

“Backyard Medicine is a wonderful book that all herbalists need.”
—David Hoffmann, BS, FNIMH, Medical Herbalist

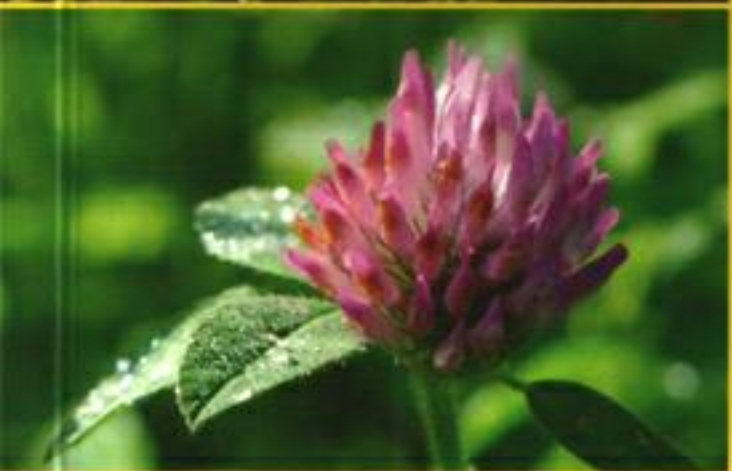


Backyard Medicine



Harvest and Make Your Own Herbal Remedies

Julie Bruton-Seal & Matthew Seal



BACKYARD MEDICINE

Harvest and Make
Your Own Herbal Remedies



JULIE BRUTON-SEAL
MATTHEW SEAL



SKYHORSE PUBLISHING

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Please note:

The information in *Backyard Medicine* is compiled from a blend of historical and modern sources, from folklore and personal experience. It is not intended to replace the professional advice and care of a qualified herbal or medical practitioner. Do not attempt to self-diagnose or self-prescribe for serious long-term problems without first consulting a qualified professional. Heed the cautions given, and if already taking prescribed medicines or if you are pregnant, seek professional advice before using herbal remedies.

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Preface to the North American edition

We have taken the opportunity to correct the text and make the spelling more appropriate for North American readers. The substance of the book, however, remains as for the British edition. All the plants are found on both sides of the Atlantic, some being native in the New World and others brought over from Europe by settlers precisely because they were useful plants that they wanted to keep using.

We appreciate that some of the plants are less common in North America and that a few are classified as noxious or invasive (we give details of these in the text), but we believe that each of them is worth seeking out in the wild and has medicinal value. And if you do not have these plants growing near you, most of them can readily be grown in your own garden (subject to state or federal law).

In addition, the recipes we give can be adapted and used for other medicinal plants that may grow around you. We have made the measurements more North American-friendly by changing metric to standard, but the recipes remain simple and easy to follow.

Additional thanks go to Donna Bryant, David Hoffmann, Sara James, Maida Silverman, Karin Uphoff, and Matthew Wood.

As we write, the credit crunch and deepening recession are affecting all of us. But as the things of the money economy become scarcer, this is the time to look to our own backyards. We can grow more food and harvest our wild and cultivated plants for medicine. We can do so much for ourselves.

October 2008

Norfolk, UK

Introduction

The British edition of this book used the title “hedgerow medicine,” which we have changed to “backyard medicine” for the present edition.

Hedgerows in Britain are an integral part of the landscape, and the word conveys a sense of countryside and the often-forgotten traditional harvesting and use of plants – there are miles of public footpaths with rights of access. We wanted to suggest the same sense of self-sufficiency in using the plants that grow “on your doorstep,” hence our choice of the term “backyard medicine.”

The plants we have selected are found in various habitats, including both cultivated and neglected land. So do not be surprised to see pictures here of plants growing on cliff scree, a church wall, or open moorland. Quite a few of our plants are happy in cities, in waste lots, and parks, or cracks in sidewalks.

If we give ourselves some latitude in the first part of our title, what of “medicine”? Herbal medicines are traditional and effective, and we encourage you to use our chosen plants in making your own medicines. In the process you are taking responsibility for your own health. We do not intend to decry either pharmaceutical or manufactured herbal products, for clearly both have their place and many people want them. What we’d prefer to do is make a positive case for our wild plants.

Consider the following quotation from a 2004 survey of *Britain’s Wild Harvest*, which is also relevant for the US. In terms of sourcing herbal medicines, it said that Britain is a major user of herbs, but “despite this interest our own wild species play a remarkably small

role in this market. Almost all of the tinctures, creams or infusions we use derive from plants that we import or cultivate.”

Using local plants for herbal remedies saves on imports and air miles; backyard medicines are not only cheap, they are free. There is also a sustainability issue: many popular imported herbal medicines have negative environmental effects in their place of origin. Our plants are common, local, often invasive plants written off or condemned as weeds.

An excellent reason to harvest and make your own local herbal medicines is the pleasure the whole process brings. You will also have the peace of mind of knowing exactly what is in your medicines. Then again, the current regulatory environment is running against over-the-counter herbal preparations, and there is almost certain to be less choice and more control in future. All in all, the best option is to learn to make your own remedies.

Do please be aware that this book is intended to be a general guide to plant medicines and is not specific to personal circumstances or meant to replace a professional consultation. Do not self-diagnose or self-treat for serious or long-term conditions without consulting a qualified herbal or medical practitioner.

Having said that, we hope to show you how easy it is to make your own remedies from wild plants. You will soon build up a home medicine cabinet better than anything you could buy. We support you in taking responsibility for your own health, and wish you well in seeking the healing virtues offered by the plants all around us.

Harvesting from the wild

Harvesting wild plants for food or medicine is a great pleasure, and healing in its own right. We all need the company of plants and wild places in our lives, whether this is in an old wood, a mountainside or the seashore, just down the street, or in our own backyard. Gathering herbs for free is the beginning of a valuable and therapeutic relationship with the wild. Here are a few basic guidelines to help you get started.

Why pay others to frolic in the luscious gardens of Earth, picking flowers and enjoying themselves making herbal products? You can do all that frolicking, immersing yourself in wondrous herbal beauty, and uplifting your mind and spirit. Making your own herbal medicine both enhances your happiness and boosts your immune system.
– Green (2000)

When collecting, try to choose a place where the plant you are harvesting is abundant and vibrant. Woods, fields, and minor roads are best, though many of our fifty plants are also found in the city. Avoiding heavy traffic is safer for you and your lungs, and plants growing in quiet places are less polluted. Plants growing next to fields may receive crop sprays.

We usually want to harvest herbs when they are at their lushest. It's best to pick on a dry day, after the morning dew has burned off. For St John's wort and aromatic plants the energy of the sun is really important, so wait for a hot day and pick while the sun is high in the sky, ideally just before noon.

It is really important to make sure you have the right plant. A good field guide is essential – for North America we recommend the Peterson Field Guide series, which has regional guides including *A Field Guide to Medicinal Plants and Herbs of Eastern and Central North America*. Some herbalists and foragers offer herb walks – great for learn-

ing to identify plants. For distribution maps and other information, go to the USDA PLANTS database: <http://plants.usda.gov/>.

Harvest only what you need and will use; leave some of the plant so it will grow back. When picking "above-ground parts" of a plant, only take the top half to two-thirds. Never harvest a plant if it is the only one in a particular area.

We have included a few roots in our recipes. It is important not to over-harvest these, even though most of the plants we describe are widespread. The law states that you must seek the permission of the landowner before you dig up roots, if this is not on your own land (see p. 198 for more on law).

Collecting equipment is simple: think carrier bags or a basket, and perhaps gloves, scissors, or shears. If you are harvesting roots take a shovel or digging fork.

A quiet English country lane in May, with hawthorn flowering and a healthy undergrowth of nettles and cleavers.

bark. Infusions and decoctions can also be used as mouthwashes, gargles, eyebaths, fomentations, and douches.

Tinctures

While the term tincture can refer to any liquid extract of a plant, what is usually meant is an alcohol and water extract. Many plant constituents dissolve more easily in a mixture of alcohol and water than in pure water. There is the added advantage of the alcohol being a preservative, allowing the extract to be kept for several years.

The alcohol content of the finished extract needs to be at least 20% to adequately preserve it. Most commercially produced tinctures have a minimum alcohol content

of 25%. A higher concentration is needed to extract more resinous substances, such as myrrh resin.

For making your own tinctures, vodka is the simplest alcohol as it can be used neat, has no flavor, and allows the taste of the herbs to come through. If you can get pure grain alcohol (95%) it can be diluted as needed. Whisky, brandy, or rum can also be used. Herbs can also be infused in wine, but this will not have as long a shelf life.

To make a tincture, you simply fill a jar with the herb and top up with alcohol, or you can put the whole lot in the blender first. It is then kept out of the light for anything from a day to a month to infuse before being strained and bottled.



Tinctures are convenient to store and to take. We find amber or blue glass jars best for keeping, although clear bottles will let you enjoy the colors of your tinctures. Store them in a cool place. Kept properly, most tinctures have a shelf life of around five years. They are rapidly absorbed into the bloodstream, and alcohol makes the herbal preparation more heating and dispersing in its effect.

Wines and beers

Many herbs can be brewed into wines and beers, which will retain the medicinal virtues of the plants. Elderberry wine and nettle beer are traditional examples, but don't forget that ordinary beer is brewed with hops, a medicinal plant.

Glycerites

Vegetable glycerine is extracted from palm or other oil, and is a sweet, syrupy substance. It is particularly good in making medicines for children, and for soothing preparations intended for the throat and digestive tract, or coughs. A glycerite will keep well as long as the concentration of glycerine is at least 50% to 60% in the finished product.

Glycerine does not extract most plant constituents as well as alcohol does, but is effective for flowers such as red poppies, roses, and St John's wort. Glycerites are made the same way as tinctures, except the jar is kept in the sun or in a warm place to infuse.

Glycerine is a good preservative for fresh plant juices, in which half fresh plant juice and half glycerine are mixed, as it keeps the juice green and in suspension better than alcohol. This sort of preparation is called a **succus**.

Vinegars

Another way to extract and preserve plant material is to use vinegar. Some plant constituents extract better in an acidic medium, making vinegar the perfect choice. Herbal vinegars are often made from pleasant-tasting herbs, and used in salad dressings and for cooking. They are also a good addition to the bath or for rinsing hair, as the acetic acid of the vinegar helps restore the natural protective acid pH of the body's exterior. Cider vinegar is a remedy for colds and other viruses, so it is a good solvent for herbs for these conditions.

Herbal honeys

Honey has natural antibiotic and antiseptic properties, so is an excellent vehicle for medicines to fight infection. It can be applied topically to wounds and burns. Local honey can help prevent hay-fever attacks.

Honey is naturally sweet, making it palatable for medicines for children. It is also particularly suited to medicines for the throat and respiratory system as it is soothing and also clears congestion. Herb-infused honeys are made the same



way as glycerites, or can be gently heated in a bain-marie.

Oxymels

An oxymel is a preparation of honey and vinegar. Oxymels were once popular as cordials, both in Middle Eastern and European traditions. They are particularly good for cold and flu remedies. Honey can be added to an herb-infused vinegar, or an infused honey can be used as well.

Electuaries

These are made by stirring powdered dried herbs into honey or glycerine to make a paste. Electu-

aries are good as children's remedies, and are often used to soothe the digestive tract. This is also a good way to prepare tonic herbs.

Syrups

Syrups are made by boiling the herb with sugar and water. The sugar acts as a preservative, and can help extract the plant material. Syrups generally keep well, especially the thicker ones containing more sugar, as long as they are stored in sterilized bottles.

They are particularly suitable for children because of their sweet taste, and are generally soothing.



Herbal sweets

While we are not recommending large amounts of sugar as being healthy, herbal sweets such as coltsfoot rock and peppermints are a traditional way of taking herbs in a pleasurable way.

Plant essences

Plant essences, usually flower essences, differ from other herbal preparations in that they only contain the vibrational energy of the plant, and none of the plant chemistry. To make an essence, the flowers or other plant parts are usually put in water in a glass bowl and left to infuse in the sun for a couple of hours, as in the instructions for our self-heal essence. This essence is then preserved with brandy, and diluted for use.

Infused oils

Oil is mostly used to extract plants for external use on the skin, but infused oils can equally well be taken internally. Like vinegars, they are good in salad dressings and in cooking.

We prefer extra virgin olive oil as a base, as it does not go rancid like many polyunsaturated oils do. Other oils, such as coconut and sesame, may be chosen because of their individual characteristics.

Infused oils are often called macerated oils, and should not be confused with essential oils, which are aromatic oils isolated by distilling the plant material.

Ointments or salves

Ointments or salves are rubbed onto the skin. The simplest ointments are made by adding beeswax to an infused oil and heating until the beeswax has melted. The amount of wax needed will vary, depending on the climate or temperature in which it will be used, with more wax needed in hotter climates or weather.

Ointments made this way have a very good shelf life. They absorb well, while providing a protective layer on top of the skin.

Ointments can also be made with animal fats or hard plant fats such as cocoa butter.

Butters and ghees

Butter can be used instead of oil to extract herbs, and, once clarified by simmering, it keeps well without refrigeration, making a simple ointment. Clarified butter is a staple in Indian cooking and medicine, where it is called ghee. It is soothing on the skin and absorbs well. Herbal butters and ghees can also be used as food.

Skin creams

Creams are made by mixing a water-based preparation with an oil-based one, to make an emulsion. Creams are absorbed into the skin more rapidly than ointments, but have the disadvantages of being more difficult to make and not keeping as well. Essential oils can



Nettle, from Woodville's *Medical Botany* (1790-3)

Rosaceae
Rose family

Description: Upright perennials with spikes of small yellow flowers reaching up to 2 feet.

Habitat: Meadows and roadsides/grassy places.

Distribution: *A. eupatoria* is native to Europe and introduced to North America. Tall hairy agrimony, *A. gryposepala*, is more widespread and is used interchangeably with the European species.

Related species: There are around 15 species of agrimony found in northern temperate regions and South America. In China, *xian he cao* (*A. pilosa*) is widely used medicinally, mainly for bleeding and diarrhea. Cinquefoil and tormen-til are old medicinal herbs with very similar properties to agrimony.

Parts used: Above-ground parts, when in flower in summer.



Agrimony *Agrimonia eupatoria*, *A. procera*, *A. gryposepala*

Agrimony stops bleeding of all sorts, and is used in trauma treatment and surgery in Chinese hospitals. It helps relieve pain too, and has a long tradition as a wound herb as well as for treating liver, digestive, and urinary tract problems.

Agrimony tightens and tones the tissues, and, in a seeming contradiction, also relaxes tension, both physical and mental. This is the herb for when you're feeling frazzled, when stress and tension or pain are causing torment.

You can hardly miss this tall and bright summer garden herb, which readily earns its old name of church steeples. The sticky burrs that cling to passers-by lie behind another name, cocklebur.

Agrimony used to be a significant herb in the European tradition, being the Anglo-Saxon healing plant "garclive," but it is underused and underrated in modern western herbalism.

Agrimonia eupatoria is the "official" agrimony, but John Parkinson in *Theatrum Botanicum* (1640) preferred fragrant agrimony, *Agrimonia procera*, if available. The two can be used interchangeably.

In Chinese medicine, *A. pilosa* is the species used, and its name, *xian he cao*, translates as "immortal crane herb," which gives an idea of the reverence in which it is held. It is used in surgery and trauma treatment to stop bleeding, and has been found to be effective

against *Trichomonas* vaginal infections and tapeworms, as also for dysentery and chronic diarrhea.

Dr Edward Bach chose agrimony as one of his 38 flower essences. It is for people who soldier on, who say everything is fine when it is not, hiding inner turmoil behind a cheerful facade and ignoring the darker side of life. The out-of-balance agrimony person often resorts to alcohol, drugs, or adrenaline-producing sports to avoid dealing with life issues.

Use agrimony for...

Contemporary American herbalist Matthew Wood has written more deeply about agrimony than anybody else. He uses it as a flower essence, herbal tincture, and homeopathic preparation, and has researched it in great detail, expanding on the traditional picture of the plant. Wood calls agrimony "the bad hair day remedy" – imagine the cartoon picture



Agrimony, from Woodville's *Medical Botany* (1790-3)

Agrimony tea

- eyewash, conjunctivitis
- gargle for mouth & gum or throat problems
- in footbath for athlete's foot
- in bath for sprains & strained muscles

Agrimony tincture

- appendicitis
- urinary incontinence
- potty training
- cystitis
- weak digestion
- diarrhea/constipation
- tension
- irritable bladder
- asthma
- childhood diarrhea
- burns



of a cat that has had a fright or put its paw into an electric socket. He has found it works for people with mental and physical tension or work-related stress, with "pain that makes them hold their breath" and a range of other conditions.

Agrimony is a great herb for treating intermittent fever and chills, or in alternating constipation and diarrhea, as it helps the body to recover a working balance between extremes, by releasing the tension and constricted energy that cause such problems.

Pain is very often associated with constriction, with one condition reinforcing the other. Agrimony can help release us from this self-perpetuating spiral, allowing body and mind to relax and restorative

healing to begin as blood and energy flow are brought back to normal.

Agrimony is a wonderful wound herb, as it rapidly stops bleeding and also relieves pain. It is thought that a high tannin and vitamin K content account for its remarkable coagulation properties. In the 1400s agrimony was picked to make "arquebusade water," to staunch bleeding inflicted by the arquebus or hand gun.

Agrimony works well for burns too – put tincture directly on the burn and take a few drops internally; repeat until pain subsides.

Agrimony has an affinity for the liver and digestive tract, working to co-ordinate their functions. John Parkinson – the herbalist to King James II and King Charles I – wrote in 1640 that "it openeth the obstructions of the Liver, and cleanseth it; it helpeth the jaundise, and strengthneth the inward parts, and is very beneficiall to the bowels, and healeth their inward woundings and bruises or hurts." All these are uses borne out today and explained by the herb's bitter and astringent qualities.

Agrimony's other main affinity is for the urinary tract, being used to good effect to ease the pain of kidney stones, irritable bladder, and chronic cystitis. It can be given safely to children for bedwetting and anxiety about potty training, and to the elderly for incontinence.

... there are few of our wild flowers which are in more esteem with the village herbalist than the agrimony. Every gatherer of simples knows it well.
– Pratt (1857)

Harvesting agrimony

Harvest when the plant is in bloom in the summer, picking the flower spike and some leaves. For agrimony tea, dry them in the shade until crisp, and then strip the flowers and leaves off the stems, discarding the stems. Store in brown paper bags or glass jars, in a cool dry place.

Agrimony tea

Use 1-2 teaspoonfuls of **dried agrimony** per cup of **boiling water**, infused for 10 to 15 minutes. The tea has a pleasant taste and odor, and was often used as a country beverage, especially when imported tea was expensive.

Dose: The tea can be drunk three times a day, or used when cool as an eyewash or gargle for gum irritations and sore throats.

Agrimony bath

Make a strong tea with a handful of **dried agrimony** infused in 1 pint of freshly **boiled water** for 20 minutes.

Poured hot into a foot bath, this soothes athlete's foot or sprained ankles; added to a hot bath it helps strained muscles after exercise, and general tension that has stiffened the muscles, back, and joints.

Agrimony tincture

To make agrimony tincture, pick the **flowers and leaves** on a bright sunny day. Pack them into a glass jar large enough to hold your harvest – clean jam jars work well – and pour in enough **brandy or vodka** to cover them. Put the lid on the jar and keep it in a dark cupboard for six weeks, shaking it every few days. Strain off the liquid, bottle, and label.

Amber or blue glass bottles will protect your tincture from UV light. If you use clear glass bottles, you will need to keep your tincture in a dark cupboard. It doesn't need to be refrigerated and should keep for several years, although it is best to make a fresh batch every summer if you can.

Dose: For tension or interstitial cystitis: 3-5 drops in a little water three times a day; as an astringent to tone tissues (as in diarrhea), half a teaspoonful in water three times daily.

The tincture can be used as a first-aid remedy for burns. First cool the burn thoroughly by holding it under water running from the cold tap for several minutes. You can just pour a little tincture onto the burn, but for best results, wet a cotton ball with the tincture and hold it in place until the burn stops hurting.





Bilberry *Vaccinium myrtillus* Blaeberry, Whortleberry

Bilberries are one of the best herbs for the eyes and eyesight. They also strengthen the veins and capillaries, so are used for fragile and varicose veins.

The leaves are healing too, being effective for urinary tract infections and helping to regulate blood sugar levels.

Ericaceae **Heather family**

Description: A short deciduous shrub with green twigs, pink flowers, and bluish-black berries.

Habitat: Heathland, moors, and woods with acid soils.

Distribution: Circumboreal in distribution, occurring in Europe, northern Asia, and in western North America.

Related species: North American blueberries are very similar to bilberries. There are several species, including highbush blueberry (*V. corymbosum*) and lowbush blueberry (*V. angustifolium*).

Parts used: Berries and leaves picked in summer.

Bilberry is an ancient source of food and medicine in northern Europe. Its long period of use is reflected in its many colorful British regional names: bilberry in northern England, blaeberry or blueberry in Scotland, wimberry in Shropshire, whortleberry in south-eastern England, and huckleberry in the Midlands.

In North America it grows wild in western states, and is known as European blueberry, whortleberry, or huckleberry. There are several similar North American species, including highbush blueberry (*V. corymbosum*), lowbush blueberry (*V. angustifolium*), and dwarf bilberry (*V. cespitosum*), that can be used the same way as bilberry, though not as well studied.

In Britain, gathering bilberries in high summer was once a regular family and social occasion, as well as a local cottage industry. The main food harvest, usually grain or potatoes, was about to begin, but the timing of early August was just right for a day celebrating bilberries.

Whether Fraughan Sunday in Ireland (from Gaelic for “that which grows in the heather”), whort or hurt day in southern England, Laa Luanya in the Isle of Man, and equivalent August picking days in Wales, Scotland, and the south-west, the pattern was similar.

Whole communities would visit hill tops, woods, lakes, or holy wells, and the more assiduous would pick bilberries in rush or willow baskets. This was a rare day out, and it was a noisy, happy, and often drunken occasion. It had predictable consequences, with unmarried boys and girls, off the leash for once, taking the chance to slip away and have more personal kinds of fun.

In Yorkshire, there was a more sober bilberry connection, with bilberry pies the traditional fare of funeral teas: berries mixed with sugar and lemon juice were baked in crusty pastry. Bilberry pies were known there as “mucky-mouth pies” because they stained your hands and mouth blue, though still deliciously worth the trouble.

Bilberry is a wild plant, rarely cultivated, and you must gather it for yourself if you want it. Picking bilberries takes the present-day forager as close to being a hunter-gatherer as one can get. For our ancestors, the harvest was more than recreational, it was an important source of nutrition.

Picking the berries is the perfect excuse to get out into wild nature, as bilberry grows on windswept moors or in heathy woodland. You have to get down to it on all fours to gather, especially on tundra and moors where the plants are very low-growing.

Harvesting the low-lying fruit was and is backaching work, but bilberries are so intensely flavor-

ful and so loaded with nutritional benefits that it is still worth the effort today. Where commercial gathering was undertaken, as in Gwent, the process was sometimes eased by a toothed metal comb or rake, the *peigne*, named from a French tool, which could remove the berries from their stems. The fruit would be sold via dealers to jam-making factories, and sometimes for dyeing.

The dealers were reported as being annoyed in 1917 and 1918 when the bilberry crop was requisitioned for wartime dyeing needs and they made less on the deal than with the usual jam.

The berries made more than jam, going into wine and liqueurs in

Anthocyanins

These are a class of flavonoid compounds, found in high levels in bilberries. Anthocyanins are pigments that give red or blue color to blackberries, elderberries, hawthorn berries, cherries, and many other fruits and vegetables. These compounds are powerful antioxidants that are attracting a lot of attention in nutritional research. Their potential health benefits include easing the effects of aging, reducing inflammation and increasing insulin production. Anthocyanins also protect the blood vessels and have a range of anti-cancer effects.



Natural and Affordable Remedies for Everyone!

Alternative medicine and natural healing are an important part of a healthy lifestyle. A lack of confidence in commercial medicine and an interest in getting closer to nature have made "alternative" treatments mainstream. Packed with nearly 300 color photographs and over 120 herbal remedies that you can make yourself, *Backyard Medicine* offers fascinating home remedies for everyday ailments, including:

- ✿ Birch leaf tea as a remedy for kidney stones
- ✿ Dandelion oil to relieve muscle tension
- ✿ Elderflower as a cough syrup
- ✿ Hops as a tincture to cure insomnia
- ✿ Red clover tea to reduce acne
- ✿ Rose hip vinegar to alleviate a sore throat
- ✿ Willow bark tincture for sports-related aches and pains

With easy-to-follow recipes for treatments of eczema, cellulite, indigestion, earaches, and many other ailments, this full-color handbook is essential for anyone who wants to harvest and make herbal remedies from wild plants. It will bring you closer to nature, help you and your family feel better, and save you money. *Backyard Medicine* is as practical as it is beautiful.

JULIE BRUTON-SEAL is a practicing medical herbalist and natural healer. She is a council member of the Association of Master Herbalists and editor of its quarterly magazine, *Nature's Path*.

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