

Making Effective Formulas

Two or more herbs together in a blend can be called an herbal formula. Formulas have several advantages over simples.

1. First of all, herbs often have additive effects. Consider nervine herbs. While valerian is an effective herb for easing nervous tension and promoting a refreshing night's sleep, valerian and kava together can be even more effective. Both herbs are useful sleep aids, but kava has stronger effects for relaxing the muscles of the body, while valerian has calming effects peculiar to the central nervous system, helping the mind to "let go" and relax. When combined, kava can help ease muscular tension that often accompanies a poor night's sleep, and valerian can calm the mind. In the digestive example above, chamomile can help relax the intestines (antispasmodic effect) and reduce inflammation (anti-inflammatory effect), while peppermint can help ease gas and help it move out (antispasmodic and carminative effect).
2. Counteracting side effects. Some herbs may have a particular side effect that another herb might help counteract. For instance, cascara is a stimulant laxative herb that stimulates bowel activity and reduces water absorption from the digested food mass working its way through the bowels, hydrating the stool. Because it is a strong bowel stimulant, cascara can cause cramping and pain of the bowel in sensitive individuals, if a little bit too much is used. Counteracting this unwanted side effect is easy with the addition of an antispasmodic herb like orange peel, wild yam, or cardamom in the formula.
3. Organ affinity (tropism). Every herb is attracted to a particular primary and secondary organ or body system, according to tradition and to the available science. Constituents of some herbs have been shown scientifically to concentrate in particular organs and tissues. For instance, ginkgo flavone glycosides tend to accumulate in the inner ear, near the retina, and certain areas of the brain, offering antioxidant protection to these areas. Hawthorn by tradition is a heart herb, but modern science shows it also has calming effects on the nervous system.
4. Flavor ingredients. In the above example with cascara, the wild yam might help reduce the possibility of cramping, but the herb would do nothing to mitigate the very bitter, unpleasant flavor of cascara. Orange peel obviously would, and it is also a tasty antispasmodic.
5. Sweeteners. Herbal sweeteners go a long way towards enticing a child or adult to take an herb preparation and be open to its effects, especially with long-term use. Favorite sweeteners include stevia (the sweet herb), licorice, and of course medicinal fruits like blueberries, bilberries, elderberries, hawthorn fruits, and jujube (red Chinese) dates. Many tonic herbs are sweet and can be used to tonify the adrenal or digestive system, while at the same time imparting a sweet taste to a formula. Examples include ginseng, codonopsis, astragalus, and lycii berries.