagogue   | Herbs that bring on delayed menstration            | Motherwort, Mugwort        |
| Estrogenic    | Herbs that contain high amounts of plant estrogens | Chaste Tree, Black Cohosh  |
| Galactagogue  | Herbs that increase milk supply                    | Fenugreek, Fennel          |

Notes:

| Full Body and Illness |                                                                                                         |                                 |
|-----------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Herbal Action         | Defintion                                                                                               | Plant Example                   |
| Adaptogen             | Modulating herbs that help restore homeostasis, these can work more generally or target one body system | Reishi,<br>Ashwaganda,<br>Tulsi |
| Anti-bacterial        | Inhibits bacterial growth                                                                               | Garlic, Thyme                   |
| Anti-catarrh          | Reduces mucus/phlegm in the respiratory tract                                                           | Elecampane                      |
| Anti-Viral            | Inhibits Viral reproduction                                                                             | Elderberry,<br>Barberry         |
| Expectorant           | Helps to expel mucus in the respiratory tract                                                           | Horseradish                     |
| Febrifuge             | Used to bring down fever                                                                                | Feverfew,<br>Elderflower        |
| Nutritive             | Herbs that nourish body tissues                                                                         | Nettles, Oats                   |
| Stimulant             | Substance that temporarily increases alertness and energy levels                                        | Coffee, Ginseng                 |
| Tonic                 | Herbs that overtime increase vitality and well-being (Many herbs fall into this category!)              | Chaga, Nettle,<br>Astragals     |

Notes: