

3. Principles and Practices of Bush Medicine

HARVEST AND PREPARATION

The great majority of bush medicines that are taken internally are prepared as teas or decoctions. A tea is a liquid preparation prepared by steeping or soaking macerated or whole plant matter (leaves, stems, bark, flowers, roots) in cold or hot water to prepare a beverage, typically for the purpose of extraction of medicinal substances. A decoction is a liquid preparation made by boiling selected plant parts in water to release active medicinal ingredients. A decoction is generally intended for immediate use, ideally within 24 hours, but may be stored under refrigeration for about 72 hours. When boiling is used, it is usually a gentle rolling boil on low heat.

The leaves and leafy branches of bush medicine plants are typically harvested fresh and then prepared for use within a few hours. When bark, roots, or twigs are harvested they are either prepared when fresh, or allowed to dry, and then stored for later use. When drying plant parts, the plants are allowed to dry in the sun and then brought inside for storage, sometimes suspended from the ceiling in mesh bags.

When Bahamians speak of making bush tea, they are often referring to making a decoction, but not always. When making a hot or cold water tea, the term “steep” is often used. Liquid preparations are usually described

as boiled or steeped, though in some instances “steep” may refer to the condition where the plant is boiled very briefly and then allowed to steep. The distinction between tea and decoction is important from a medicinal standpoint. Decoctions are much more concentrated, and the strength of the preparation is more or less proportional to the boiling time, up to a point. Although some types of plant material require extended boiling, most decoctions are boiled for about 15 to 20 minutes. Medicinal substances are more quickly extracted from leaves (which have a high surface to volume ratio) than from bark, stems, or roots (which have a low surface to volume ratio). On the other hand, roots, stems, and bark, which have a lower water content, tend to have a higher concentration of medicinal substances. These can often be boiled a second time to extract more medicinal principles, but a third boiling is often too weak to be of use. Roots and bark are considered to be superior to leaves or leafy branches in their medicinal quality. That said, there may be differences in the types of medicinal compounds found in roots, bark, twigs, and leaves.

When possible, it is important to document the length of boiling time, but this is easier said than done. When interviewees are asked about the length of the boiling time, they typically respond by saying that about 15 minutes is adequate, though sometimes they specify