

Rosalee de la Forêt:

Here's one of the coolest things about being an herbalist. You can take an herb you already know is safe, something perhaps from your kitchen, and put a little on your tongue. Before you look up a single thing about it, it's already telling you how it wants to work in your body. You just have to know how to listen.

Here's what I mean. How an herb tastes is one of the most important things you can know about it. Not whether you happen to like it or not, but instead, what the taste itself is actually telling you. Because taste isn't random. Each taste points to what a plant actually does.

In herbal medicine we have five tastes, and each one is a doorway into what an herb can do.

Once I saw how much taste could tell us, a couple decades ago, I dove in deep to understand it myself. And I saw that this was often a crucial missing piece of herbalism. So, I wanted a way to hold it all in one place, where you could look at an herb and take in its taste, its qualities, and its actions all at once.

So I made the Flavor Wheel, a blueprint or visual representation of energetic herbalism. My first version of this was released in 2013 and since then it's been downloaded more than a hundred thousand times.

You can get your copy of the Flavor Wheel within my free mini Herbal Energetics Course that is happening right now and for a short time only. We only open this up once a year in September, so check out the show notes or video description, depending on where you're watching or listening to this, to get your link to register. Or simply go to HerbalMiniAdventure.com.

Also, one more note before I dive in, I'm filming this out in my garden, so if you are listening to the podcast, you may want to jump over to YouTube to see the plants I'm going to talk about in real life.

Okay, so to give you a real taste of the Flavor Wheel, I'm gonna give you one herb for each of the five flavors, and for each one, I'll walk the same path: from how it tastes, to what that taste is telling you, to what the plant can do.

Let's start with bitter: Hops or its cool botanical name, *Humulus lupulus*. Yes, of course this is the same hops that give beer its bitter bite.

Taste a hops tea and there's no mistaking it. It's bracingly bitter, with an aromatic, almost resinous edge. And that bitterness is doing something the instant it touches your tongue.

Bitter is the taste that wakes up digestion. Your mouth waters, your body starts readying its digestive juices, your bile begins to move, which helps you to digest fats. This is why bitter herbs have been worked with for sluggish, stagnant digestion for as long as we have records.

Hops is a lovely example. That bitter, aromatic quality makes it a wonderful digestive herb for the person who feels heavy and stuck after meals, especially when there's tension tangled up in it.

But here's something I find especially fascinating. We tend to think taste happens only on the tongue. But we now know there are bitter receptors all over, and even further down, in the gut itself. And a recent human study on hops found that when that bitterness reaches the gut, the body responds by releasing the very hormones that tell you you've had enough to eat, that you feel full and satisfied. In other words, your body reads bitterness as information at every step, not just in your mouth. That, to me, is energetics made visible.

In other words: Taste is a language the whole body understands.

On the flavor wheel, you'll find hops in the bitter section. It's a bitter, cooling, relaxing herb, and it has a long friendship with sleep. Not necessarily for everyone who lies awake, but for a very particular person: the one who's hot, restless, wound up, with a busy mind that won't settle. For that person, hops is a quiet, cooling companion. And you can feel why in the taste. It's bitter and cooling, easing an overheated, overly tense system.

Hops is more of a medicine than a food, usually taken as a tea or a tincture. If you take pharmaceutical sedatives or antidepressants, or you're pregnant, larger doses are worth setting aside or talking through with a clinical herbalist first.

But if you taste even a little, you can notice how much the plant is already telling you. Bitter, so it moves digestion. Cooling, and relaxing, so it suits heat and tension. By simply tasting and feeling hops you can know a lot about it before you read a single word about it.

Next up is the sweet flavor. And I don't mean sugary. In herbal energetics, sweet points to herbs that build and nourish and moisten, that soften and soothe. The classic sweet herb, and one of my favorites to feel, is marshmallow: *Althaea officinalis*.

Taste or feel a cold infusion of marshmallow root and you'll understand it instantly. It's slippery. Silky, a little slick, almost gooey. In herbal terms we call this a demulcent, and it comes from the plant's mucilage. Similar to cooked oats or okra, this is one of our most important herbal actions.

On the Flavor Wheel, marshmallow sits in the sweet section, cooling and moistening, and that slippery sweetness tells you exactly what it does. It coats, it soothes, it moistens whatever is hot, dry, and irritated.

So picture having a dry, raw, scratchy sore throat. Or a dry, relentless hacking cough that won't bring anything up. Or dry, irritated tissues anywhere from the digestive tract to the urinary system. Marshmallow is the soft, cool, moistening balm for all of it.

And here's the piece I love most, because it's such a hopeful way to think about inflammation. A lot of irritation in the body comes from dryness. Instead of simply trying to block that irritation, with an anti-inflammatory, marshmallow tends to the dryness underneath it. It isn't suppressing anything. It's restoring what was missing.

Marshmallow is unusual in that you don't even need to heat it to prepare it. Instead you can make a cold infusion. Fill a jar about a third of the way with the dried root, and then fill the jar

with cool or room-temperature water, and let it sit for a few hours or overnight. What you pour off is silky and soothing. If you grow marshmallow you can also make a lovely tea from the leaves.

Marshmallow's considered safe for just about everyone. The one thing to know is to take it a little apart from medications, since all that mucilage can potentially alter how things absorb.

Sweet, cooling, moistening. Soft, right where the body has gone dry. And you can feel every bit of that on your tongue. It's a wonderful flavor - sweet.

That brings us to pungent. Which is admittedly a sorta weird name for our aromatic plants.

Where sweet is soft and nourishing, pungent is the opposite energy. It's warming. It moves. It opens things up. Think of the heat of ginger, or the spread of a spicy meal through your whole chest. Pungent herbs are ideal for people who tend to feel cool or for situations when we want to warm someone up, for example to support the fever process when someone feels cold.

For this one I'll use a plant I love dearly. Holy basil, also called tulsi, *Ocimum sanctum* or this one is *Ocimum africanum*.

Tulsi has been revered in India for thousands of years, and once you get to know it, you understand why. Smell it and taste it, and it's aromatic, warm, a little spicy, with a soft sweetness behind the heat. On the wheel, holy basil sits in the pungent section, warming and drying. Pungent, aromatic herbs like this one get things moving. They warm you from the inside, they wake up sluggish digestion, and their fragrance has a way of lifting a heavy mood.

And that aroma leads straight to what tulsi is best known for. Aromatic, pungent plants have a long relationship with the nervous system, and tulsi is a wonderful example of that. It's calming and clarifying at once. It's what we call an adaptogen and a relaxing nervine, which means it helps steady a person who's stretched thin by stress, quiets a busy mind, and brings

a kind of clear, present focus. It calms without dulling you, so I think of it for frazzled, overworked, spread-too-thin folks which you might know a little bit about.

The simplest way to enjoy this in is tea. A teaspoon of the dried leaf in a cup of just-boiled water, covered and steeped for three to five minutes so you hold on to all those aromatic oils. It's a genuinely lovely thing to drink, so you can just sit with it and enjoy it.

One note worth knowing. If you're trying to conceive, or you're pregnant, or you're managing blood sugar with medication, tulsi is one to look into more closely first.

Warming, drying, aromatic, uplifting. All of that, waiting for you in the very first sip of this pungent, aromatic, herb. It's so lovely.

Next is salty, and this may surprise you, because salty in herbal terms isn't about the flavor of salt on your tongue, just like sweet isn't about sugar. It points to a plant your body reads as mineral-rich, the way a good broth is. Nettle, or *Urtica dioica*, is the queen of this.

Drink a strong nettle infusion and what you taste is deep and green and almost brothy, closer to a soup than a tea. That flavor is the mineral content itself, and your body reads it as nourishment, because that's exactly what it is. In fact, nettle is considered one of the richest sources of minerals among the plant foods, and you can really taste it.

On the Flavor Wheel, nettle sits in the salty section, cooling and drying. And its gift is simple and profound. It feeds you. Nettle is what we call a nutritive herb, and that's a whole category that we can easily overlook, because it isn't dramatic. It's not pungency, it's not warming. It doesn't do this big flashy thing, it simply restores.

Herbalists reach for nettle to strengthen bones, hair, nails, and teeth, to rebuild energy in someone who's run down, and to steady a body that's simply depleted. As David Hoffman once said: when in doubt, choose nettle. Herbalists have taken that line and run with it!

Nettle has another well-loved gift worth mentioning. Taken as a nourishing infusion in the weeks leading up to allergy season, it helps a great many people with the seasonal sniffles

and hay fever. Its slightly drying, astringent quality is part of the reason why, but it also does something deeper. There are a lot of wonderful gifts in nettle.

And it's beautifully safe. Nettle carries the highest safety rating there is, and it's worked with as a food as much as a medicine. The way I make it is as a nourishing infusion. I use a good handful, about an ounce by weight, of dried nettle in a quart jar, filled with just-boiled water, covered, and left to sit for four to eight hours, or overnight. Then strain and drink. It's one of the simplest, most restorative things you can do for yourself. And something I enjoy practically every day.

Because nettle leans a little drying, if you ever find it too drying for you, you simply pair it with a moistening herb like the marshmallow we just met. Salty, cooling, drying, mineral-deep. All of that waiting in a plain green cup.

And we definitely call it stinging nettle for a reason. As I was sitting down here, it stung me through my leggings! It's a little voracious this time of year, but oh how I love it.

Let's begin our next plant with a story from Ireland.

In the 1800s there was a country doctor named Dr. Green. He lived in Ennis, in County Clare. He built a reputation for helping people with failing hearts, the swelling in legs, the breathlessness, the weakness. He was actually helping when other doctors could do nothing. People clamored to know his secret. What was he using? How was he helping so many in such a notable way?

But, he would not tell a soul how. He actually kept his remedy secret his entire life. It was only when he died, in 1894, that his daughter, thankfully, finally revealed what her father's famous cure had been.

A simple tincture of ripe hawthorn berries, which is the perfect example of a sour herb.

Sour is bright. It's the pucker of a fresh berry, refreshing and quick, and it tends to cool.

Hawthorn is a hedgerow plant, a small thorny tree covered in white blossoms in spring and deep red berries in the fall. Taste the berries and you get that sour brightness, with a soft sweetness underneath, and then a slight drawing, puckering feeling in your mouth. That's astringency, and astringency belongs to the sour taste. Hold on to that feeling, because it's about to tell you something.

While hawthorn is considered sour, its qualities are close to neutral. Maybe it's a little cooling, but really it's neutral, which is part of what makes it such a friendly herb. It suits almost everyone, whether you run warm or cool, damp or dry.

So follow the taste. Sour and bright points you toward plants that cool, that protect, that modulate inflammation. That puckering astringency points you toward tone, toward tissues being drawn back together and made whole. Put those two together and you are standing right in front of what hawthorn is for.

It's one of the most beloved herbs for the heart. We call it a heart trophorestorative, which is a wonderful word that simply means it nourishes and restores the heart over time, the way good food does.

It's rich in the kinds of plant compounds that support the heart's own resilience, its own capacity to protect itself, and those are the very compounds you tasted as sour and astringent. Modern research on hawthorn extracts has caught up with what herbalists have known at least since Dr. Ennis in Ireland, showing real benefit for people with mild to moderate heart concerns. The strongest evidence comes from a Cochrane review, which is about as rigorous as medicine gets, because what they do is look at a bunch of studies. Researchers pooled ten randomized, double-blind, placebo-controlled trials of a standardized hawthorn extract, in this case it was leaf and flower, given right alongside people's regular heart medication. And throughout the studies, the people taking hawthorn did measurably better. They could exert themselves longer before tiring. They were less breathless, and less fatigued. Their hearts were working more efficiently, doing the same

work on less oxygen. And they felt better in themselves. Any side effects were few, mild, and passing.

Hawthorn tends to the emotional heart too. Herbalists reach for it for grief, for heartbreak, for the heart that's carrying something heavy. I love that a single plant speaks to the heart in both senses at once.

The lovely thing is that hawthorn is food-like. You can take the berries, leaves, and flowers as a tea, or cook the berries down into something closer to a jam or syrup or even barbecue sauce—that's my new favorite—and enjoy it daily over the long term, which is exactly how it works best. Slow, nourishing, cumulative.

While hawthorn is generally regarded as safe, if you take heart medications, hawthorn is worth talking through with someone experienced first, simply because your heart is precious and deserves that care.

So, sour. Bright, cooling, protective. This flavor is filled with herbs that modulate inflammation, protect the eyes, and restore tone to tissues.

I love that as we're talking about how bright the sour taste is, the sun really came out and has lit up this hawthorn behind me. Super bright! Thank you, sun.

There you have it. Five flavors and five herbs. Experiencing and understanding the flavors is absolutely one of the most useful skills you can have as an herbalist, because it opens up the language of plants to you. Next time you taste a strongly bitter herb you'll know it can be used to promote digestion. And next time you feel the warmth of a pungent herb, you'll know it'll be a good match for someone who feels cold.

That's the whole art, and it works with any herb you'll ever meet—as long as it's safe to taste, of course.

This is exactly what the Flavor Wheel is for. It has all five flavors—their tastes, their qualities, and their actions in one place, so you can look up an herb and read it just like we did together. Of course, the most important part is that you experience it.

If you'd like to learn to use the wheel yourself, step by step, I put together a free mini Herbal Energetics Course that walks you all the way through it. It's free, and once the wheel clicks, you really won't look at your herbs the same way again.

I also go through a safety protocol with herbs that I think is so simple that it just sticks with you, so you'll never look at herbs the same way again.

Check the video description or show notes, depending on where you're watching or listening, for the link to get your copy and get into the mini Herbal Energetics Course.

By the way, I'm hoping that the next podcast I do is answering all your herbal energetics and Flavor Wheel questions. But in order to do that, I need your participation! So drop me a line in the comments or through the mini course or hit up my DMs and let me know your burning (or cooling) herbal energetics questions!

Thanks for joining me. See you next time.

Thanks so much for listening. If you're not already subscribed, I'd love to have you as part of this herbal community so I can deliver even more herbal goodies your way.

This podcast is made possible in part by our awesome students. This week's Student Spotlight is on Bonnie Hammersley in Maryland.

Bonnie is a student in the Herbal Energetics Course whose herbal journey has blossomed through curiosity, practice, and joyful exploration. From discovering a new appreciation for dandelion to calling ginger "a friend for life," she has developed really thoughtful relationships with the plants she works with every day. One of our favorite stories was her family's tradition of adding a slice of ginger to soups as a "poison indicator"—a charming reminder of how herbal wisdom is often passed from one generation to the next.



To honor her contributions, Mountain Rose Herbs is sending Bonnie a \$50 gift certificate to stock up on their incredible selection of organically and sustainably sourced herbal supplies. Thank you, Mountain Rose Herbs, for supporting our amazing students!