

Tinctures:

The liquid medium into which the herb (known as the marc) is placed is called the menstrum. The menstrum can be many different things. Alcohol is the most common. Vinegar is sometimes used. Glycerine is becoming more and more popular for reasons listed below in the Glycerite section. A good rule of thumb for beginners is, 'When in doubt, use 'dilute alcohol' as a menstrum.' This is a very practical solution. The amount of a tincture taken is small, so the alcohol consumed is negligible. It is far less than that contained in over the counter remedies such as Benedryl, etc. 100 proof Vodka (50% alcohol) is ideal for most applications, although 80 proof is usually acceptable. Sometime menstrums can be a combination of more than one and are almost always partially water (vodka and vinegar are already partially water). If adding water, distilled or filtered water is highly preferable. Some herbs, especially kidney/bladder herbs do not do well in vinegar. They look bad and taste bad and seem to produce nausea. When using vinegar, always use an all-natural, non-distilled, apple cider vinegar. Western Family makes one that is excellent and cheaper than the ones in health food stores.

The proportion of herb (marc) to menstrum is known as the weight/volume (w/v) ratio of the tincture. Standard ratios are:

1. Tinctures of dried intense botanicals are 1:10. This means 1 part herb, an oz for instance, to 10 parts liquid. Example of this type of herb are cayenne and the resins such as myrrh and propolis. Most of these herbs require a higher proportion of alcohol to water than the 50% listed above for maximum potency. If 50% is all you can get, certainly use it.
2. Tinctures of dried fluffy & absorbent herbs such as mullein, yarrow, hops, etc. should also be 1:10. Always check your tincture after 24 hours to make sure all of the herb is still covered with liquid. Any exposed parts will spoil and ruin the entire batch.
3. Tinctures of regular dried botanicals are made with a 1:5 ratio. For example - if you have 3 oz of herb you would multiply by 5 and use 15 oz of menstrum.
4. Tinctures of fresh plants are made on a 1:2 ratio. This is because the plant still contains so much water that the tincture would be too diluted to pull the herbal properties and to avoid mold. I have found that a higher ratio of alcohol to water (about 75%) and using the usual 1:5 ration works good. This kind of alcohol is expensive unless you have a source coming out of Mexico. Always use the least amount of alcohol that you feel is effective.

Basic Instructions:

Measure your herb into a glass jar with a well-fitting lid. Add your menstrum, cap and shake well. Set in a cool place out of direct sunlight - but not 'out of sight, out of mind'. You will need to shake this concoction at least once per day for 10-14 days. Once again, add liquid if the herbs are even close to being exposed. When the appropriate time has passed, strain your tincture and discard the herbs.

You can strain a tincture by using an ordinary strainer. This leaves a lot of the menstrum behind. Straining the herbs through a cheesecloth works well but is messy and stains your hands badly unless you wear gloves. This also leaves quite a lot of the menstrum still clinging to the herb. A centrifugal juicer, such as the JuiceMan or the Omega, work very well and you will get back nearly all of your expensive alcohol, vinegar or glycerine.

A tincture stored in a cool place in a glass jar will keep indefinitely and remain potent. Evaporation is the only enemy. Vinegar tinctures need to be watched closely and have the lids changed regularly. Use a plastic lid if possible.

Glycerites:

For making herbal glycerites, it is recommended that you use non-synthetic vegetable glycerine.

Glycerine has the capacity to break down & remove certain chemicals and preservatives from the body, so it is an excellent medium for herbal tinctures. The sweet flavor makes it especially appropriate for children. When diluted, glycerine is demulcent, emollient, soothing & healing. Undiluted, it is an irritant and a stimulant.

Glycerites are useful in keeping skin surfaces moist, due to its tendency to absorb water from the air. Glycerine does not evaporate at normal temperatures and produces a sensation of warmth to the skin and tongue. These properties make it useful for really tough skin problems such as athlete's foot, where alcohol would irritate, dry and evaporate and oil would provide a growth medium for the bacteria.

In almost all tincturing uses, dilute to 60% glycerine with 40% water (distilled or highly filtered is preferred).

A word of caution: Some books will tell you that 50% glycerine is a good preservative. Experience has shown that this is not always the case. 60% to 70% is more reliable. If some alcohol is tolerable, 10% added to 50% glycerine/40% water formula can be ideal.

A few drops of an essential oil called benzoin added to the finished and strained glycerite at a ratio of 4 drops to each 8 cups of tincture is very nice. The benzoin does not interfere with the medicinal properties and greatly improves the length of time the tincture can be stored. A glycerite without alcohol or benzoin has a shelf life of 1-3 years. Benzoin seems to add an additional 2 or 3 years to the shelf-life.

Method:

Tinc Trac Method from ABC Herbal by Steve Horne. Use a 60% glycerine, 40% distilled water menstrum and a ratio of 1:5 - 1:7 (1 oz herb to 5 oz menstrum - 1 oz herb to 7 oz menstrum). Stir the glycerine and water together first. Then place herb and menstrum in a canning jar. Place a tight lid on the bottle and cold pack can it, much like you would do for fruit. Leave in the canner with the water lightly boiling for 2 hours. Remove from hot water and allow to cool.

I have done this with a variety of herbs, including peppermint, and the heat does not seem to destroy the medicinal properties of the herbs at all. I can't really explain this, except to speculate that because the jar is sealed and glycerine is a fairly heavy medium, the medicinal properties do not diffuse into the air. At any rate, glycerites made this way are extremely potent and effective. (In making peppermint tea, perhaps the loss of the volatile oils and their properties is due to diffusion into the air rather than destruction by heat and we should make our teas with lids on.) I am going to try making salves & oils in sealed containers by the same method and see if this reasoning holds true with oil as a medium.

Glycerites (or tinc tracs, if you prefer) have the added advantage of being ready to use in a few hours instead of in two weeks. ***Note: Wild Cherry Bark cannot be heated under any conditions. Note in the Wild Cherry Cough Syrup Recipe that the Wild Cherry is placed in the glycerine menstrum 24 hours before and simply allowed to sit. It is not heated with the rest of the ingredients.