



Categorizing Herbs

The Basics

- ◆ An herb is any plant or part of a plant that has nutritional or medicinal uses. It might be a leaf, root, flower, seed, bark or a fruit.
- ◆ The medical definition of medicine: "anything which enters the body and alters its structure or function."
- ◆ Plants have been used as medicine for over 4000 years. In most countries they continue to be the primary source of medicine.

- ◆ There are many resources (books, online, etc) for looking up herbs to help with a particular symptom.
- ◆ The purpose of this class is to help you begin to think about the best herbs for your particular constitution, and your particular symptom.



Herbology is such a large field that
no one person can know all of it in
one lifetime.

It is useful to help organize this
information into categories so that
we can access it and have a greater
understanding of this wide and
complex field.

We will be looking at two different
ways of categorizing herbs that
may affect the way you think about
them.

It's more complex than one herb for
one symptom!



Why would we need categories for herbs?



- ◆ Have you ever tried an herbal remedy for something and were less than impressed with the results?
- ◆ Why would one herb work wonders for one person, but not do a thing for someone else?
- ◆ Have you noticed fifteen different herbs that are good for a particular symptom, and were unsure which was the best one to try?
- ◆ Sometimes you need an herb that acts on your ailment from a different category than the one that isn't working.

Categorizing herbs by their degree of action

- ◆ 1st degree- have no immediate discernible effect on the body and are totally overwhelmed by the natural forces of the body - (foods, such as oranges)
- ◆ 2nd degree- have some immediate effect, but in the end are overwhelmed by the body. (medicinal foods- usually used as a condiment and you probably wouldn't eat one whole. Examples: garlic, lemon, spices, herbs)

All natural foods
have some
medicinal effect.



- ◆ 3rd degree- act on the body and overwhelm natural forces. (herbs you won't be putting in your food- such as echinacea, golden seal, oregon grape, feverfew, etc)
- ◆ 4th degree- are poisons and can cause death. Minute quantities, used with great skill can be useful. Examples- belladonna, rue, foxglove. This is where pharmaceuticals begin. Aspirin, Zantec, Tylenol, etc.



- ◆ Allopathic medicine uses fourth level solutions for second level problems.

The difference between herbs and drugs

- ◆ Drugs often take an "active ingredient" in an herb, such as digitalis in foxglove, or salicin in white willow bark, and extract and concentrate it.
- ◆ They are very potent and lack the several hundred other factors in the plant that tend to have a balancing effect.
- ◆ Drugs will have side effects, that are often counterbalanced by whole herb preparation. For example, chemical diuretics flush potassium out of the system, which needs to be replenished. Herbal diuretics are naturally high in potassium.

Another way to categorize herbs



- ◆ Herbs generally fall into five different categories, based on their active constituents.
- ◆ This comes in handy for substituting one herb for another in herbal combinations.

Before going into detail on these categories, it will be useful to talk about the Chinese concept of Yin and

- ◆ Yin- passive, slow, cold, wet, Yang.
expanding, loose structure, flexible
- ◆ Yang- active, fast, hot, dry,
contracting, rigid structure, fixed
- ◆ You can see how different ailments might fall into these different categories, such as a wet cough versus a dry, irritated cough.
 - ◆ Understanding that the different categories of herbs can be viewed as yin/yang helps to determine which type of herb will be useful.



Constitution

- ◆ Do you run hot or cold? Are you the one who grabs a sweater for the air conditioned movie theatre or the one who is happy enough in short sleeves in winter?
- ◆ Another way to tell is by tongue color. It's subtle, but there is a marked difference between the palest tongues (cool constitution) and reddest tongues (warm constitution)
- ◆ If you run cold, herbs that are more warming (yang) may be more beneficial, and vice versa.



5 Main Categories



- ◆ Aromatic Herbs
- ◆ Astringent Herbs
- ◆ Bitter Herbs
- ◆ Mucilaginous Herbs
- ◆ Nutritive Herbs

1

Mucilaginous

Most yin.

Drawing in and expanding.

Bitter

2

Most expanded.

Shifting from yin to yang,

Expansion to contraction



Most contracted.

Shifting from contraction to
expansion,

4 yang to yin

Astringent

Aromatic

3

Most yang.

Pushing out and
contracting.

Mucilaginous



- ◆ Derive their properties from polysaccharides, which have a slippery, mild taste and swell in water.
- ◆ Most mucilage is not broken down in digestion, but absorb toxins from the bowel and give bulk to the stool.
- ◆ They are very useful externally in poultices and knitting agents.
- ◆ They have the properties of yin in Chinese medicine. They are loose, wet, flexible, and are drawing in and expanding.
- ◆ Examples: marshmallow root, aloe vera, comfrey, fenugreek, psyllium, slippery elm, mullein.

Bitter

- ◆ In Chinese medicine, it is shifting from yin to yang. It is the most expanded state, shifting from expansion to contraction.
- ◆ Examples: golden seal, Oregon grape, cascara sagrada, senna, yucca, yellow dock, juniper, milk thistle
- ◆ A large category which subdivides further into laxative, diuretic, saponin, and alkaloid.
- ◆ Purified alkaloids are some of the most potent drugs known to man.



Aromatic Herbs

- ◆ Usually have a strong odor
- ◆ Properties come mainly from their volatile oils
- ◆ Stimulants and Nervines are all aromatic herbs. (they're subcategories)
- ◆ Qualities include heat, pushing out and contracting, dry, rigid, fixed. (the most yang qualities in Chinese Medicine)
- ◆ Examples: ginger, garlic, thyme, catnip, basil, clove, marjoram, valerian



Astringent

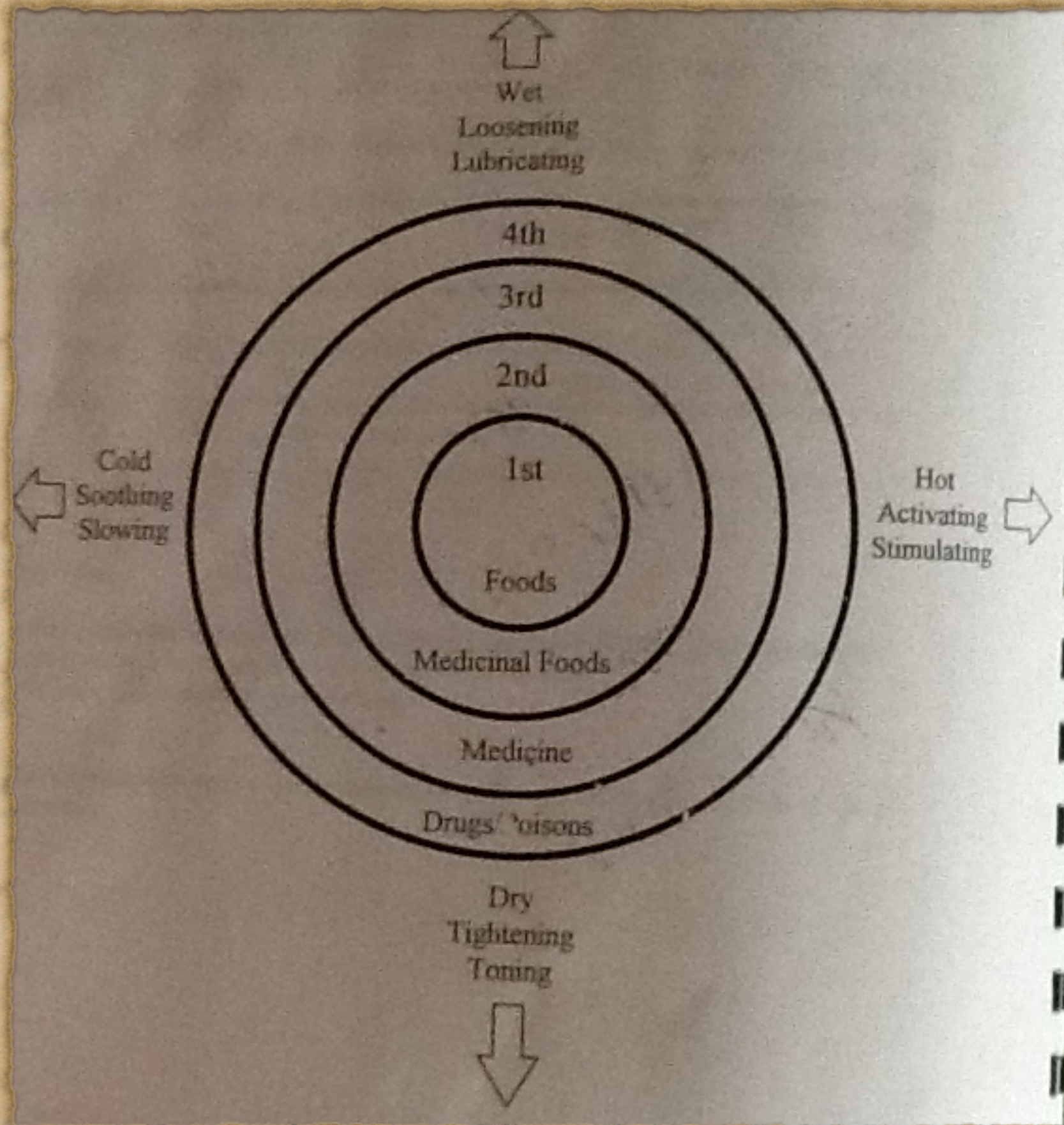
- ◆ Owe their properties mainly to their tannins
- ◆ Tannins tighten or tone living tissue.
- ◆ Astringents are still warm, but moving towards cool.
- ◆ In Chinese medicine, they are in the most contracted state, shifting from contraction to expansion, from yang to yin.
- ◆ Examples are yarrow, red raspberry, Uva Ursi, bayberry, white oak bark



Nutritive Herbs

- ◆ Herbs placed in this category are known for their nutritive value.
- ◆ Medicinal effects are relatively minor- such as fiber, mucilage and diuretic action.
- ◆ Provide proteins, fats, carbs, vitamins and minerals necessary for building and maintaining a healthy body.
- ◆ Examples: carrot, lemon, spirulina, bee pollen, rose hips, hibiscus, pineapple, asparagus.





A few examples:



- ◆ Varicose veins- veins are over expanded. Herbs that are yang will help with contraction. Aromatic herbs are the most yang and will help with circulation. Astringent herbs are the most contracted.
- ◆ If you have a cold, and are drowning in mucus (very yin ailment), something drying, or yang, will be helpful. Something from the aromatic category would be helpful.
- ◆ Sunburn- what quadrant would you look to for relief?
- ◆ Constipation? - depends on why constipated? Are bowels constricted? Are stools too expanded?

Now you should be able to understand a little bit about an herb when reading its properties



Feverfew- bitter



Comfrey- mucilaginous with supporting astringent properties



Yarrow- astringent