

An Article about Sheep and Herbs

By Alethea Kenney

My last two articles focused on what health is and how to maintain it and using homeopathics when problems do arise to help return the animal to balance while the shepherd works to correct the underlying condition that allowed the illness or injury to arise in the beginning. Herbs are another natural way to treat illness, parasites and injury holistically and there are many herbs and ways to use them. I will give a few examples of preparations and herbs that work well for me. Several good books on herbal care for livestock are available and most animals can be given the same herbs humans take but in doses specific to the weight of the animal being treated. In my experience, less is more. I often start with a dose well under what would be appropriate for an animal's weight and find that in most cases, it is effective and I've saved myself time, expense and herbs. Repetition seems to be key to herbs and I will repeat a dose several times a day in extreme cases or only once or twice a day in non-critical cases. When preparing herbs for use, the most common ways are teas, tinctures and capsules (or ground whole herb in an easy-to-dispense dose). I prefer teas for several reasons but teas also have drawbacks when dosing animals. According to Kevin Spelman in his article in Journal of American Herbalists Guild (2007), animals have evolved to digest a multi component mix of nutrients in herbs not just one isolated constituent or chemical and Juliette de Bairacly Levy (1991) also describes the use of fresh whole herbs or teas as more natural to animals. Because of this, I make teas from fresh or dried herbs as infusions or decoctions. An infusion is made from leaves, flowers or other ephemeral parts and boiling water is poured over the plant material, this is covered and allowed to steep for 10 minutes up to an hour (de Bairacly Levy steeps hers overnight). Decoctions are made from roots, dried berries and woody parts of plants and the plant parts are boiled in the water for 10 minutes to a half hour (I do this until the water turns the color of the plant material). When preparing these, I use about 2 handfuls of fresh material or one handful of dried (this is approximately 2 oz fresh or 1 oz dried if you want to weigh it) and one pint of water. For an average Icelandic ewe, the dose I then give is about half the pint at a time, repeated up to 4 times a day. To use a tea externally, I use the same recipe but then after the tea cools, pour some on the affected area. The downside to teas is obvious, it's time-consuming to make and then you have to catch the sheep and manage to pour a considerable quantity of liquid (which may not taste great) in its mouth. Adding molasses can aid in taste but handling the animal is still difficult. For those who wish to attempt it, straddling the sheep from behind at about the neck and using your legs to hold while you tip the head slightly and insert a large syringe of tea in its mouth is about the easiest. If the animal is separated from the flock, teas can be added to water but make sure the water is still palatable, if you've adulterated it to the point the animal will not drink, you haven't gained anything.

This brings us to tinctures, the easier way to dose. A tincture is made by soaking herbs in alcohol and can be done in a folk method or a carefully measured scientific method. In spite of the fact some people will fight over the incorrectness of folk methods, they have worked for millenia for people around the world and I find them to be the easiest. I simply soak a jar full of herb in either vodka or vegetable glycerine for 2-6 weeks (depending on how patient I am), shaking it when I remember to do so. The downside to this is that not all constituents of an herb are soluble in alcohol (or veg. glycerine) so you don't get every little chemical in the herb, however, not all constituents are soluble in water either so you miss some in teas also. The wonderful thing about tinctures is that doses are small, 10 drops to a tablespoon, depending on weight of animal and how you made the tincture. This is a much more manageable amount to get in an angry sheep's mouth! This can be the only way you find herbs for sale so you may be forced to use this form.

Dried herbs can be powdered and either placed in boughten capsules or placed directly in the animal's mouth, the dose is still 2 handfuls of fresh (more difficult to powder) or 1 handful of dried.

Doses listed on boughten jars are for a 150 lb adult man and this can be calculated out for the weight of the animal if it differs substantially.

I like to harvest my own herbs (and this includes many woody species and roots, not just kitchen herbs and spices) as I can then guarantee quality and my material hasn't been shipped across the country or from a foreign country. Even organically grown herbs shipped from other countries are fumigated and possibly irradiated as they cross borders. But I encourage anyone interested in doing this to be careful to conserve critical species, critical habitats and respect private property. A list of endangered plants is available from the DNR or ASCS office in your county. Sensitive habitats include wetlands and bogs or highly erodible sites and motorized vehicles are not recommended in these areas. Plants should never be harvested by roadways or near sprayed fields (use your common sense!).

If you cannot harvest your own or just want to buy them for ease of use, there are several websites that offer high quality herbs and you may find local sources also. A guide to herbs helps you know what you are getting, what it should look like and it's basic uses. In general, if an herb is listed as having specific actions for humans, it will also have these actions in animals.

I do not like to simply substitute an herb for a pharmaceutical drug, I find this is not the best use of herbal treatments. Instead, I like to find herbs that either have an affinity for an organ system or can help the whole body detoxify and rebuild so I do not need a large pharmacy of herbs to find one that will help in a certain situation.

I am going to list a few of my favorites and their uses but this is not a recommendation and people wishing to use herbs should invest in books on herbs and their uses then experiment cautiously with herbs that appeal to them. This is by no means a comprehensive list and I am going to stick mainly with herbs you can grow or find locally, not ones that must be shipped from somewhere else. The main problem I find with herbal livestock books is they are written for other countries and the herbs listed are often not available here. This does not mean you cannot use native American or introduced plants, you can!

Raspberry leaf (*Rubus* spp., including blackberry and dewberry): This herb has traditionally been used in humans as a uterine tonic, an astringent for diarrhea and a drying agent for wounds and as a superb blood cleanser. It serves the same purposes in sheep and has the advantage of tasting good, sheep will eat this out of your hand, making your job easier (Levy 1991, Tierra 1998). I've used it for retained placenta to help heal and strengthen the uterus (obviously, I then determined the reason for the retention and corrected it before the next breeding season).

Yarrow (*Achillea millefolium*): A powerful herb, easily found in most pastures. For wounds, this herb is THE herb of choice, astringent, cleansing and its scent repels flies. I use it for all kinds of cuts and bleeding scurs on rams in rut. Internally it helps promote fevers so cures by aiding the body in its own fight against infections. More information can be found in Levy and Fischer-Rizzi.

Echinacea (*Echinacea* spp.): This herb has become popular as a cold remedy and immune booster but I have found one of its best uses for any condition involving inflammation. It can be applied externally as well as taken internally and I use the whole herb, not just the root. I've seen it work almost miraculously in cases where there is sudden swelling and infection (heat) like infected surgical sites or inflamed joints from infection. Worth growing in a plot or seeding into a pasture, it should not be used simply as a way to continuously boost weak immune systems without addressing the underlying cause. It can exhaust the system over time and do more harm than good.

Mints (*Mentha* spp.): Easy to find and wonderful aids to digestion, usually palatable to a sheep. The essential oil can be used but should be diluted as it is irritating to the skin and mucous membranes (Levy 1991). I have found that allowing the animal to sniff the peppermint essential oil is almost in-

stantly effective in bloat and digestive upset to promote bowel movement and ease discomfort.

Comfrey (*Symphytum officinale*): This herb is now suspect for internal use in humans and I've not found my sheep to like it in particular so I use it mainly externally for wounds, but never abscesses. It promotes skin regeneration so well it will cause the abscess to seal up. Fischer-Rizzi describes several species, only one of which should be used internally. For skin problems and broken bones it is unsurpassed (Fischer-Rizzi 1996, Levy 1991).

Burdock (*Arctium lappa*): The root is traditionally used as a liver cleanser and all-around blood cleanser and since the skin is an eliminative organ, when you see skin conditions, you should also remember that internal eliminative systems will also be compromised and in need of cleansing. The leaf can be made into a tea and applied externally to skin problems while the root can be used internally (Fischer-Rizzi 1996, Levy 1991).

Calendula (*Calendula officinalis*): Almost universally known as a skin healer, this herb also regenerates skin and should not be used with an abscess. It will act as a bacteriostat, keeping bacteria from proliferating and can be used internally to cleanse, especially if the lymph glands are swollen (a sign the body is fighting a systemic infection) (Fischer-Rizzi 1996, Levy 1991, Wood 1997).

Willow (*Salix* spp.): The herbal forerunner to aspirin, this plant has the advantage of not causing stomach irritation. It can be used for pain, inflammation and fever and most sheep will browse it readily.

Plantain (*Plantago* spp.): Unbelievably common and useful for just about anything that ails ya! Externally it can be used as a cleanser and healer for just about any skin condition or injury while internally it is a demulcent and good for diarrheas and mucous membranous conditions (coughs, etc). I find it works best fresh and for winter use I freeze some leaves, drying them is a fine art, they attract mold quicker than bread (Fischer-Rizzi 1996, Levy 1991).

Goldenseal (*Hydrastis canadensis*): Because this herb has been overharvested to the point of rarity, I always look for an organically grown product and don't attempt to harvest it myself. It is an antibiotic and works on the liver system to help cleanse in infections. I use a few drops of the tincture in most cases where a sheep seems to be ill and feverish. Because it is such a strong antibiotic, it should be used internally for short periods only as it can upset the beneficial bacteria in the rumen. Externally, it is wonderful for skin infections. Avoid using it with pregnant animals (Tierra 1998, Wood 1997).

This is a very brief listing and almost all plants have some medicinal uses. Allowing sheep to graze and browse a pasture with mixed forbs, bushes, trees and grasses ensures they take in as many minerals and vitamins as are available and can choose plants that will help heal them. Many other species can be used to help return sheep to health, white oaks (*Quercus* spp.) are useful astringents while the acorns are nutritive. Slippery elm (*Ulmus rubra*) bark is demulcent, nutritive and healing so these trees should be treasured on a farm. Alders (*Ulmus* spp.) can be blood cleansing and sheep love to browse them.

Learning to identify and use plants and trees to aid in restoring balance to your sheep can be fun, rewarding and beneficial, not to mention cost-saving and easily available. Many good books on using herbs and identifying native and introduced plants are available. Choose herb books by authors who actually use the herbs, not just those that are repeating what was said in previous herbals as this can give you new insights and tips on uses. As always, herbs are not a substitute for good pasture management or care and a veterinarian's advice should be sought before undertaking any treatments. Some herbs can mask problems (like willow reducing pain and inflammation) making it difficult for a vet to diagnose conditions so use common sense in feeding herbs.

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