

What Herbs Are Good for Labor?

Midwives Herbal, Part Two

by Demetria Clark

Any type of intervention is an intervention. As a mother or practitioner, one has to decide what level of intervention is appropriate. An herbal tea can be a nutritional beverage; a tincture can be a remedy. It comes down to perspective and choice. If a mother wants to use herbal remedies in labor, they can be a great alternative to pharmaceutical drugs, with appropriate usage and education. Midwifery has always been about providing safe choices.

As an herbalist, I am wary of herbal practices that mimic modern medicine. Herbs should not be used to be used. I also do not believe in starting herbs to assist labor five weeks beforehand. Babies are born, without herbs and without drugs, every day.

How to purchase herbs

All herbal products should be labeled with the common name and the scientific name. For example, the herb name squaw root can apply to blue cohosh, partridge berry or *Conopholis americana*. So if I read “squaw root,” what am I getting? Similarly, there are two varieties of red raspberry leaf commonly on the market. In addition, many herbals have traditional names. This is why it is important when purchasing herbs make sure the name is given both in English (or the local language) and in Latin.

The following herbs have a variety of uses, including support during childbirth. I have indicated some of their benefits for labor, but I encourage you to explore other uses as well.

Herbs commonly used in labor

Black Cohosh—*Cimicifuga racemosa*

Black cohosh and blue cohosh are a common team, often considered the best combo to have on hand. Black cohosh is not only excellent as a liniment for back labor, it is also used to relieve pain and cramping in the womb. Black Cohosh relieves muscle pain, which is one reason it works so well with blue cohosh, the uterine stimulant.

In more than 40 years of observed use in Germany, black cohosh has shown no serious adverse effects, contraindications or drug interactions.(1) One study did show that 7% of patients who took it experienced transient stomach upset, but not to an extent to prevent the trial from continuing.(2) Studies on the herb’s possible mutagenicity, teratogenicity and carcinogenicity have proven negative.(3, 4)

Relevant properties: emmenagogic , anti-spasmodic, alterative, nervine, hypotensive. It is high in volatile oils and contains triterpene glycosides, isoflavones and isoferulic acid. Black Cohosh yields from the U.S. and Canada.

Blue Cohosh—*Caulophyllum thalictroides*

Blue cohosh can be used at any time during pregnancy that a threat of miscarriage occurs. Similarly, because of its anti-spasmodic action, it will ease false labor pains and dysmenorrhea. Nonetheless, when labor does begin, the use of blue cohosh just previous to birth will ease delivery.(5) Blue cohosh is used to stimulate uterine contractions and to tone the uterus.

Relevant properties: emmenagogic, anti-spasmodic, anti-rheumatic, diuretic. It contains alkaloids and saponins. Blue cohosh yields from the U.S. and Canada.

Shepard's Purse—*Capsella bursa-pastoris*

Shepard's purse has long been a number one recommendation for hemorrhage and excessive bleeding. It is a stiptic herb that constricts blood vessels and tissue, lowering blood pressure and contracting the uterus. Shepard's purse leaves provide vitamin C and K, some protein, sulfur, calcium, iron and sodium.(6) In the U.S., it has been used following expulsion of the placenta since the time of the Pilgrims.

Relevant properties: astringent, anti-inflammatory, diuretic, hemostatic. Shepard's purse contains flavonoids, polypeptides and plant acids. It can be found in many parts of the world, including Europe, North America and Asia.

Motherwort—*Leonurus cardiaca*

I can think of no better herb for labor and postpartum than this one, the Latin name for which means "lion heart." Though it is not to be used until labor, motherwort can ease early labor pains if they begin prematurely.(7) Motherwort can also alleviate the restlessness, anxiety, tension and insomnia some women experience during labor. After childbirth it is given to help the uterus relax and return to normal.(8)

Relevant properties: nervine, emmenagogic, anti-spasmodic, hepatic. Motherwort is a cardiac tonic and contains iridoids, diterpenes and flavonoids. Motherwort can be found in Europe, the U.S. and Canada.

Other Common Herbs

Trillium—*Trillium erectum* Trillium has long been utilized in the U.S for birth, first by indigenous peoples and then by European settlers. It is used prior to labor to smooth the progress of contractions and ensure an easier delivery. Trillium can also decrease the incidence and severity of postpartum hemorrhage.

Valerian—*Valeriana officinalis* Valerian is wonderful as an internal or topical pain reliever. It can also assist with relaxation and sleep.(9) Valerian has been found to slow preterm labor. This does not, of course, mean it will stop a preterm delivery. Valerian can be used to massage sore thighs and backs.

Cranesbill—*Geranium maculatum* Cranesbill has astringent properties and has long been used to prevent or stop hemorrhage in childbirth. It is also anti-inflammatory and can be used topically on sore tissues or hemorrhoids.

Many herbs, of course, are not listed. Many more are regional treasures used by midwives in a particular area. It is my hope that through communication and research, midwives can identify a multitude of herbs to assist birth in a more natural and balanced way. Herbs can be a safe and effective alternative when used with proper education and care. Some great reads are:

The Natural Pregnancy Book: Herbs, Nutrition, and Other Holistic Choices, by Aviva Jill Romm

Herbal Healing for Women, by Rosemary Gladstar

Holistic Herbal, by David Hoffmann

Wise Woman Herbal for the Childbearing Year (Wise Woman Herbal Series, Book 1), by Susun S. Weed

Demetria Clark is the director of Heart of Herbs Herbal School in Vermont (www.heartofherbs.com) and a labor support doula.

References:

1. Gordeichuk, T.N., et al. (1993) The prevention of congenital developmental anomalies in rats. *Ontogenesis* 24(1): 48–55.
2. Sullivan, J.B., Jr, et al. (1979). Pennyroyal oil poisoning and hepatotoxicity. *JAMA* 242(26): 2873–2874.
3. Shlosberg A., Egyod M.N. (1983). Examples of poisonous plants in Israel of importance to animals and man. *Arch Toxicol Suppl* 6: 194–96.
4. Beier, R.C. (1990). Natural pesticides and bioactive components in foods. *Rev Environ Contain Toxicol* 113: 47–137.
5. Belew, C. (1999). Herbs and the childbearing woman. Guidelines for midwives. *J Nurse Midwifery* 44: 231–52.
6. Iurisson, S.M. Shepherd's Purse. (Vitamin content in shepherd's purse [*Capsella bursa pastoris* (L.) Medic.]
7. Hoffman, David. (1996). *The Complete Illustrated Holistic Herbal*. Barnes & Noble Books in arrangement with Element Books Ltd.
8. Gale Group. (2001). *Gale Encyclopedia of Alternative Medicine*.
9. Mitchell, W. (2000). Applications of Botanical Remedies in Naturopathic Medicine. Seattle: manuscript.