

Written by Sara Bran

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*Between the idea
And the reality
Between the motion
And the act
Falls the Shadow
T. S. Eliot*

From October 23rd, as the syrupy decay of the final Autumn harvest gives way to the bleak lines of Winter, those of us in the northern hemisphere come under the influence of Scorpio, the most karmically-loaded of all astrological signs. As the overseer of death, rebirth and transformation, Scorpio is a hard taskmaster, demanding fortitude and courage.

We're now moving through darkness towards the Winter solstice, when we welcome the rebirth of the Sun, and celebrate life. If the keyword for Autumn was reflection, the word for Winter is renewal. Nature invites us to contemplate darker forces: the more challenging aspects of what it means to be human. An epic battle between light and dark commences in Nature, and in our psyches. From the Kabbalistic Da'at, to Divali, through the Druidic solstice, to the Christian Christmas, parallel ideas of dormancy versus activity, life and death, and insularity versus expansion are celebrated. All these festivals place us at the edge of something, always with the potential to move forward a wiser version of what we were before.

The importance of 'mining the shadow' runs deep in our culture. The Celts regarded sunset as the beginning of the day, and all celebrations commenced in the evening. We all begin in the dark, in the cradle of our mothers' wombs. In the tumultuous blackness of pre-existence, our spark ignites, and we start to be. And so it is in Nature; although the face of Winter seems barren and dead, in the deep, fertile soil, the invisible seeds of the future are already growing. Under the cover of darkness, our psyches are free to discard old structures, seek innovation, and embrace the chaos relinquishing the logical mind. We're free to die and reinvent ourselves, before returning to the light of the New Year. The medicinal and folkloric qualities of the trees, fruits, spices, plants and natural resources associated with this time show how Nature magically mirrors our human journey. In the etheric qualities of symbols, such as the apple or the holly tree, our psychologies are reflected and nurtured by Nature, like the good mother she is.

The last of the Autumn apples has hit the ground. The fruit has

many esoteric qualities in folklore, and is associated with ideas of beauty and immortality. It symbolises the journey of the Sun ~ starting out yellow, and reddening as it passes through the sky, setting crimson into the horizon, only to be born again. In Norse and Greek myths, the gods ate apples to prolong youth and beauty. The magical qualities attributed to the apple derive from the fact that when cut in half horizontally, a five-pointed star is revealed in the middle, as used in Pagan and Druid symbolism. Both Adam, in the Garden of Eden, and Merlin, in the Druid apple grove, received special knowledge when they consumed an apple. As a Bach Flower Essence, Crab Apple (*Malus sylvestris*) cleanses and purifies, helping us clarify our needs, and leave negative patterns behind. This is an excellent essence to take on the Winter solstice, when we are looking back over our year and deciding what to take forward with us.

Nutritionally, there is much truth in the adage, "an apple a day keeps the doctor away". A huge amount of vitamin C and anti-oxidant chemicals are found in the skin and flesh of apples. Anti-oxidants help maintain the quality of our skin, and aid in cancer treatments, as they 'mop up' molecules responsible for cell

damage. Researchers found that eating just 100g of apple gives an anti-oxidant effect equivalent to taking some 1,500mg of vitamin C, which is vital in maintaining a healthy immune system.

Several herbs are gathered around this time of year. One of the main ones is Mugwort (*Artemisia vulgaris*), which is from the same family as Wormwood. The incredible ability of this plant to grow in desolate and uninhabitable areas leads

herbalist, Matthew Wood, to describe Mugwort as, "Mother Nature's promise that, even in the midst of such unnatural destruction, life will spring up anew. It's the remedy for devastation in human life."* What a perfect metaphor for the

Remedies from the edge

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challenges of Winter! It's one of the nine sacred Druid herbs, and was deployed to protect against evil spirits and misfortune. It's esoterically associated with dreaming, and is especially protective of children. Sleeping over mugwort pillows enhances dreamwork and shamanic journeying. Homeopathically, *Artemisia vulgaris* is indicated for epilepsy, as well as in sleepwalking, and menstrual complaints. Herbally, it acts on the digestive and nervous systems, and is useful in expelling tapeworms.

The warming spices we traditionally use have health-giving qualities. Allspice (*Pimenta dioica*) comes from the berries of an evergreen tree, and its use as a preservative has been traced back to the Mayans and Arawak Indians. It has a similar effect to clove, in that it has a soothing, carminative effect (relieving of flatulence) on the digestion. The essential oil irritates the skin by expanding the blood vessels, therefore bringing heat to the body. Cloves (*Eugenia caryophyllus*) soothe the smooth muscle of the digestive tract, and folk tradition has it that sucking cloves reduces the desire for alcohol, and relieves toothache. The essential oil has a powerful neutralising effect on pneumococci and other

bacteria, and kills intestinal parasites. Another warming spice, Nutmeg, known as *Nux moschata*, homeopathically, is a remedy with an affinity for 'hysterical' fainting patients with menstrual symptoms. Think of one of Jane Austen's heroines, and you get the picture! Patients needing *Nux moschata* are worse for excitement, and I've seen children go into this state at Christmas. If they also have a lot of digestive

symptoms like bloating and flatulence, this remedy could help.

Rosehips (*Rosa camina*) can be collected as late as November. This is the type of rose depicted in *Sleeping Beauty*, the metaphorical tale of the long sleep and spectacular reawakening. Rosehips are one of the best natural sources of vitamin C and bioflavonoids, and it makes wonderful nourishing oil for the skin. Scientists recently discovered that the powdered form of these hips is more effective than paracetamol in giving pain relief in patients with osteoarthritis.

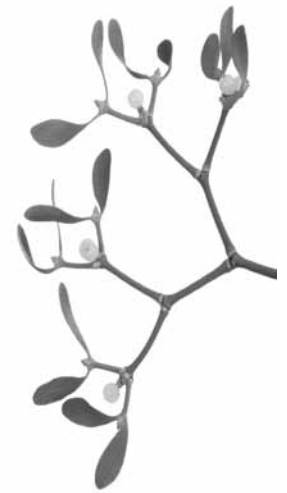
Rosehip syrup can be taken daily throughout Winter, and is best made by gathering fresh hips, washing them well, removing stalks, and placing them in a blender. Add the blended hips to a pan of simmering water with lots of agave or honey (equal amounts of sweetener to fruit), plus warming spices of your choice. After a short time, the mixture will be syrupy, and ready to pour through a strainer into jars, for storage. (Simmering for as little time as possible will help to keep the Vitamin C content high.)

In Druid lore, Winter is the time of the epic battle between the Oak King (God of Light) and the Holly King (Lord of the Dark/Satan). At the Winter solstice, the Oak King triumphs until the Summer solstice, when the Holly King returns to power. All evergreen plants have importance now, as they're a symbol of the renewal and abundance that will return. Holly (*Ilex aquifolium*), as a Bach Flower, is indicated for nervous depletion, jealousy, hatred and envy. As a homeopathic remedy, *Ilex aquifolium* fosters healing between fathers and their offspring, and indeed the entire paternal ancestral line. It's used in tension headaches made worse by excessive noise and turmoil.

Oak (*Quercus robur*) is a Bach Essence for life's plodders who keep going until they exhaust themselves. They have an incredible sense of duty, to the point of stubbornness. Giving this essence helps people become aware of when they need to rest and simply 'trust'. Likewise, homeopathically, *Quercus robur* is a support for those who exhaust themselves day-after-day in jobs and life situations that give them no joy. If you imagine sitting under a huge oak tree, this is the feeling the remedy fosters. It gives a sense of deep roots and support that frees the patient from having to plod on and on. It can reconnect them with their creativity, and permits them to find more free-flowing directions in life.

Mistletoe (*Viscum album*) is parasitic, mainly growing on the bark of apple trees, oaks and hawthorns. The tradition of hanging mistletoe at Christmas comes from the Norse legend of Balder (the Sungod), who was killed by his brother Hodur's arrow, made

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of mistletoe. The moment Balder died was said to be the

beginning of Winter. At the behest of the other gods, Balder was restored to life, and mistletoe was placed under the guardianship of Freyja (goddess of love), who ordained that anyone who passed near it should receive a kiss to show that mistletoe was an emblem of love, not hate. Persephone opened the gates of hell with a wand of mistletoe, and to the Celts, in the dead November forests, evergreen mistletoe and its white fruits represented hope for new life. At the Winter solstice, druids cut mistletoe from the sacred oak, with a golden sickle. As the plant falls onto a white cloth, the New Year begins. In homeopathy, *Viscum album* is used in depression, especially where a patient has given up on themselves and their gifts. It's also used for rattling winter coughs, and rheumatism.

The main greenery we bring into our homes at this time of year is, of course, the spruce or pine tree of Christmas. Various species of pine are used in bronchitis, sinus, upper respiratory catarrh and asthma, as an inhalant. Adding pine sprigs to a bath is said to ease tension, and encourage healing of abrasions. As a Bach Flower, Pine is used for those who take on a lot of guilt. They're perfectionists, who, when things go wrong, blame themselves to the point of emotional paralysis. Giving the essence encourages patients to be kinder to themselves, releasing unhealthy patterns of self-blame.

Ivy (*Hedra helix*), infamous for being the 'loser' in the song, *The Holly and the Ivy*, is a fascinating plant symbolically, as it only flowers when it has the support of another structure. It is the material of the Poet's Crown, and the wreath of Bacchus (*Dionysus*). It's an emblem of fidelity, and English pubs would display the sign of an ivy bush to indicate the good quality of the liquor sold within. When ivy flowers, from September to December, huge amounts of iodine are present in the leaves. Iodine has a particular balancing effect on the thyroid. Herbally, ivy is useful in respiratory and asthmatic conditions.

Winter is traditionally associated with nuts, such as the Walnut (*Juglans regia*). The Bach Walnut is a wonderful 'protective' remedy. It helps to guard against outside influences, and is excellent for children and adults who are too 'open' ~ those who take on every nuance and negative energy they encounter. It's a wonderful essence to use at any time of change or transition.

In the Winter, we see the strangely individualistic flowering of the Christmas Rose (*Helleborus niger*). This remedy is associated with darkness, due to the blackness of its roots. Pliny records its herbal use in treating mental afflictions, and Paracelsus talks of its 'rejuvenating effects'. French prisoners of war cured themselves of night blindness when they replaced diminishing supplies of

snuff with powdered hellebore. It's another warding plant used for protection, and the black powder scattered before one's feet was said to make one invisible. These associations with blackness are reflected in the homeopathic remedy, which is used for patients suffering from low vitality, sensorial and seasonal depression, and melancholy made worse by seeing the happiness of others.

In recent years, the giving of Cyclamen (*Cyclamen europaeum*) plants as gifts has become common. The plant is dormant in Summer, and, in Winter, can survive shockingly low temperatures. It's associated with the Greek goddess, Hecate, 'the distant one', who is overseer of the dark hours. Homeopathically, it's helpful in menstrual problems, violent headaches and depression. The Light Heart Flower Essence, Cyclamen, encourages self-care and the nurturing of one's dreams.

The bright red berries of the Hawthorn (*Crataegus*) are abundant during Winter, their deep colour in the dull landscape offering a symbol of hope. Metaphorically, the plant represents the challenge of not 'hardening' into thorns ~ of maintaining a sense of grace in adversity. The Crown of Thorns is meant to have been hawthorn, and in Glastonbury, there was said to be a hawthorn which bloomed every Christmas Eve. The Romans dedicated the plant to Cardea, goddess of health. The herbal and homeopathic use of *Crataegus* is mainly as a heart tonic and modifier of the cardiovascular system. Nutritionally, hawthorn berries are high in vitamin C content, and were given to troops in the Second World War to prevent scurvy.

Winter would not be complete without mentioning the Three Wise Men. They followed the Star of Bethlehem (*Ornithogalum umbellatum*), which is a Bach Essence used for grief and shock. It's helpful if a birth is shocking (for any member of the family), and metaphorically, the essence supports the birth of the Sun/Son at solstice.

Frankincense (*Olibanum*) is a resin that has been used for centuries. Chinese medicine records it as 'fanhunxiang', the 'calling back the soul fragrance', used as incense. Research into Indian Frankincense (*Boswellia serrata*) shows its promise for treating stiff muscles and joints. Homeopathically, *Olibanum* is not a common remedy, but its central theme is 'saying farewell'. It's helpful for children who take on the responsibility of the 'endings' of the adults around them, such as

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in cases of parental separation or illness. Homeopathic *Olibanum* helps children see that they don't need to mediate for the adults surrounding them.

Myrrh (*Commiphora myrrha*) is also a resin with an intense perfume. It was an Egyptian embalming agent. It's used extensively in Ayurvedic and Chinese medicine. In diluted form, a drop of myrrh tincture in warm water is a wonderful mouthwash for infected gums and ulcerated tongues, such as

those brought on by seasonal indulgence. It's also an effective gargle for sore throats and tonsillitis.

Gold (*Aurum metallicum*) is difficult to excavate, as it sits extremely deep in the Earth. The legend of King Midas teaches us that when gold is used well, it can bring great joy, but if used badly, it becomes a burden that paralyses us. Gold is symbolically associated with the Sun, and is the alchemist's goal, the

ultimate state of perfection. Homeopathically, *Aurum* is probably our greatest remedy for treating depression, especially the type that is brought on by a sense of financial failure, or disappointed ambition. As such, it's a remedy prescribed commonly during times of recession, when many material dreams are crushed. *Aurum* fosters the idea of seeking the gold within, and, metaphorically, pours a little sunshine into the soul.

These are just a few of the many allies we find in Nature during the Winter months. At times, the days can seem unbearably harsh, but every year I'm inspired by the existential writer, Albert Camus, who wrote, "In the depth of Winter, I finally learned that within me there lay an invincible Summer." May you be blessed enough to find your unconquerable light in the weeks ahead.

*Matthew Wood, quoted in Frans Vermeulen's *Synoptic Materia Medica 2*, Emryss Press, Haarlem (1996)



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