

The Alchemical Allure of Herbalism: Transformation and the Copper Still

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There is an old traditional song that I learned growing up listening to the angelic voice of Joan Baez. She sings, “Get you a copper kettle/Get you a copper coil/ Cover with new cut corn mash/And never more you’ll toil./ You’ll just lay there by the Junipers,/while the moon is high/ Watch them jugs a-fillin up/ in the pale moonlight”.

My friend Corazon carried my copper still on her lap from Portugal to California. It is beautiful, shaped something like a mosque. I use it to distill flower petals into an herbal product known as a Hydrosol. This is a magical process in which the oils of the flowers combine with water to form an entirely new substance, thirty to forty times stronger than a tea. Hydrosols are potent medicines. They contain no alcohol, yet are preserved by the natural acids in the petals.

I cover flower petals with water in the kettle of the still and set it to boil. The steam rises from the kettle, passes through a copper tube and down into the coil, which is shaped like a spiral and enclosed in a cup. Cold water is added to the cup around the coil so that the coil doesn’t overheat, and so that the steam becomes liquid as it cools which I then collect in a Mason jar.

I take the two separate entities, in this case the flower petals and water, and use the process of distillation to make them one. This is Alchemy: the transformation of the acts of separation and rejoining. If you have ever dropped some essential oil into water, you know that oil and water don’t mix. However, through the process of distilling, the water and the flower petals are mixed without a solvent. This process gives me a substance that is pure and long-lasting. Simply placing flower petals (or leaves) into water and letting them stand won’t produce a lasting product. It will rot and wind up a putrid mess. As an experiment, following a distillation of roses, I put the leftover water and

petals (called the tail) from the kettle into a Mason jar on my patio. I left it for two months, expecting to get moldy rose petals. However, when I opened it up, it was pure, even with the plant matter still in it.

Hydrosols are frequently referred to as Floral Waters. The most common are rose and lavender, often found at high-end stores and used to spray on linens. Another common use is as a skin toner.

Herbalists are discovering the amazing medicinal uses of Hydrosols. Because they contain no alcohol, they can be comfortably used by alcoholics – and safely used on the skin without the drying effects of alcohol. Hydrosols can be sprayed onto the skin, in the mouth, or applied with a cloth to soothe the skin. We also drink them; they are stronger than tea but milder than essential oils.

All of the Hydrosols I make come from flowers on my organic farm. Looking out of my kitchen window I can see rose, lavender, oregano, thyme, sage, clary sage, white sage, lemon balm, yarrow, rosemary, Queen Anne’s Lace, rue, Chinese chrysanthemum, tansy, feverfew, borage, Sweet Annie, and goldenrod blooming at different times of the year. From experience, I know that many of these herbs are very strong and often must be used sparingly. Hydrosols are a great delivery vehicle for them. First let’s consider the Lamiaceae family, many of which can also be thought of as the Mediterraneans. This family contains important medicinal plants that can be unsafe when used in excess. They are all rich in volatile oils. These oils become gasses when heated and escape with the steam. When making a tea with herbs with volatile herbs, such as lavender or thyme, it is important that they be covered to keep the volatile oils in the cup or teapot. I often use a flat Mason jar top over a cup.

Many of these Mediterranean herbs are wonderful

Mary Pat Palmer grew up in the powerful surroundings of the Big Sur area. Reverence for nature was further ingrained by her Cherokee grandfather and by her parents. She lived in the East for 35 homesick years. In the late 90’s she served as the Vice President of the Northeast Herbal Association and editor of that Journal, and as President of the Massachusetts Mental Health Counselor’s Association. She also became an AHG Registered Professional Herbalist. Mary Pat co-founded the Boston School of Herbal Energetics in 2000 and moved it home to 16 enchanted acres in California in 2002, as The Philo School of Herbal Energetics. She is mother to two brilliant and beautiful daughters and a grandmother. She lives with beloved cats and dogs, and with over 200 species of medicinal plants in her organic gardens.

medicines, as well as irreplaceable in cooking. Rosemary (*Rosemarinus officinalis*) leads the list. This plant is rich in volatile oils and flavonoids, which are also found in the white inner peel of citrus fruits, and also phenolic acids, which are strongly antiseptic and anti-inflammatory. Rosemary stimulates the liver and gall bladder, improves digestion, and inhibits a number of pathogens.

Another herb I grow is the lavender species *Lavendula angustifolia*, a highly-scented lavender, rich in volatile oils, and most often grown in this country. It is used

internally for depression, especially in combination with rosemary (*Rosemarinus officinalis*), indigestion, anxiety, bronchial complaints, exhaustion, and tension headaches. Externally it is used for burns, rheumatism, muscular pain, neuralgia, skin complaints, cold sores, insect and snake bites, head lice, halitosis, and anal fissures. It is highly antiseptic and it smells heavenly! Lavender was used to strew on hospital floors for cleanliness long before the antiseptic betadine took over.

I also grow many varieties of thyme. Common thyme (*Thymus vulgaris*) is mostly used for medicine. It is a warming and astringent antiseptic and is antifungal. It improves digestion, relaxes spasms, and controls coughing. It is also antifungal. The oil is not used internally for pregnant women, but can be used in a bath. The Hydrosol is safe to use as a skin spray or to drink sparingly. I use thyme Hydrosol when I am traveling or am in a crowd, to protect me from germs.

Oregano grows particularly well on my land in Northern California. The most common is *Oreganum vulgare*. Like thyme, it contains the volatile oil thymus, which is used increasingly in medicine. James Duke, renowned ethnobotanist and scientist, tested oregano for its antioxidant properties and found it the highest of the Lamiceae family, due not to any individual component but to the synergy of its properties. It is antiseptic, antispasmodic, increases perspiration, benefits digestion, stimulates the uterus, and is a mild expectorant. Using the Hydrosol rather than the oil is safer, particularly for pregnant women.

Common garden sage (*Salvia officianalis*) is also rich in volatile oils, particularly thujone, and should not be taken in excess by anyone, a pregnant woman should avoid it entirely. It is astringent, antiseptic, and anti-inflammatory. It relaxes spasms, suppresses perspiration and lactation, and improves liver function and digestion. It also has antidepressant properties and estrogenic effects. It is an important post-menopausal supplement (as tea or Hydrosol) that improves and cleanses the circulatory system.

I make Hydrosols with two other sages, clary sage (*Salvia sclarea*) and white sage (*Salvia apianis*). Clary sage is used very sparingly internally because it is very potent. It relaxes spasms, aids digestion, stimulates the uterus, calms nerves, controls vomiting, and is said to be an aphrodisiac. I love to spray this one on before bed.



The copper still from Portugal

White sage has many of the properties of common sage. It is best known as a ceremonial herb, first used by Southwestern Native American tribes who burned it to clear the air at gatherings. The good news is that the Hydrosol doesn't get smoke in your eyes and lungs! I use it for ceremonies and also as a medicine.

Yarrow (*Achillea millefolium*), a prolific herb on my land, is a member of the Compositae family rather than the Lamiceae. It is best known as a protector plant, both physically and psychologically. The dried stalks of the plant have also long been used in divination with the I Ching and are hung over a door to ward off unwanted presences. It is said to be the substance that Achilles' mother dipped him in to protect him from battle wounds. But she forgot to anoint his heel and he was hit by a poison arrow in what would become known as the Achilles tendon. It was used up through the Civil War as the primary wound healer. I have used it countless times to heal open wounds. I use the Hydrosol to spray on wounds, particularly when the skin has been burned or chafed, like in a rope or seat belt burn. It is healing and anti-inflammatory. Taken internally it is bitter and astringent. It increases perspiration, aids digestion, lowers blood pressure, relaxes spasms, and heals hemorrhages. It can be used to stop bleeding and can also be used to bring on menses when the hormonal balance is off.

Borage (*Borago officinalis*) belongs to yet another family, Boraginaceae. It pops up everywhere in my garden and attracts hordes of happy bees, particularly in the early spring. "Borage for courage" is a very old saying, and alludes to its antidepressant action. It also helps to soothe damaged tissue. The oil regulates hormonal systems and helps to lower blood pressure. Unlike most herbs, the oil can be used more safely than the plant, which must be used sparingly. It adds a cucumber flavor to water and the beautiful blue star flowers are commonly used in salads. The Hydrosol is uplifting and especially good before public speaking or a first date.

Queen Anne's Lace (*Daucus carotus*) grows rampant along the highway and easily adapts to the home garden. It is in the Umbelliferae family, along with our garden carrots, and is also known as wild carrot. It is a beautiful wild flower growing along California roadsides. It has a calming effects on the urinary system and acts on cystitis, gout, and edema. Many, including herbalist Phyllis Light, say that it is an effective remedy for flu. It is also a uterine stimulant.

When I am using my still, I can imagine the ancient magic of the medieval alchemists. Alchemy has a long and diverse history. It has been practiced for at least 2500 years, with its origins in the ancient Persian Empire. The practice of Alchemy has been documented on every continent and weaves throughout the history of Europe, the Islamic countries, and Asia. Modern chemistry grew out of the practice of Alchemy. Essentially it is the practice of transformation or transmutation. Alchemy is best known for the attempt to turn "base metals", in most cases lead, into gold. However, a separate branch of alchemy arose in the 16th century known as Spagyric Plant Alchemy. This branch focused on using plants to create remedies. The name is attributed to Paracelsus, the alchemist and physician who lived c. 1493 to 1541. He was born Theophrastus Bombastus Von Hohenheim in Switzerland and renamed himself Phillipus Aureolus Paracelsus ("beyond Celsus"). He was the first who wrote of specific diseases having specific remedies, emphasizing the importance of observation and experience.

Paracelsus and others who practiced Spagyric Plant Alchemy were attempting to create a "panacea", or elixir of life that would not only cure all diseases, but grant immortality. You can imagine the importance of these endeavors, particularly during the European plagues. These experiments brought about the creation of "theriac", said to cure all. Theriac was similar to our modern tinctures and/or spagyrics, combining many plants and even the burnt remains of a snake, to form a remedy. Paracelsus himself claimed to have discovered a triune system involving sulphur, mercury and salt that would grant immortality.

Over the ensuing years, Alchemy was both popular and persecuted. In the 17th century Robert Boyle attacked Paracelsus and Aristotle's theories of the four elements (Earth, Air, Fire and Water), which underlie Alchemy. Paracelsus himself experimented with many substances that we now call elements in our periodic table of the elements, like sulphur, lead, and arsenic. Over time, the idea of the four elements was abandoned and was ultimately replaced by the Periodic Table of Elements. The Medieval Christian Church viewed spiritual leanings by Alchemists as heresy. For Paracelsus and other alchemists the miraculous transformation and purification of metals was tantamount to the purification of the soul through alchemical practices. Alchemy and

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Plant Spagyric Alchemy were ways to distill purity, be it of a physical or spiritual nature. The metaphor they followed is the transformation of matter.

In the modern era, Carl Jung compared Alchemy to the process of becoming an individual, which we call individuation. The practice of Alchemy was seen as changing the mind and spirit of the alchemist, much as the practice of Yoga and Buddhist Meditation change the mind and spirit of the adherent.

In modern Chinese medicine (Traditional Chinese Medicine or TCM), particularly the school of Pao Zhi, Alchemical spiritual and pharmacological practices continue. These transform the nature of temperature, taste, the body part, and/or toxicity. In Ayurveda, a medical system practiced in India, a purification rite or ceremony marking an event is called a Samskara. The same word is also used for the process used to transform heavy metals and toxic herbs to remove their toxicity.

I use my still with great joy. As I place the flower petals in the kettle, both they and the copper interior

glow. The steam condenses in the Mason jar; the aroma of the essential oils envelopes me. I feel myself part of a 2500-year old tradition.

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