

The Bountiful Bonanza of Bitters

With Abby Artemisia

www.thewanderschool.com

abby@thewanderschool.com



What are bitters?

An herbal formula containing bitter-tasting herbs, often (and hopefully) with other herbs as well. The possibilities are endless!

History

Bitters have a long history:

Ancient Egypt steeped in wine, Ayurveda, TCM, Paracelsus Elixir 1538 (later Swedish Bitters)
Italy called *amari* for weight loss, western world in the 19th century

Phytochemistry: including terpenes, iridoids, alkaloids

Purpose of bitters in plants: pesticides

How they work

Bitter taste → Nervous system → Gut → Digestive hormone (gastrin) released

Then: stimulates release of digestive juices (inefficient/allergy-impaired digestion) & appetite, increase bile, help liver detoxification, regulate pancreatic hormones (affects blood sugar, insulin), help stimulate self-repair in the gut wall¹

Basic Benefits

Digestion (esp. rich, fatty, or sugary foods), anti-depressant, anti-inflammatory, liver/gallbladder detoxification, appetite/weight regulation

Secondary Benefits for the rest of the body, especially skin! And increases biodiversity of plants in the wild habitat and in our bodies.

Contraindications

Pregnancy, kidney stones, gallbladder diseases, dysmenorrhea, gastroesophageal reflux disease, hiatal hernia, gastritis, peptic ulcer, quick metabolism or diarrhea, long term use

When to Take/Dosage

Before Meals to stimulate digestion, After Meals for bloating, gas, general indigestion, and food allergy reactions.

Start with 1/2 to 1 dropperful and experiment to see what works best for you. Not for long term use.

The Easiest way to get your bitters is to just **Eat Them!** Also teas, like Dandy Blend (<https://dandyblend.com>)

Wild Harvest: dandelion (*Taraxacum officinale*), burdock (*Arctium* spp.), chicory (*Cichorium intybus*), yarrow (*Achillea* spp.), ground ivy (*Glechoma hederacea*), mugwort (*Artemisia vulgaris*), boneset (*Eupatorium perfoliatum*), barberry (*Berberis thunbergii*), yellowroot (*Xanthorhiza simplicissima*), bitter greens, reishi mushroom (*Ganoderma* spp.), mints, angelica (*Angelica* spp.), black walnut (*Juglans nigra*), wild Lettuce (*Lactuca* spp.)

Cultivate: wormwood (*Artemisia absinthum*), gentian (*Gentiana* spp.), chamomile (*Matricaria recutita*), valerian (*Valeriana officinalis*), mints, hops (*Humulus lupulus*), elecampane (*Inula helenium*), horehound (*Marrubium vulgare*), horseradish, goldenseal (*Hydrastis canadensis*), milk thistle (*Silybium marianum*), blessed thistle (*Cnicus benedictus*), artichoke leaf, motherwort (*Leonorus cardiaca*), blue vervain (*Verbena hastata*), bitter greens

Buy: citrus (peel), vanilla, coffee, chocolate, tea (from the *Camellia sinensis* plant)

Non-alcoholic Bitters aka *Glycerites* and *Vinegars*

Glycerites

Vegetable glycerin(e) is a clear, odorless syrupy liquid with a sweet taste. “It’s obtained from vegetable fats found in carrier oils such as soybean oil or coconut oil. It’s also water and alcohol soluble.”² It can be a by-product of soap, candle, or biodiesel production. The soy can also be GMO, so be sure to get pure, preferably organic, glycerin.

Herbs that extract well in glycerin:

Burdock, chamomile, dandelion, echinacea, ginseng, goldenseal, mugwort, peppermint, skullcap, valerian³

I generally dilute my glycerin to around 60% to get the water extraction of the herbs, too. I use <http://homedistiller.org/distill/dilute/calc> to figure out the dilution for glycerin or alcohol.

Vinegars

Vinegar extracts are also a great way to make non-alcoholic bitters. My go-to is unpasteurized apple cider vinegar, but there are a ton of great vinegar options. I just stay away from white vinegar. Vinegar is good for extracting minerals, so think about high mineral content herbs. Contraindicated for people with acidic stomach issues

Herbs for vinegars:

Dandelion, burdock, yellow dock, chicory, mugwort, lambsquarter, nettle, mints, catnip, bee balm/bergamot (*Monarda* spp.), parsely, plantain, red clover, alliums, yarrow, any bitter greens, pine/spruce/fir⁴

Carminatives

Carminatives are herbs with a high volatile oil content, meaning they usually have a pungent smell and relax the digestive system and increase peristalsis, resulting in reduction of gas, indigestion, bloating, and constipation. It’s nice to add these herbs to bitters to make the action of the bitter herbs a little more gentle and soothing.

Carminative herbs:

Anise, fennel, mints, citrus peel, lemon balm, chamomile, cinnamon, ginger, coriander, cumin, cardamom, fenugreek, lavender, black pepper

Making the Formula

Herb blending is an art! It takes practice, but is fun to experiment with. Try experimenting with mixing couple or few bitter herbs with a couple or few carminative herbs.

When making alcohol extracts of herbs (tinctures), check out the recommended alcohol percentages for those herbs. Some good resources for finding this information are the book *Making Plant Medicine*⁵ and Michael Moore's *Materia medica*⁶.

Some herbs are better extracted in water (again check the just-mentioned resources). So you can make a tea decoction or infusion and add alcohol as a preservative or mix with tinctures, preferably ending with at least 50% alcohol content.

To make a basic tincture, cover your herbs with twice as much alcohol, leaving an inch space at the top of the jar. Add a lid and label. Strain in 4-6 weeks.

Resources

1. *Medical Herbalism* by David Hoffman pg 498-501
2. What is Vegetable Glycerine
<https://blog.mountainroseherbs.com/what-is-vegetable-glycerine>
3. How to Make Glycerine Extracts
<https://blog.mountainroseherbs.com/make-glycerin-extracts-glycerites>
4. Nourishing and Tonifying Herbs: Mineral-Rich Medicinal Vinegars
http://www.susunweed.com/herbal_ezine/October08/anti-cancer.htm
5. *Making Plant Medicine* by Richo Cech
6. Herbal Tinctures in Clinical Practice by Michael Moore
<http://www.swsbm.com/ManualsMM/HerbTinct3.txt>
7. 18 Bitter Healing Plants and Herbs
<https://www.healthyhildegard.com/18-bitter-healing-plants/>
8. Natural Healing: Befriending the Bitter Herbs
<https://www.motherearthliving.com/health-and-wellness/natural-healing-bitter-is-better-befriending-the-bitter-herbs>
9. *DIY Bitters: Reviving the Forgotten Flavor* by Guido Mase and Jovial King
10. *Herbal Medicine Maker's Handbook* by James Green
11. *The Gift of Healing Herbs* by Robin Rose Bennett
12. Thanks to Becky Beyer bloodandspicebush.com