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Evergreen Healers: Wintertime Herbal Medicine



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PLEASE READ: *The information handout has not been approved by the FDA and does not in any way intend to diagnose or prescribe. Always consult with your health practitioner before taking any remedy.*

Above this, I also recommend that you...

1. Research an herb in at least three good sources before ingesting it (see website for sources),
2. Listen to your body/intuition to determine if an herb resonates or doesn't resonate with you.
3. Take proper steps to ensure that any wildcrafted or cultivated plant is what you think it is, AND
4. Check with your pharmacist for herb-drug interactions if you take prescriptions.

In winter it seems our medicinal herbs have all gone to sleep. However, the evergreens we decorate our homes with also have healing properties that are particularly important during the cold season. We'll discuss the history and healing properties of pine, hemlock, fir, spruce, thuja and juniper and unravel their rich heritage.

White Pine (*Pinus strobes*) & the Pines

Natural History: White pine is our predominant pine and evergreen in Central/Southern New Hampshire, in part because it is well adapted to (and amplifies) our acidic soil. It has long horsetail-like needles that grow on the branches in bundles of five. Its species name "strokes" is an ancient name for an incense-bearing tree, most likely for the aromatic resin that exudes out of injuries to protect the tree. Straight white pines are important for lumber and exceptional pines were once marked as "King's Pines" for British Navy floorboards. On younger trees, each whorl of branches signifies one year of growth. Turpentine, a paint thinner, solvent, and old-timer (toxic) remedy is made from pine. Yellow pine pollen can be found everywhere in spring. Rake up last year's fallen pine needles for use as organic mulch in the garden—according to local organic and native plant landscaper Ayn Whytemare, pine needles are among our best and most economical mulch sources. They're abundant, effective, less apt to harbor slugs or contain weed seeds compared to straw and hay. Contrary to popular opinion, pine needles do not acidify the soil. Pine roots do. Pine branches make an attractive decoration during the winter months, bound together with wire as a wreath or spray. **Medicinal Activity of the Needles:** Young bright green needles are a good source of vitamins C and A, and they make a tasty infused tea for camping trips and bonfires. The needle tea has value for lung congestion. The needles are slightly antiseptic but also quite astringent from the tannins. These tannins are also useful for diarrhea and any weepy membrane condition. The tea has a mild diuretic and expectorant action as well. Needles can be harvested year-round but the best needles are the bright new growth in late spring. To make a tea steep a handful of pine needles in 1 pint of near-boiling water, covered, for 15 to 30 minutes, strain and drink. Young pine needle growth can be collected, chopped roughly, and simmered in honey to make an aromatic cough syrup. (See directions in Balsam Fir, below.) **Medicinal Activity of the Pitch & Essential Oil:** Warmed pine resin can be placed on a splinter, boil, sore, or insect bite to help draw out the irritant. It increases circulation locally (which may cause a productive throbbing) and acts as an antiseptic. Soaked into a warm cloth, it can be placed on sore joints and muscles to relieve pain, or to the chest for pneumonia. A few drops of essential oil added to a bath or inhaled as a steam is similarly useful and convenient. Collect the sap from freshly broken twigs and limbs and store in a glass container that can be gently warmed once the sap has formed a thick, sticky, dry resin. This resin can also be placed on smoldering charcoal for incense. The fresh woody smoke is believed to clear negative energy from an area. **Similar species:** Our other common pine is Red Pine (*Pinus resinosa*), which has more compact, decorative pinecones and needles bundled in pairs. It is a common tree for reforestation and so is abundant around Massabesic Lake and Bear Brook State Park. The *Pinus* genus is vast and shares similar properties. **Cautions:** Although pine contains similar aromatics and healing properties as the other aromatic evergreens (fir, hemlock, spruce), it is more irritating to the kidneys and digestive system, making it less useful, says Michael Moore. Turn to the other trees if you are using the remedies regularly or have any kind of kidney inflammation.

Hemlock (*Tsuga canadensis*)

Hemlock groves are my favorite place to visit in winter. They tend to grow in wet areas near swamps, creeks, and streams in groups. They release chemicals (in shed needles) and create a thick layer of shade that inhibit the growth of other plants, which makes it easy to walk under them during warmer months. Yet, the darkness created by a hemlock grove in summer has always been spooky to me, particularly at dusk. If you stand in some hemlock groves and listen, you can hear water gently running and bubbling under a thin earthen mat created by their root systems. In winter, however, the eerie darkness of a hemlock grove is replaced by the bright white of snow clinging to its branches, creating a winter wonderland. Because the snow sticks so readily to the flat needled branches of the hemlock tree, the snow under a hemlock can be much less deep than the surrounding area. It's a joy to stand enclosed in the snow-encrusted branches and admire their beauty. If the snow is fresh, you can examine it closely on the branch to see the shapes of the snow crystals. I like to nibble a few needles on the end of a hemlock branch; it tastes pleasantly like a Christmas tree, slightly sweet, and is a moderate source of vitamin C. In the winter, no walk in the woods is complete without a nibble on some hemlock needles, which helps me feel more connected with the forest. (If there's no snow, I also like to eat a young leaf of a wintergreen plant.) Along with pine, hemlock is our most common wild evergreen in this area. Grouse, rabbits, deer, red squirrels, and porcupines all enjoy the food and shelter provided within a hemlock grove—so keep an eye out for them when traveling through one. The tannins in hemlock bark was once used by the tanning industry. Native Americans have been known to pound the inner bark into a flour or thickener. The tea, as with it's comrades mentioned above, is pleasant-tasting and contains some vitamin C. The trees can grow quite tall and old. However, height is not a good determinant of age since a hemlock may stay stunted for many years in the shade of larger trees. The oldest recorded hemlock tree was 988! Hemlock groves are relatively impermeable except by humans, disease, fire, or pests. Right now the hemlock woolly adelgid threatens to destroy our local hemlock groves—a white, cobwebby substance on the branches indicates its presence. **Medicinal Actions:** The hemlock's medicinal uses of the needles, bark, branches and essential oil are essentially the same as for Balsam Fir, below. The pitch/resin would presumably be used the same, but I don't find it as prolific. **Cautions:** The same as for Balsam Fir, below. Please note that hemlock tree is completely unrelated to the parsley-family plants poison and water hemlock. It is coincidence that it has the same name. Poison and water hemlocks are deadly poisonous. Hemlock tree is not.

Balsam Fir (*Abies balsamea*) & The Firs (*Abies* spp)

Balsam firs are not common in our woods but do grow in the more northern areas of New Hampshire and Maine, throughout Vermont, and in western Massachusetts. They tend to grow amongst white and red spruce. Balsam fir is commonly used for Christmas trees because it is among the most pleasantly aromatic evergreens and holds its needles well once cut. Fir's flat needles have two whitish lines on them, which spruce needles don't have (spruce needles are also square-ish and they have drooping cones). Balsam fir bark is bulbous with pockets of pitch (resin blisters) that ooze fragrant, antiseptic resin Canada balsam if punctured. The resin has medicinal and aromatic properties and was also used as waterproof cement for mounting slides. This resin is also highly flammable. My husband's family holds an annual tree burning post-Christmas and our dried trees go up like firecrackers thanks in part to the resin. Balsam fir, like all firs, produce upright cones, and they have flat, single needles. They drop scales rather than whole cones, leaving a spike behind on the tree. According to Michael Moore, *Fir (Abies), Spruce (Picea), Hemlock (Tsuga), and Douglas-Fir (Pseudotsuga) species are medicinally interchangeable. (Pine (Pinus) can be used similarly but is harsher on the kidneys and digestive system.)* **Medicinal Use of the Needles:** Spring and summer new growth at the tips of the branches is the best for medicine since it has stronger resinous compounds and other constituents, has gone through fewer winters, and has more soluble constituents. However, for quick use, you can harvest the needle tips at any time. Dry or fresh needles can be infused into a wintery-tasting tea. To make a tea, infuse one handful of needles in a pint of hot water, covered, for 15-30 minutes, strain and drink. This tea is a bronchial dilator, vasodilating, expectorant, and warming. Inhale or drink to soften mild or early bronchitis. It can be used for mild lung congestion and tightness. Add a strong tea to the bath for sore joints, arthritis, and pain that comes on with barometric pressure and storms. The tea is diuretic and also contains some vitamin C. Or, warm the fresh boughs until soggy and place on sore joints. Gently simmer the needles to make a delicious honey that can be used somewhat like caught syrup. To make a honey, combine 1/2 cup of chopped needles with 2 cups of honey. Bring to a gentle boil, stirring frequently. Once it comes to a boil, shut it off and let it cool. Repeat as many times as necessary to get the flavor you want, and strain into a mason jar during the last heating. This can be taken by the spoonful, added to tea, or combined with medicinal tinctures for colds, etc. **Medicinal Use of the Bark & Branches:** Harvest small branches, strip the bark, and dry. Small twigs may be

simply chopped and dried. To make a tea, decoct, or simmer, two tablespoons of finely chopped bark in one pint of water for 15-20 minutes, strain, and drink 1-3 ounces. The bark is rich in astringent tannins, which help to tighten membranes and are slightly antimicrobial. Drink the weak tea for long-standing diarrhea, loose stools, hemorrhoids, dysbiosis, candida flare-ups, boggy intestines, leaky gut, early Crohn's. Topically, you can use the tea as a wash for bruises, bad knees, etc. **Medicinal Use of the Pitch:** If you have a lot of time and don't mind sticky hands, you can prick the resin blisters of the balsam fir and collect the liquid that oozes out. You can apply the liquid directly to the skin to pull out foreign bodies or puss. Or, you can make a salve by melting down 1 part pitch with 5 parts oil, some alcohol, and 1 part beeswax. This drawing, warming, antimicrobial salve can also be applied to splinters, infections, sore congested joints, as a counter irritant for sprains. The pitch does not contain tannin. **Medicinal Use of the Essential Oil:** Essential oil of fir, spruce, hemlock, etc. can be used somewhat similarly as the pitch for rheumatic complaints, a few drops in a body oil or mixed with oil or alcohol and added to the bath. You can put a few drops in hot water and inhale for lung and sinus congestion. The uplifting fragrance can be diffused into the air for focus and mood. Place a drop on the heater, use a diffuser, or make an aromatherapy spray. For a spray, mix 1.5 ounces of water with .5 ounce of vodka and 10-20 drops of essential oil. The essential oil can also be added to cleaning products for pleasant smell, antimicrobial and grease-cutting action. I use a gentle, unscented all-purpose cleanser by Global Balance to wash my floors (or white vinegar, for wood) and like to add 10 or so drops total of fir, spruce, rosemary, and/or thyme essential oils to the bucket. It's much healthier and better smelling than conventional cleaners. **Cautions:** Tannins from the bark and branches can be over-astringent and impair nutrient absorption if used in high doses (ie: a strong decoction vs. a weak) or used for too long. The tea can also be constipating if used past necessity.

Northern White Cedar or Thuja (*Thuja occidentalis*)

This attractive tree grows wild throughout much of Massachusetts and New Hampshire, almost all of Maine and Vermont, yet it does not generally grow in our south/central NH region. (If you look at a distribution map, we are an vacant circle surrounded by a mass of trees.) However, you may have a cultivated thuja growing in your yard. Also known as arborvitae, thuja is a popular landscaping tree for its beauty, and in rows for privacy. Our thuja can be used as incense but don't smell quite as sweet as the western species. I like to clip a small thuja branch when I find it to see if it smells nice as incense. (So far the best one was from the side of my old apartment in Manchester, if you can believe it.) You can certainly use cultivated thuja medicinally, but watch it throughout the growing season to be sure that it IS *Thuja occidentalis* and also make sure it (and the surrounding area) has not been treated with any landscaping chemicals. Arborvitae, means "tree of life." It was named this after Native Americans used thuja tea to cure the men of Cartier's Canadian expedition of scurvy. As a result thuja was the first tree to be exported from America to Europe. Thuja's outer bark makes good tinder, and "cedar" swamps create a nice habitat for moose, deer, rabbits, squirrels, and songbirds. Although there are some similarities, thuja is used much differently than the other evergreens in medicine. **Medicinal Use of the Scales:** Thuja first and foremost is used as a topical antifungal and for warts. You can make a tincture of the scales by snipping them into a jar until you can't pack any more in, then fill the jar to the brim with whole grain alcohol or vodka. Let it sit for at least one month, strain. This is best for topical—not internal—use. Thuja oil can be made and used similarly. To make thuja oil, steep 1 ounce of fresh or dried thuja scales in 7 ounces of extra virgin olive oil, place the container in a warm place for 2 weeks and then strain, OR heat the mixture to 100 degrees for a day and then strain. OR, grind up the freshly dried scales with 1/2 ounce of whole grain alcohol, cover and let sit for about 1 day, then combine in a blender with 7 ounces of olive oil. Run on high for about 5 minutes, strain through cloth. Commercially-made thuja oil can be purchased or special ordered from companies like Gaia and Herb Pharm in most natural food stores. Apply the oil or tincture topically for skin fungus including tinea, barber's itch, plumber's fingernails and toenail fungus (use a cotton swab to get it under the nail as well). Skin fungus is hard to get rid of, so be prepared to apply the thuja AT LEAST twice daily (three or more times is preferable) for a month or more. The oil, and perhaps the tincture, are also applied topically, and regularly, to get rid of warts. The tincture can be used as a topical disinfectant as well. Thuja tea or tincture is sometimes used internally to stimulate the innate immune system, specifically macrophages. It is in at least one European cold and flu formula called Esperitox (distributed in the US by Enzymatic Therapy) with echinacea and baptisia. Thuja tincture is used in relatively small doses internally, 5 to 15 drops (most other tinctures are 30-60 drops) up to four times a day. **Cautions:** The essential oils in the scales can be irritating to the kidneys. It is not recommended for long-term use internally, unless under the guidance of a practitioner. Avoid even moderate doses internally, and avoid completely if there is any kidney weakness or disease. Use caution in autoimmune diseases like lupus and rheumatoid arthritis (the use of an immune-booster may bring on an attack).

Homeopathic Use of Thuja: Natural food stores are most apt to sell thuja in homeopathic form, usually marked as Maria Noël Groves

“Thuja 30C” (30 C means that the remedy was diluted 30 to the 100th time). Homeopathics are incredibly dilute remedies that often contain no chemical markers of the plant itself yet it is used to simulate the body to heal itself. Homeopathic is most often used to get rid of warts, taken internally, about 5 pellets four times a day for several weeks. Take a break for a week or two, and repeat until the warts are gone. You can make your own homeopathic liquid by diluting a tincture many times. However, you’d want to consult a homeopath for specific directions. One of the primary advantages (from an herbalist’s point of view) is that homeopathics are less apt to produce side effects. As an herbalist, my view of homeopathy is probably much simpler than that of a homeopath. **Similar Species:** *Thuja occidentalis*’s scales are thicker compared to the similar, yet more delicate-looking, Atlantic White Cedar (a different genus all together, *Chamaecyparis thyoides*, which grows wild in the south and creates one of its most northern stands in the beautiful Cedar Swamp land in Hooksett). Thuja can look a lot like, but does not have the blue “berries” of some of the scaly species of Juniper (*Juniperus virginiana*, *J. spp*), which are sometimes also called Red Cedar. (Strangely, NONE of these plants are in the true old world cedar genus *Cedrus*, which doesn’t grow here.) THESE PLANTS ARE NOT USED THE SAME AS THUJA. To avoid confusion—and go more with the herbal medical texts—I prefer to call our tree “thuja” rather than “cedar”. *Thuja plicata* grows on the other end of the continent in the Pacific Northwest and is sometimes called Incense Cedar because the dried branches can be lit and then smoldered for a delicious-smelling incense used for fragrance and spiritual reasons. *T. plicata* has similar medicinal uses as *T. occidentalis*; however, ours is most often used medicinally, and theirs is most often used for incense. (Note: Thuja pitch makes a lovely incense reminiscent of copal.)

Juniper (*Juniperus communis*)

There are many species of juniper, and some can look quite different, although all of them generally have blue “berries.” From the huge juniper trees of the west and scaly trees (sometimes called red “cedar”) that look much like thuja, to the prickly, needle-y creeping bushes, the trees can seem unrelated. Our primary medicinal juniper is common juniper, the later description, with other species sometimes, not always, being used interchangeably. Juniper berries can be harvested when ripe for culinary and medicinal use—they have a piney, resinous flavor reminiscent of gin (which is flavored with, you guessed it, juniper berries, as well as other herbs). Needles and branches can be collected at any time. Native Americans use all aromatic parts of the plant to clear “bad vibes” and protect against black magic. The plant is often used as incense. Desert juniper species are burnt into an ash and then, from the ash, flat cakes are made which are incredibly high in minerals including calcium. **Medicinal Use of Juniper:** Needles and berries are used similarly in tea or tincture form for the urinary tract. The berries are slightly more disinfectant, the needles more astringent. Juniper is among our best urinary disinfectants (as are heath family members uva ursi, trailing arbutus and, to a lesser extent, blueberry leaves) for UTIs and cystitis. It is diuretic, astringent, antimicrobial, and somewhat pain-relieving. It’s best combined with soothing plants like slippery elm, cornsilk, and/or marshmallow as well as more gentle urinary herbs like blueberry leaf, trailing arbutus, and pipsissewa. Follow the same basic tincture recipe as listed in Thuja, above. Follow the same basic recipe for tea as mentioned in Balsam Fir, above. If you’re using berries, use slightly less volume of berries since they’re more dense. Juniper berries are used in food, especially poultry and wild game. Michael Moore recommends 10 berries per pound of meat. And if you chew a juniper berry before your meal, it will stimulate digestion. Juniper essential oils is often used to stimulate circulation, detoxify, and relieve pain in the body. A few drops can be added to vegetable oil or alcohol and then added to the bath. For circulation and detoxification, you can add a few drops to a body scrub. [Make your own body scrub](#) by mixing 1 cup of salt (sea or Epsom) with 1/2 cup of vegetable oil and 10-20 drops of essential oil. **Cautions:** Juniper is best short-term since the essential oils in the plant are irritating to the kidneys. For this same reason, juniper is contraindicated in a urinary problem that has moved north into the kidneys, with flanking pain in the lower back. Juniper is not recommended if you’re pregnant (too stimulating to the uterus) or have a kidney disease.

Sources & Resources

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- Mrs. Maude Grieve, *A Modern Herbal Volume I & II*. Dover Books, 1931.
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- Michael Moore, *Medicinal Plants of the Mountain West* (revised & expanded), Museum of New Mexico Press, 2003. *Medicinal Plants of the Pacific West*, Red Crane Books, 1993. SWSBM Class Notes, 2004.
- Donald Stokes, *Stokes Guide to Nature in Winter*. Little, Brown, 1976.

Visit the Links page of www.WintergreenBotanicals.com for Local & Online sources for seedlings, seeds, *herb supplies, herbs...* as well as links to *informative herbal websites*.

Some quick local evergreen ID tips:_(This is just to get you started. Don't identify on these guides alone!)_ • Long needles in bundles - Pines_ • Bundles of 5 needles, long cones - White Pine - common_ • Bundles of 3 needles, short cones - Pitch Pine _ • Bundles of 2 needles, short cones - Many other Pines including Red, Jack...

Short, prickly needles, square crosssection, cones point down - Spruces_ • Small cones - Black, Red & White Spruce (white smells like cat piss)_ (semi-common, often near water or in dense stands)_ • Long cones, cultivated - Norway Spruce

Flat needles, mostly flat sprays, cones point up - Firs_ • Pitch "blisters" on trunk, strong sweet scent, smooth-looking cones - Balsam Fir_ (grows wild/common up north, primary Christmas tree sold already cut)_ • Cones not smooth (bracts visible between cone scales), milder scent - Fraser Fir_ (often cultivated for cut-your-own Christmas tree farms)

Flat needles, mostly flat sprays, small cones point down - Eastern Hemlock - common_ (no relation to "poison hemlock" and "water hemlock" - not poisonous)_ (often near water or in tall stands with nothing growing underneath, no underbrush)

Flat "scales" instead of needles, small cones - "White Cedar"_ • Slim cones, slightly thicker scales - Thuja (aka "Northern White Cedar")_ (grows wild/common up north, common in cultivation as 'arborvitae')_ • Short, round cones, slightly thinner scales - Chamaecyparis (aka "Atlantic Wt C.")_ (not common, but there is a stand at the "Cedar Swamp" in Manchester)

Flat "scales" instead of needles, blue "berries" - Juniper species (aka "Red Cedar")

Short, very prickly needles, shrubby tree, round blue "berries" - Common Juniper

Flat needles, mostly flat, red berry-like fruits - Yew (poisonous! usually cultivated)

Deciduous "evergreen," short needles in groups, small cones - Larch