

Working With the Shelf

The Furthering Institute · Members' Library

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What the Shelf Is For

This book is about materials: dried herbs, oils, and stones. It is a book about buying them, cutting them, drying them, storing them, keeping notes about them, and working with them slowly. It is not a book of recipes and it is not a book of cures. Nothing on a shelf is a prescription, and nothing in these pages should be read as advice about the body.

What we hold, as an Institute, is a tradition of practice: that a material is best known by being kept, handled, and observed over a season rather than read about in an afternoon. A jar of dried leaf on a shelf, dated and labelled in your own hand, teaches more than a page of description, because it is the same jar on the same shelf in March and in September, and you are the one who has been watching it.

Treat the shelf as a small working library. A library is not improved by being large. It is improved by being known: a dozen materials you can identify with your eyes closed are worth more than a hundred you have to read the labels on.

Keep the shelf out of the kitchen's traffic and away from the body's traffic. The two rules that follow from this are stated plainly and repeated at the end of the book: nothing here is a prescription, and oils and dried materials are kept out of reach of children and animals.

Buying Dried Herbs

Buy small. A dried herb loses its character in the jar as the months pass, and a pound of leaf bought in enthusiasm is a pound of dust by the following spring. Buy an ounce, use it, and buy again. A shelf that turns over is a shelf that is alive.

Buy whole where you can. Whole leaf, whole flower, whole root, whole

seed. Powdered material gives up its scent within weeks and cannot be judged by the eye. If a material must be ground, grind it at home in small quantity, on the day you need it.

Smell before you buy, and if you cannot smell before you buy, buy from a shop that will let you open the jar. A dried herb should smell like itself, only quieter. A smell of hay, dust, or nothing at all means the material has been on the shelf longer than it should have been, whoever is selling it.

Ask when it was dried. A good supplier knows. An honest answer will often be a season, sometimes two. A vague answer is information too, and you are free to act on it. Where the year is given, prefer the most recent, and prefer a supplier whose jars are small, dark, and dated.

Look at the colour. Leaves should be green, grey-green, or silver, according to the plant, and not brown. Flowers should hold some of their colour. Roots and barks should be dry, firm, and free of mould. Seeds should rattle. Any material that is damp, clumped, or musty is not a bargain at any price.

Keeping Dried Herbs

Dried herbs are kept from four things: light, air, heat, and damp. Every storage rule in this tradition is a variation on those four, and every failure of a shelf can be traced to one of them.

Light fades colour and scent. Keep materials in dark glass or in tins, and keep those in a cupboard rather than on an open shelf. A clear jar in a bright kitchen is the most common way a good purchase is quietly ruined.

Air carries moisture and scent away. Close the jar properly, with a lid that seals, and open it only to take what you need. Do not leave a jar

open while you work. Do not store materials in paper bags, which is how they are carried home and not how they are kept.

Heat speeds every process you are trying to slow. Keep the shelf away from the stove, the radiator, and the sunny window. A cool cupboard is better than a warm shelf, and a warm shelf is better than a windowsill.

Damp is the enemy of the whole enterprise. If you live in a damp house, keep the materials in tins with a well-fitting lid, and inspect the shelf at the turn of each season. One mouldy jar will spoil the mood of the whole shelf and can spread to its neighbours.

Label every jar with the name of the material and the date you bought or dried it. Write it on a paper label and stick it on the side, or write it on the lid in ink. A jar without a date is a jar you will have to guess about, and guessing is how shelves become museums of things nobody dares to use.

Once a year, take everything off the shelf. Smell each jar. Throw away what has gone flat without regret. Wash the shelf. Put back what remains, and note in your materia notebook what you discarded and why. The shelf is a practice, and this is the practice's annual maintenance.

Cutting and Drying at Home

Grow or gather only what you can identify with certainty, and identify it twice: once in the field, and once with a book on the table at home. If you are not certain, do not use it. There is no herb so useful that it is worth working with a plant you only think you recognise.

Gather in the morning, after the dew has lifted and before the heat of the day. Take from plants that are healthy and away from roadsides, sprayed ground, and the edges of fields that are worked. Take a little from many plants rather than a great deal from one, and leave the stand as you found it.

Cut leaves and flowers with a clean blade, into a basket that breathes. Never into a plastic bag, which holds the moisture the plant is trying to give up and turns a good harvest to rot within hours.

Dry in small bunches, tied loosely, hung upside down in a dark, dry, airy place: a cupboard with the door ajar, a shed, a spare room. Not an oven, not a sunny window, not a sealed box. Air moving past the plant is what dries it, and darkness is what keeps its colour.

If the air is damp, dry on a screen instead: a frame with muslin stretched over it, the material in a single layer, turned once a day. A screen dries roots, bark, and seeds better than a hanging bunch, and it lets you see what is happening.

The test of dryness is the snap, not the clock. A leaf should crumble between the fingers; a stem should snap rather than bend; a root should be hard enough to break with a small crack. If it bends, it is not dry, and if it is stored while it bends, it will mould.

Dry thoroughly before storing, and store the day it is dry. Put whole leaves in the jar and crumble them only when you use them. A jar of whole leaf keeps its scent for a year or more; the same leaf crushed on the day of storage is flat by the winter.

Date every jar with the day you dried it. Write the place as well, if you gathered it: the field, the garden, the hedge, the month. A note that reads 'garden lemon balm, June, second year' will be worth more to you in three years than any description of the plant.

Infusing Oils

An infused oil is a simple thing: dried plant material, a clean oil, a jar, and time. It is a way of keeping something of a plant's scent and character in a medium that will hold it. We describe it here as a method

of the house and not as a remedy; nothing in this section is advice about the body, and no infusion should be applied to skin without your own practitioner's view.

Use dried material for oil, not fresh. Fresh plant carries water, and water in oil invites spoilage. If you have only fresh material, let it wilt for a day or two in a dry place, then use it. This single rule prevents most of the failures that members bring to the shelf.

Use a clean, plain oil that will not fight the plant: olive, sunflower, safflower, or sweet almond. Use a jar that has been washed and thoroughly dried, and fill it no more than two-thirds with material, then cover the material completely with oil. Anything above the surface of the oil is the part that will go off.

Two methods are common. The slow method: seal the jar and leave it in a cool, dark place for four to six weeks, shaking it when you pass it and remembering to date the jar. The warm method: stand the jar in a pan of water over a low heat, for two to three hours, with the water kept below a simmer. The slow method is the one we recommend, because it is harder to spoil and it teaches patience.

Strain through muslin into a clean, dry bottle, and squeeze the last of the oil from the cloth. Label the bottle with the plant, the oil, and the date. Do not add water, and do not leave plant material sitting in the finished oil, where it will continue to work and eventually turn.

Store the bottle in the dark and the cool. A cupboard, not a windowsill. An infused oil that smells sharp, flat, or like a wet cellar has turned, and it should go out to the garden rather than onto anything else. Keep all oils, infused or not, closed and out of the reach of children and animals.

Stones: Choosing

A stone is not a cure and it is not a machine. In this tradition a stone is a material of attention: something with weight, colour, and presence that you keep on the shelf, handle in the hour, and come to know by looking at it. Whatever a member experiences while working with a stone, we make no claim about its effect on the body, the household, or events in the world.

Choose a stone the way you would choose a tool. Hold it. A stone worth keeping sits well in the hand, has no sharp edge that will catch in a pocket, and is pleasant to look at from more than one angle. Size matters less than you think; a stone you can carry is a stone you will handle, and a stone you handle is a stone you will learn.

Prefer a stone you can see before you buy it. Photographs flatter and colour varies between screens. If you buy at a distance, buy from a seller who will tell you plainly what the stone is, where it came from, and whether it has been treated or dyed. Treated stones are common and are not a scandal, but you should know what you have.

Choose by use and by company rather than by reputation. A stone that suits the work you have chosen for the season is more useful than one that is said to be powerful. If you keep several, keep them where they can be seen and handled together, and let the shelf teach you the differences between them.

Keep a plain field stone if you like, gathered on a walk, with the date and place written in your notebook. Some of the most useful stones on a member's shelf cost nothing at all and were chosen for no reason except that they were noticed.

Stones: Cleansing and Charging

Cleansing and charging are words from the tradition, and it is worth saying plainly what they mean here. Cleansing is the practice of putting a

new stone, or one that has been long neglected, in order: washing it, drying it, and giving it a place. Charging is the practice of keeping it where you will see it and handling it with intention during the hour. Neither is a claim about forces or effects. Both are habits of care, and care is what makes a shelf a practice.

For cleansing, use water and a soft cloth, and nothing harsher. Wash the stone in clean water, dry it thoroughly, and let it stand in the air for a day before it goes on the shelf. Some stones will not take water: soft, layered, or flaking stones, and anything that has been glued to a base. For those, wipe with a dry cloth and a soft brush.

Some materials will not take salt at all. Salt is abrasive, it draws moisture, and it leaves a residue in cracks that will not come out. Do not bury soft or porous stones in salt, and do not keep a salt dish on the shelf beside your stones.

Sun and salt are the two things we ask members to keep their stones away from. Strong sun bleaches colour out of many stones within a season and heats them in a way that cracks some of them. Salt, whether in a dish, a bowl, or a bath, is the commonest cause of a stone that has gone chalky, dull, or rough in the hand. Keep the shelf in shade, and keep salt at a distance from it.

For charging, in the sense this library uses the word, do this and nothing more elaborate. Set the stone on the shelf in the place you have chosen for it. Handle it during the hour, for a few minutes, with the attention you would give to any other material of the practice. Note in your notebook the date you set it there, and the date, some weeks later, when you notice something about it that you had not noticed before.

Some stones are harder than others and will scratch a shelf, a table, or a neighbouring stone. Keep the harder ones on a square of cloth. Some are soft and will be scratched. Keep the soft ones apart. A shelf is a set of small arrangements, and it is worth arranging deliberately.

Keeping the Materia Notebook

The materia notebook is the companion to the shelf. It is where a material becomes yours, because it is where you write down what you actually did with it rather than what you meant to do.

Give each material a page. At the top write the name, the date you acquired it, and where it came from. Below that, leave room, because the page will be filled over a year and not in one sitting.

Record four kinds of thing. What you bought or gathered, and how it looked and smelled on the day. What you did with it: dried it, jarred it, infused it, set it on the shelf. What you noticed: the colour after a month, the scent after three, the way a stone looked in different light. And what you would do differently, which is the line that improves the shelf.

Keep the notebook near the shelf, with a pen, and write in it while your hands are still on the material. A note made an hour later is a summary. A note made now is a record. The difference matters more than it sounds.

Photographs are useful and are not a substitute. A picture will not tell you how the jar smelled in March. Write the smell down in words, even badly. 'Like the underside of a log' is a better note than 'earthy', because in five years you will know exactly what you meant.

Working a Material for a Season

The practice of the shelf is seasonal, not occasional. A material is taken up for a season, worked with steadily, and then set down, and only then is another taken up. A member who works twelve materials in a year knows twelve names and no materials. A member who works four knows four.

A season is long enough for the material to stop being interesting and to become familiar, and that second state is the one worth having. The first weeks of a new material are easy; it is the weeks after the novelty has gone that do the work, and it is precisely those weeks that a practice kept for a day cannot reach.

Choose a material that suits the months you will work it in. Leaves and flowers in the summer, when they are to be had fresh and dried. Roots and barks in the late autumn, when the plant has finished and the year is turning. Stones in the winter, when the hands want something with weight. There is no rule here, only a fitness that members come to feel.

Work in small quantities and in the same order each time. Handle the material. Look at it. Note what has changed since the last time you looked. Do one small thing with it: a jar, a sachet, an infusion, a page. Then write four lines and close the hour. Repetition of this kind is what builds the shelf.

At the end of the season, write a page of closing notes: what you learned, what you would buy again, what you would not, and what surprised you. Put the material back on the shelf with its date, and let it rest. A shelf worked in this way is small, well kept, and full of things you actually know.

House Rules

These are the standing rules of the shelf. They are printed here so that no member has to guess at them, and they apply to every material and every practice described in this book.

- Nothing in this book is a prescription. No page here is medical advice, no material here is a treatment, and no practice described here is offered as a cure, a dose, or a course of any kind.

- Ask your own practitioner. If you are considering using any material in or on the body, in any form and in any quantity, speak to a qualified practitioner who knows you and your history first, and follow their view over anything you read here.
- Keep children and animals away from essential oils and from all infused oils. Store every oil closed, upright, labelled, and out of reach. A spill should be wiped up at once and the cloth put outside to air.
- Label everything with the name and the date, and throw away anything you cannot identify. An unlabelled jar is not a mystery; it is a hazard.
- Buy small, keep the shelf dark and dry, and work one material at a time. These three habits prevent more trouble than any rule that follows them.

Beyond these rules, the shelf asks only for attention: a place, a notebook, an hour, and the patience to work one material for a season rather than for a day.