

# SURVIVAL PAPER

#SP06-1



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## GETTING TO KNOW THE BITTER HOREHOUND

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Many years ago, when I was still in high school and beginning my earnest study of botany, I got a phone call from friend Joe Hall. Joe and I were both interested in wild foods and herbs, and Joe told me that he'd located a patch of horehound. I'd read about horehound, I'd heard about horehound, and it supposedly grew all around us. Yet, I'd never knowingly seen the plant. I hopped on my bicycle and within 30 minutes I met Joe just north of Pasadena's famous Rose Bowl. He was squatting next to a small inconspicuous plant, and I eagerly got off my bicycle and down on the ground to examine the plant.

"Here it is," said Joe, still looking at the plant himself.

"That's it?" I said in near disbelief. It was, after all, a plant I'd casually noticed but paid no attention to. I looked at the opposite leaves, typical of mints. I examined the square stems covered in fine white hairs. Apparently, these "hoary" stems are what gave rise to the name "horehound." I got up close to look at the typical mint-shaped leaf with the typical wrinkled pattern. Yes, it was a very familiar looking plant.

The mints that grew in my mother's garden were more like vines, however, which grew out of control and gradually spread everywhere. This horehound was more like a single bush that grew taller as it produced flowering stalks and then seed.

"What do you think?" asked Joe, still examining the plant himself.

"It doesn't smell like a mint," I told him as I crushed a single young leaf and detected none of the strong fragrance so common to nearly every other mint.

"That's right," said Joe. "Try tasting it."

I picked off a clean leaf and slowly chewed it. The texture was furry, like an old mustard leaf perhaps. The initial flavor was fresh and pungent, but as I chewed it became more and more bitter. I spit it out and Joe laughed at my reaction.

"It doesn't taste great" said Joe, "if you just eat it like that. But you know that this herb is good for sore throats, right?"

"Yes," I told him. I was aware of horehound candy. My mother once gave my brother and I a horehound drop, and I spit it out as soon as I put it into my mouth. But I gradually got used to it. Plus, despite the odd flavor, it was very effective at minor coughs and sore throats.

After Joe showed me a few other plants in the area, I collected some horehound leaves for experimenting. Then we each bicycled home.

That night, I tried my first horehound tea. You do not boil the leaves in water (a decoction), but rather, you make an infusion. You put the fresh or dried leaves into your cup or pot, add boiling water, and let it sit until it is cool enough to drink.

I had my first taste with no sweetening. It had an interesting flavor, and it was even tolerable as a simple beverage. But there was no getting around it – it *is* a bitter herb and it really is an medicine.

Over the years, I have had horehound many times, but I usually add honey or lemon juice to the horehound infusion to make it easier to consume.

Herbalist Michael Moore (author of [Medicinal Plants of the Mountain West](#)), says that horehound (*Marrubium vulgare*) is the herb for coughs and lung congestion. He also points out that the hot tea helps to reduce feverish coughs, promotes sweating, and has a long history as a bitter expectorant (a substance that stimulates the outflow of mucus from the lungs and bronchials).

Either the dried or fresh leaves of horehound can be made into tea. As a hot tea, horehound has been commonly used as a tonic, and for chronic sore throat, coughs, colds, and breathing problems associated with asthma. Horehound leaves should be gathered in the spring when the plant is young and the leaves are large.

This plant provides the raw ingredients for horehound candy, which has long been sold in drugstores and markets as a mild cough drop. Here is a recipe for those of you who'd like to try to make the candy yourself. Cook (don't boil) one cup of the fresh herb (or 3 cup of the dried herb) with two cups of water for about 15 minutes. Strain. To each cup of liquid, add one cup of honey. Cook until the mixture thickens. Keep at a low heat or it will run over. Pour onto a cookie sheet and let it cool. Break (or scoop) off pieces as you need or want it. It is best to refrigerate it, since it tends to spread. (For details on making a truly "hard" candy, consult a candy cookbook.) This candy is pleasant as a snack or energy food on the trail, as well as being useful for sore throats.

I was living in Ohio when I first read about horehound, and my reference book said it should be growing in that state. I never found it in Ohio, but when I returned to California, and was shown the horehound by my friend Joe, I realized that the plant was quite widespread and common in California. The plant is a European native, found throughout the U.S., but most widely naturalized in the Southwestern. You can find it by the roadside, in open field areas, and in areas disturbed (plowed, disced, etc.) by man.

Discovering and learning about new herbs (wild and cultivated) can be a life-long process. There is no shortcut to learning about wild plants and their uses. You need to treat each one as an individual, and take the time that's required to get to know each one intimately.