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HOW TO DEAL WITH A SORE THROAT AND COUGHING USING NATURE'S MEDICINE CHEST

by Christopher Nyerges

Nyerges is the author of Guide to Wild Foods (\$15 + \$2 post.) and Testing Your Outdoor Survival Skills (\$10 + \$2 post.). Both are available from School of Self-Reliance, Box 41834, Los Angeles, CA 90041. Also request the free newsletter which describes the classes Nyerges teaches. The newsletter can also be viewed online at <http://home.earthlink.net/~nyerges/>.

It seems that sore throats and coughs have afflicted people forever, whether resulting from the proximate causes of pollen, dust, and smoke, or from talking too much, or yelling, or even from "catching" something from another person.

Fortunately, there are quite a few natural remedies which help relieve the pain and discomfort of coughs and sore throats, and many of these have been used for at least centuries.

Each of the plants described are commonly available in the wild, and typically can be purchased in the dried form in herb shops.

MALLOW

The various mallows have been used to soothe a sore throat for centuries. In fact, even the ancient Egyptians used one of the mallows for this purpose.

In the United States, the common mallow (*Malva parviflora*) is a widespread "weed" of vacant lots and fields. It is sometimes referred to as poverty weed or cheeseweed. In fact, the tender leaves of mallow are tasty in salads, added to soup, and can be cooked with other vegetables or like spinach. They are high in vitamin C.

In Mexico, mallow leaves (known as malva) have long been chewed so that the slightly mucilaginous quality can soothe a sore throat. Herbalists consider the mallow leaves an emollient and a demulcent. Whether the leaves are eaten, or made into a tea, this plant helps to relieve inflammation, especially to the throat.

A related mallow, the marsh mallow (*Althea officinalis*), is also used for coughs and sore throats. This plant has a long tap root that is boiled, and the resulting liquid is like egg whites. This is then whipped, and honey is added, and it is eaten as a very pleasant and very effective cough medicine. Of course, marshmallows today are pure junk food, and no marshmallow manufacturers any more use extract of the marsh mallow plant. Gelatin is today used in the manufacture of those fluffy white non-food objects.

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HOREHOUND

The horehound (*Marrubium vulgare*) is a bitter mint, native to Europe, which has now naturalized throughout the United States. It is called marrubio in Mexico, where it also grows in the wild. When you see it in the wild, it is an obvious mint, yet it lacks any strong aroma so typical of most mints. However, you'll see the square stem, the opposite leaves, and the wrinkled leaves on horehound which makes it easy to recognize.

Do any of you remember horehound candy? This was a popular "old fashioned" cough drop, made by boiling the horehound leaves, straining out the leaves, and adding sugar or honey to the liquid. It is then cooked until it is thick enough to harden. (Recipes for horehound candy can be found in most candy-making books).

Unfortunately, if you go to the store and buy horehound drops, it is very unlikely that they will contain any horehound extract at all. With very few exceptions, all the horehound I have found in stores are nothing more than sugar with artificial flavors added.

Horehound is made into a tea, which is very bitter and unpleasant. No one would ever drink it if it weren't so effective. Besides soothing a sore throat and a cough, horehound is an expectorant, which means it can help clear your throat when it is congested.

To make horehound tea, I collect the young leaves in the spring. They can be used fresh or dried. I place about one teaspoon of the herb into my cup, pour boiling water over it, cover it, and let it sit until it is cool enough to drink. The flavor? Terrible! Its bitterness must be experienced to understand. So add honey and lemon juice to your horehound tea to make it more palatable. The honey and lemon are also good for your sore throat.

MULLEIN

Mullein (*Verbascum thapsus*) is another European native that has now naturalized throughout the entire United States. It is particularly common in dry waste areas throughout the Southwest. I can recall driving to the Grand Canyon once, and the dominant roadside plant was mullein.

Mullein leaves feel like flannel or chamois cloth. The plant produces large basal leaves the first year, and then in the second year it sends up a seed spike that can reach up to four and five feet.

To make a tea, use the first year leaves of mullein, and infuse them. There is not much flavor, so I typically add mint to mullein tea. Mullein acts like a mild sedative on the lungs, and it helps to relieve the roughness in the throat common with coughs and some fevers.

Interestingly, mullein leaves have also been smoked to help relieve coughing and even mild asthma attacks. I have tried this on a few occasions, and I felt quick relief.

MORMON TEA

Throughout the Southwestern United States is found a stick-like plant called Mormon Tea (*Ephedra* sp.). It is common in the California high deserts, in the Great Basin area, throughout Southern Colorado, and down into Texas. It is commonly available at herb stores.

The plant appears as a low shrub, with branched needle-like segments, with scales at the nodes.

In China, a related member of the Phedra genus is the source of the drug ephedrine, which is used as a decongestant and a bronchial dilator. Though the wild U.S. species contain much less ephedrine, they are nevertheless useful in home remedies where there are breathing problems associated with coughs and colds. Typically, the stems are brewed into a tea at low temperatures in a covered pot. There is a mild but distinctive flavor and aroma that I like.

I have made an evening tea from Mormon Tea while camping in the desert where there were no other beverage plants readily available. It has a pleasant flavor, and it is improved with just a touch of honey.

No doubt there are many, many other remedies for coughs and sore throats. Included here were just a few of the common wild plants which are safe and easy to use.

(Note: None of the above should be construed to take the place of competent medical advice in a face-to-face setting. Chronic coughing or chronic sore throat may be an indication of a more serious disorder. Use your common sense, and consult a medical authority if you are experiencing any sort of chronic disorder.)