Aromatic Herbs: Uplift the Spirit and Gladden the Heart
*Tension and Anxiety Support for Modern Life*

Guido Masé, RH (AHG) 2012

In today’s world of tight schedules, constant communication, and high-speed movement we often find ourselves disconnected from what matters most, from what truly brings us joy. Whether from an endless to-do list or a lack of time spent quietly outdoors, our spirit is endlessly stimulated and yet feels dissatisfied, unsettled, and sometimes even sad. In a different time, we might have retreated to the corner of a scented garden to find a moment’s peace and solace, but without such a refuge readily available, internal tension can manifest as anxiety, irritability, and sleeplessness – or leave us feeling overwhelmed, uninspired, fatigued, and unhappy. It is a malaise that has been creeping up on us in these modern times.

There are so many options set forth to cure this malaise: sedatives for anxiety and insomnia, stimulants for apathy and sluggishness, narcotics, alcohol and other drugs to escape. We find concentrated extracts of botanicals like kava or St. Johnswort – powerful remedies that carry some warnings and are not necessarily the right choice for everyone. Researchers are always looking for the next “blockbuster” drug to help those suffering from depression and anxiety, but many of these choices have problematic side effects as well – from sexual dysfunction to weight gain. Not exactly the best way to heal an uninspired spirit!

Herbalists have an entire class of plants – the nervines – that can help support a balanced state of internal tension, nourish the mind and spirit, and thereby bring joy to frazzled days and restorative sleep to restless nights. They have been used for thousands of years: from the incenses and infused wines of Egypt and China, to the warming mulling spices served on a winter’s night. They are generally highly scented plants, rich in volatile oils, and are as safe as a cup of chamomile tea (still used today to soothe a worried, colicky child). Many are standby features of aromatic gardens: lemon balm, lavender, rose and mugwort in the temperate zones, and lemongrass, cardamom, holy basil and jasmine in tropical climates. Just like a retreat into the garden itself, these fragrant herbs are a time-honored and effective way to gently rebalance internal tension without being habit forming, intoxicating, or sedating.

The chemistry of these plants goes to work on our heart and arteries, relaxing their state of tension and improving circulation to the hands and feet. The molecules responsible for the aromatic quality of the nervine herbs are also great at relaxing our bellies, urinary systems, and the smooth muscle that makes up the uterus. Thus they feature in remedies for stress and nervousness, unfocused and scattered personalities, worry and sleeplessness and – believe it or not – menstrual cramping! Beyond this, one cannot overestimate the havoc that chronic stress wreaks upon us: over time, the effort of maintaining such a high state of tension can make us feel sluggish, apathetic, and withdrawn – in a word, depressed. The aromatic, nervine plants are a blessing in two ways: they help keep our anxiety and worry in check on a day-to-day basis, but can also re-enliven us when we feel sad and despondent. Think of a bouquet of flowers from a friend: it’s hard to stay upset, closed within your shell, when presented with such a fragrant gift!

In the Czech Republic, the linden tree is sacred. In fact, this tree – whose incredibly sweet-smelling flowers bloom almost the entire month of July – features on traditional currencies, flags, and palace insignia. It is rumored that in order to maintain an even temper and render swift and just judgment, all legal proceedings in the rural villages are still conducted under a linden. The flower tea is a national beverage, though it is also prized from Provence to Scandinavia. Here in the darker, colder reaches of northern Europe, country folk rely on linden (and
other aromatic nervines such as lemon balm and rose) to lift their moods during the long stretches of night at the heart of winter. When the sun barely peeks above the horizon for an hour or two, the scented herbs recall the garden’s summer delights, and give us that moment’s retreat that can make all the difference when the spirit feels low, disconnected, and undernourished.

If you look around, you might see that this very traditional practice is missing from our modern lives. Yet it seems so important, and so easy! When we cannot visit a garden for renewal, perhaps we can re-learn to cultivate our own inner gardens with the sweet-scented nervine plants. In doing so we will see tension melt away, relieve the weight of worry, and inspire a depressed spirit. Rest will come more easily, and creativity will be enhanced. Our stress might then become a challenge to meet and overcome with grace and joy – and all this using safe, aromatic, nourishing herbs that have been a part of the human experience for thousands of years. Aromatic nervines are still a delicious, refreshing cure for our modern malaise.

Guido Masé is a clinical herbalist, herbal educator, and garden steward specializing in holistic Western herbalism, though his approach is eclectic and draws upon many influences. Guido works clinically and teaches at the Vermont Center for Integrative Herbalism, holds the position of Clinical Herbalist on staff at Urban Moonshine, is a professional member of the American Herbalists Guild, and is a part of United Plant Savers and the American Botanical Council.

This article is brought to you by Urban Moonshine, makers of Joy Tonic, an aromatic blend for calm and inspiration! #joytonic

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**Effects on mood, pain, sleep, executive function:**


