

# HERBAL WISDOM

BY ELLEN ZIMMERMANN

## WATERWISE



*Borago officinales*



*Passiflora caerulea*



*Vitex agnus-castus*

This past summer my husband and I had the unfortunate experience of having our seven-year-old well go dry. For the past several years, we'd noticed our water supply diminishing, and the situation finally came to a head. Several times in the mid-summer heat, I stood in the shower with a head full of shampoo as the water came to a halt. Sometimes half an hour would elapse before the well replenished itself and I could rinse off. It was a wake-up call for all of us—and probably for many others in the Austin area.

Because I make a living by growing, processing and using herbs, this event was especially difficult. Luckily, we were able to hook into a county water supply, but it was costly. I'd been thinking about the dire state of our natural resources for years (global warming, in my opinion, is no longer debatable) but now I really began to ask myself how we could help alleviate the depletion of our water supply.

We'd already installed a rainwater collection system for use in the garden and added drip irrigation in lieu of common overhead sprinkler systems that waste much water. We set our timers to water in the middle of the night or very early in the morning to reduce evaporation.

What else can *we* do—and by *we*, I mean all of us? Gardeners can focus more on planting natives and drought-tolerant, Xeriscape herbs and plants. We can promise that the glorious wet spring we had this year won't go to our heads; we can remind ourselves that Austin summers can be brutal. Finally, we can think green by teaming up with our plants to save water.

*Echinacea purpurea*, purple coneflower, is a popular perennial Texas native wildflower. I love its lush green spring foliage and deep-pink summer flowers. Harvest echinacea roots in fall and use them to make a potent herbal medicinal tincture. As an herbal remedy used all over the world, echinacea increases the body's resistance to infection, aids in reducing inflammation and boosts the immune system. I take echinacea tincture before and during travel, during cold season or whenever I spend time around my

grandchildren. Best planted in fall, echinacea is easily grown from seed or starter plants.

*Vitex agnus-castus*, chaste tree, is my favorite perennial herb. You may have seen this incredible purple-flowering tree along Mopac. A Mediterranean native, it grows easily in our hot, dry Austin environment, providing beauty, garden accent and numerous medicinal benefits. (Don't forget other Austin-friendly Mediterranean herbs: rosemary, oregano, basil and thyme.)

Vitex berries, known as monk's pepper, are harvested in summer and made into a strong tincture/herbal extract often used to treat PMS and menopausal symptoms, such as hot flashes and excessive bleeding. Vitex is a hormone balancer, regulating progesterone and estrogen; it helps to reduce fibroids, aids fertility and assists the re-establishment of normal ovulation and menstruation.

During garden tours, I like to point out *Borago officinales*, borage, and often offer people a taste of its bright-blue flowers. They may look at me oddly, but they end up appreciating the sweet taste. Sugared borage flowers are used to decorate cakes; its oil, derived from the seeds, is effective as an anti-inflammatory and for some arthritic conditions. (Borage oil can usually be found in the refrigerated section of health food stores.) The flowers have antidepressant properties, while the leaves assist in relieving lung congestion. Borage self-seeds, so look forward to having this large-leaved herb in your garden year after year.

Explore other easily grown water-wise herbs, all of which are not just beautiful, but medicinal: *Passiflora incarnata* (passionflower), *Salvia officinalis* (garden sage), *Marrubium vulgare* (horehound), *Verbascum thapsus* (mullein), *Rosmarinus officinale* (rosemary), *Lavandula spp.* (lavender), *Solidago altissima* (goldenrod) and *Rumex crispus* (yellow dock).

Be aware that most herbs require very little care and water, and can be easily divided and shared. Examine water-use routines and evaluate appliances that utilize water. Collect rainwater for garden use. Educate others, being mindful of our most precious natural resource, our life-giving water.

Photography top and middle: Carole Topalian; bottom: Ellen Zimmermann