

## Harvesting Your Medicine

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Once you've properly identified a plant that you'd like to harvest, check out the surrounding land. Is there a busy road nearby? Are you close to the town dump, fields sprayed with pesticides, or another source of toxins? Do the plants look healthy and vital? Are there lots of pollinators buzzing around the plants? If the land and plants feel good, you can begin gathering. There are many traditional practices for harvesting plants. Some people find the largest plant - the grandmother plant - and ask its permission to harvest. If you receive a yes, you can proceed, harvesting the surrounding plants while leaving the grandmother plant alone. You can also sit with the plant, observe and listen, draw or photograph it, sing to it, or you can just get down to business (i.e. you're bleeding and need the yarrow pronto!). The important thing is to harvest with gratitude, appreciative that the plant is sharing its life force with us. You can show your appreciation in whatever way feels good to you: you can leave an offering: a piece of your hair, water or spit, a song, a pinch of an herb or a simple thanks.

Plants are affected by the time of day and the seasons, changing throughout the month, as well as throughout the year. Like the pulling of the ocean tides, the energy of the plant shifts, affected by the lunar cycle. The full moon is the optimum time to harvest aboveground parts (leaf, flower, stem, and bark) and the new moon is the time for harvesting the roots. In general, the aboveground parts of plants are best harvested in the spring and summer, before or during flowering. Roots are best harvested early in spring or late in the fall, when the plants' energy is down in its roots. The ideal time of day for harvesting is after the morning dew has evaporated, and before the full strength of the sun has potentially wilted the plant in late afternoon. The best harvesting weather is a clear, sunny day, since rain can wash away some of the very constituents you're hoping to gather. When harvesting, you want to be sure to take only what you need from each plant.

When gathering leaves, flowers, stems, and bark, you want to take the most vital parts of the plants. Find healthy leaves, not ones chewed by insects. One way to harvest is to pinch off the new growth - the top leaves and flowers or buds - which stimulates the plant's growth. Another way is to harvest the entire stem, cutting it close to the ground or just the top few inches. Having a good knife helps you to harvest the parts that you want, and to not harm the plant by pulling or tearing. Roots are potent medicine and should be harvested with respect since the plant must be killed for its root to be gathered. When we harvest roots in the fall, the plant has time to flower and go to seed. This ensures more plants for the future. Some slower-growing roots can be gathered, and its new growth or buds can be replanted after you've harvested what you need.

When harvesting roots, you want to loosen the earth around the plant with a shovel or trowel, so that you can lift the whole root system out gently. Some plants with taproots are difficult to harvest whole because they are so rooted that they usually break before letting go of their hold, such as Burdock. Once you've dug the roots, remember to fill the space back in with soil.