

# What is an herb?

Well....it depends



NORTHEAST  
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# HERBACEOUS

- Botanically speaking.....
- Green
- Leafy
- Dies back at the end of the season
- Seed producing
- Annual, biennial, or perennial

- “A plant or plant part valued for its medicinal, savory, or aromatic qualities” ....William Hylton

- “Any plant that may be used for pleasure, fragrance, or physic” ...  
.....the Herb Society of America

# More broadly....do we include?:

- Culinary
- Flavoring
- Medicine
- Veterinary
- Dyeing
- Smoking
- ?

# More questions

- Do we in the temperate zone decide what constitutes and herb? Is cinnamon considered a spice only because we don't grow it here?

# questions

- What about rosemary?..... definitely herbaceous in northern climates, but a perennial, evergreen shrub in North Carolina.
- Is the 100 foot tall popple (poplar) tree an herb? It does not “die back” each year.

# Plant parts

- Whether we use just the root, leaf, bark, or fruit or flower.....we generally consider the plant itself to be an herb.



## Henry Benson writing in *Herbs and Earth*

- In its essential spirit, in its proper garden meaning, an herb is:
- a garden plant which has been
- cherished for itself
- and for a use and has
- not come down to us purely as a decorative thing....To say that use makes and herb, however, is only one side of the story. Vegetables, quasi-vegetables, herbal what-nots, and medicinal weeds are not 'herbs' and never will be for all the dictionaries.

## Benson continued

- .... “It is not use which has kept the great herbs alive, ....
- but beauty and use together.
- Clumsy food plants, curlicue salad messes and roots belong in the kitchen garden.... and not with the herbs. They (vegetables) spoil the look of an herb garden,.....they confuse its unique atmosphere and make it common.”

# Quantity

- Maybe it's the quantity of the plant that is used that helps define whether it's an herb.
- We use a certain volume of fruits or vegetables to make a filling meal, to create a bulk amount of calories – think tomatoes or beans.....

- But we'd never consider making a meal or a complete side dish out of herbs alone.
- Would you eat a whole salad made of rosemary?
- Herbs usually can be taken only in small amounts
- There are gray areas...what about onions or peppers.

- Most plants, vegetables and herbs, have medicinal qualities

“Let thy food be Thy medicine”

Let’s say that in general, herbs are intense in taste and effect can therefore be taken in small quantities.

# And so

- My final answer to the question.....
- “What is an herb?” ..... is.....
  
- You write down your new revised definition now.

## Val's “best” definition (for this course):

- A plant (whole or a part of)
- used in small quantities
- medicinally,
- in cooking,
- or for fragrance.....
- Which helps to balance & heal us.

# Balancing and healing

- In my understanding, an herb must help “balance” a person.....usually through fragrance or taste.
- This is in addition to herbs healing properties.
- The history of herbs is mostly a history of the use of plants for healing purposes.



# Defining herbs

- So, are we on the same page?
- Hint: my “best” definition is probably not final.
- Bottom line, there is no single correct definition of “herb”.
- However, on an exam, use the previous definition for “Val’s best definition”

# Perhaps we don't need a perfect definition

- We'll explore herbs from several "angles".
- The this class we'll learn to identify herbs, both wild and tame.
- We'll learn botanical parts so that we can key out the plants.
- We'll take a few walks, learn how to collect plants, and make an 'herbarium'.
- And we'll explore the best practices for growing herbs.

- We'll let the plants teach us by starting to use them to make 'remedies'.
- We will make teas & syrups, soaks & salves, infusions & inhales.

- As we make remedies, we'll also study the 'body systems' we are trying to heal:
- Digestive
- Nervous
- Everyday remedies
- Respiratory
- Skin & hair
- Immune system

Course review: So to reiterate, by the end of the course you will be able to:

- Identify 25 herbs common to our bio-region.
- You'll practice "honorable harvest".
- You'll make simple remedies.
- You'll plan an herb garden.
- You'll be able to tell another person just what an herb is. 😊