Understanding Herbal Formulas

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Why Herbal Formulas?

Rifle or Shotgun?

Single Herbs
- Have deep and subtle actions, affecting multiple systems and processes
- When matched correctly to a person’s symptoms have powerful targeted action (like a rifle)
- Require a lot of knowledge and skill to use effectively

Herbal Formulas
- Subtle actions tend to balance out, creating a more generalized action
- Have a more generalized action that affects the body in a more diverse way (like a shotgun)
- Require less knowledge and skill to use effectively

Herbal Recipes
- Like creating a single dish from a recipe of ingredients, an herbal formula is more than the sum of the single actions of its ingredients
- Herbs can both enhance and neutralize the effects of other herbs, so the blend is different than the sum of its parts
- People unskilled in herbalism often create “kitchen sink” formulas where they simply blend together everything that has been historically used for a problem thinking that will fix everything

Herbal Energetics
- Herbs have “energetic” properties that move the body’s energies in certain directions, as follows:
  - Energy Production: Herbs can warm (speed up metabolism) or cool (slow down metabolism)
  - Minerals and Fluids: Herbs can moisten tissues or dry tissues
  - Tissue Tone: Herbs can relax tissues or constrict (tone) tissues

Herbs and Body Systems
- Herbs have affinity for various body systems and functions
- Formulas can be blended to support specific body systems in both structure and function, such as:
  - Digestive formulas
  - Respiratory formulas
  - Urinary formulas
  - Nervous system formulas
  - Cardiovascular formulas
Herbal Properties

- Herbs have certain properties, which are used to describe ways they affect structure and function
- Herbs can be blended by combining remedies with similar properties, such as:
  - Nervines
  - Blood purifiers

Formulation Principles

- Herbal formulas will be more therapeutic in their effects when herbs are combined according to common energetics or properties, so that they move the body’s energies in a unified direction
- Herbal formulas will be more nourishing in their effects when herbs are combined in ways that cancel out their energetic effects, so they don’t move the body’s energies strongly in any direction

A Plan for Designing Formulas

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Components</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1-2 Key Herbs (8-16 parts per herb)</td>
<td>8 oz. Key Herb</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-4 Supporting Herbs (4-8 parts per herb)</td>
<td>4 oz. Supporting Herb 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0-3 Balancing Herbs (2-4 parts per herb)</td>
<td>4 oz. Supporting Herb 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0-2 Catalysts (1-2 parts per herb)</td>
<td>2 oz. Supporting Herb 3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Key Herb(s)

- The key herb(s) has the primary action you want in the formula, which can be:
  - Energetic
  - Body System Affinity
  - Property
  - A Combination of the Above
- The key herb is like the king or emperor of the formula; it directs the action of the other ingredients

Supporting Herb(s)

- Supporting herbs are like the kings advisors
- They may have a similar action to the key herb(s) or may somehow enhance that action
- They may also “fill in” effects wanted in the formula that are not supplied by the key herb(s)

Balancing Herbs

- Balancing herbs are added to a formula to restrain undesirable properties of the key herb, such as:
  - Toning down harsh or unwanted actions
  - Masking unpleasant flavors
- TCM formulas usually contain small quantities of herbs with opposite effects of the main herbs to ensure the effect of the formula isn’t too harsh
Catalysts

- Catalysts are herbs that are added in very small amounts to enhance the overall effect of the formula
- Common catalysts include:
  - Licorice root
  - Lobelia
  - Cayenne
  - Ginger

Example 1: Laxative Formula

- **Key Herbs:** Senna, Cascara Sagrada, Butternut Bark, Cape Aloe
- **Supporting Herbs:**
  - Milder laxatives: Turkey Rhubarb, Buckthorn, Butternut
  - Bitters: Burdock, Barberry, Dandelion
- **Balancing Herbs:**
  - Soothing: Slippery Elm, Licorice
  - Antispasmodic: Wild Yam, Lobelia
- **Catalysts:** Capsicum, Fennel, Ginger

Example 2: Sleep Formula

- **Key Herbs:** Hops, Valerian, Skullcap, Passionflower
- **Supporting Herbs:**
  - Nervines: California Poppy, Corydalis, Kava Kava, Chamomile
  - Nerve Tonics: Milky Oat Seed, Ashwaganda, Jujube Dates, Hawthorn
- **Catalysts:** Licorice Root, Anise, Lobelia, Spearmint

Example 3: Digestive Bitter Tonic

- **Key Herbs:** Gentian, Dandelion, Goldenseal
- **Supporting Herbs:**
  - Aromatics: Cardamon, Chamomile, Angelica, Ginger, Orange Peel, Peppermint
  - Bitters: Artichoke, Myrrh Gum, Turkey Rhubarb, Burdock, Turmeric
- **Balancing Herbs:** Kelp, Irish Moss, Licorice, Anise
- **Catalysts:** Essential oils

Example 4: Cardiac Tonic

- **Key Herbs:** Hawthorn, Lily of the Valley, Arjuna
- **Supporting Herbs:**
  - Cardiovascular: Night Blooming Cereus, Ginkgo, Prickly Ash, Guggul
  - Nervine: Passionflower, Motherwort, Linden
  - Diuretic: Nettle Leaf, Goldenrod
- **Catalysts:** Capsicum, Ginger

Example 5: Anti-Inflammatory

- **Key Herbs:** Boswellia, Devil’s Claw, Turmeric, Willow Bark, Yucca
- **Supporting Herbs:** Ginger, Hops, Valerian, Holy Basil, Feverfew, Skullcap, St. John’s wort, Chamomile, Licorice
- **Catalysts:** Black Pepper, Ginger
Example 6: Fiber Blend

- **Key Herbs:** Psyllium Hulls, Guar Gum, Oat bran, Apple Pectin, Flaxseed, Slippery Elm
- **Supporting Herbs:** Dandelion, Red Clover, Plantain, Walk Yam
- **Balancing Herbs:** Ginger, Black Pepper, Cinnamon

Example 7: Allergy-Reducing

- **Key Herbs:** Burdock, Eyebright, Nettle Leaf, Goldenrod
- **Supporting Herbs:** Bayberry, Brigham Tea, Blessed Thistle, Osha, Goldenseal, Horehound
- **Balancing Herbs:** Elderberry, Licorice, Mullein
- **Catalysts:** Lobelia

A Dash of Experience

- Learning to blend herbs is a lot like learning to be a great cook
- It’s not about strictly following a recipe
- It’s more about knowing your ingredients well and being able to adjust them to get the effect you want

A Few of My Favorite Formulas

- **Children’s Composition**
  - 2 parts Yarrow (key herb)
  - 2 parts Elder Flower (key herb)
  - 2 parts Peppermint (supporting and balancing herb)
  - 1 part Elderberry (opt.) (supporting and balancing herb)
  - 1 part Chamomile (opt.) (catalyst)

- **Dry Cough**
  - 4 parts Mullein Flower (key herb)
  - 4 parts Marshmallow (key herb)
  - 2 parts Licorice (supporting herb)
  - 2 parts Elderberry (supporting herb)
  - 1 part Peppermint (balancing herb and catalyst)
Damp Cough Formula

- 4 parts Wild Cherry Bark (key herb)
- 4 parts White Pine Bark (key herb)
- 2 parts Plantain (supporting herb)
- 2 parts Grindelia (supporting herb)
- 1 part Cinnamon (balancing herb and catalyst)
- ½ part Lobelia (catalyst)

Herbal Minerals

- 4 parts Nettle Leaf (key herb)
- 4 parts Alfalfa (key herb)
- 2 parts Horsetail (supporting herb)
- 2 parts Oat straw (supporting herb)
- 1 part Red Raspberry (supporting herb)
- 1 part Peppermint (balancing herb and catalyst)
- ½ part Dill (balancing herb and catalyst)

Lymphatic Formula

- 4 Echinacea (key herb)
- 4 Red Root (key herb)
- 4 Elder Berry (balancing herb)
- 2 Yarrow (supporting herb)
- 1 Thyme (catalyst)

Tummy Tonic

- 4 Catnip (key herb)
- 4 Fennel (key herb)
- 2 Meadowsweet (supporting herb)
- 1 Peppermint (supporting herb and catalyst)
- 1/2 Lobelia (catalyst) (opt.)

A Dose of Common Sense

- Just as you can adjust a recipe with different ingredients, the specific ingredients in a blend are less important than the overall result
- You don’t have to be precise with herbal remedies except when dealing with toxic botanicals
- There’s a wide margin of safety in both preparation and dosage