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**PRISONER'S**  
**HERBAL**

N I C O L E   R O S E





# THE PRISONER'S HERBAL



Nicole Rose



The Prisoner's Herbal, Nicole Rose

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## ***For Sam***

*To my best friend who is still in prison. You brought me joy every day in the prison gardens, one day you'll be free and we will gather plants together on the outside.  
This book is dedicated to you.*



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## INTRODUCTION

Welcome to the Prisoner's Herbal. This book has been put together to create a resource for prisoners who would like to learn more about plants growing in prison courtyards. It will be distributed to prisoners around the world via supportive individuals and solidarity projects. It contains detailed descriptions of plants, their medicinal and edible uses, how to use them and what health challenges they can support. There is also a section on how to use items that can be bought on canteen for health uses, such as salt, pepper, chilli powder and more.

When I was 21 years old, I entered one of Britain's highest security prisons for women and began a 3.5-year prison sentence. This book shares stories of the relationships I built with plants in the prison gardens. The profiles in this book highlight their edible, medicinal and other traditional uses and most importantly, how to use them in a prison context with limited access to resources or common medicine making ingredients such as alcohol or oil. The prison where I did my sentence was a privatised prison meaning I wasn't able to access the spices and vegetables available in some UK prisons (but certainly not all). However, I have asked friends inside to send me copies of their canteen sheets and I have created a section of the book with remedies from these ingredients that are available. I also did some research into what is available in prisons in the United States, which seems even more limited than what I call 'prison island UK'.

I am painfully aware that prisoners will all have different access to plants. A minority may work in the prison gardens and may even grow many more plants than those that are detailed in this book, however, the majority will only see a prison courtyard once a day or even once a week if they are lucky. Many



others still will not see the outside at all, contesting with years and years of solitary confinement. For those that can access a courtyard, it may have some grass, but more likely it will just be concrete - hopefully with some defiant plants growing through the cracks. In some prisons, they actively poison all plants with the chemical spray Roundup to maintain a sterile environment to further dehumanise prisoners.

If you are a prisoner reading this then I hope at whatever level of access you have, this book is interesting and useful.

I have also organised information in an index so that you can see a list of common health issues and which plants are recommended. I thought for many people who are new to herbalism, this can often be an easier way to start. You will also find a glossary of terms. I have tried to limit botanical and medical jargon as much as possible but certain words are very specific in understanding actions of plants, so please just look up any that are not clear.

The final pages offer a resources section with recommended books and herbal schools that offer distance learning programs, including one that sends course materials completely free to prisoners.

In solidarity,

Nicole Rose

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## MY STORY

When I was 21 years old, I entered one of Britain's highest security prisons for women called HMP Bronzefield and began a 3.5-year prison sentence. I was sent down for 'conspiracy to blackmail' after a £2.1million police operation to repress and criminalise the grassroots campaign I was part of to close Europe's largest animal testing company who kill more than 100,000 animals every single year. After raiding and arresting more than 32 people, the operation eventually put 12 of us through the courts and people were sentenced from between a few months to 11 years. I was no stranger to prison, however, my first boyfriend got sent down when I was just 16 years old and so I had regularly visited prisons across England by the time it was my turn to go through the gates. All-in-all I spent just under two years in the prison itself and the rest under strict probation outside.

For many, this could seem like a long sentence, however, for many loved ones that I know inside that are serving long sentences it really is not. Friends and comrades are serving life sentences or contemporary versions of them and are literally losing their whole lives to prison. Many do not know when or if they will ever be free.

Since getting out of prison, I have done my best to support my close friends that remain inside. Over many years I have witnessed their mental and physical health decline as the brutality of the prison system has taken its toll. From increasingly horrifying self-harm to frequent suicide attempts. Nine years into her sentence, my best friend Sam was diagnosed with cancer. Her literal battle between life and death escalated due to serious medical neglect by the private

prison that she was in. They failed to take her to hospital appointments, failed to communicate test results and completely failed with post-surgery aftercare where she contracted infection after infection. The doctors in the specialist hospital who had operated on her told her that the prison had failed to bring her to over 9 appointments. Each time they had assembled a surgical team to remove the cancerous tissues from her, and the prison didn't even call to say they would not bring her. It is an absolute miracle she is still alive after two major operations, multiple MRSA infections and years of hellish stress fighting for her life. The consultant told me if the cancer had grown by even 4mm it would have been game over.

**FOR PEOPLE READING THIS IN PRISON, YOU WILL NOT BE SURPRISED.  
YOU WILL HAVE WITNESSED, AND MOST LIKELY, EXPERIENCED MEDICAL  
NEGLECT YOURSELF.**

You will have been in pain and been unable to access painkillers, or seen people begging for medical attention completely ignored by prison officers. When I was in prison, a girl even miscarried and was left alone to bleed out in her cell before being unlocked the next day.

It is in part because of this intense medical neglect that I felt motivated to put together this book. Herbalism is incredibly empowering because plants give us the opportunity to actively care for our own health without fighting an authority (we all know that everything is a fight in prison). Likewise, prison food is awful and wild plants can supplement industrial diets bringing desperately needed vitamins and minerals to our bodies. More than anything, learning about plants is fun. They become familiar friends and help counter the loneliness of imprisonment.

When I got sent down I was expecting to be totally removed from nature. But I remember when I entered the prison and first got 'processed', that first night where I was taken across the main courtyard to house block one where the newcomers go, and I looked down and could see dandelions pushing through the concrete. I could see magpies and crows on the prison walls and fences. I knew that I would find comfort in witnessing this wild resistance and this book captures these memories and experiences.

After several months of bang up and working in the gym waiting to get 'security clearance' for a job in the gardens, I finally got the slip under my door

that I had been assigned to work in the garden party. This meant I could work outside with a small crew of other girls. Most of the labour (dare I say all of it) was completely monotonous - removing the weeds that I loved from beds or paths (or in my case, pretending to weed them or always leaving the roots in the ground so they'd regrow!) or mowing the grass. Occasionally, we could do more interesting tasks like finally planting up a vegetable garden in the main courtyard, as well as building a veg patch and herb garden in the new garden of the mother and baby unit of the prison.

The courtyards were mostly small triangular concrete yards with a triangle of grass in the middle, but amidst the grass were some of my favourite plants such as yarrow and daisy. In the main courtyard, there were ornamental roses - so many that when we had to prune them all in the winter, I got really bad RSI in my wrist from working in the cold and cutting them back. Under these roses, I found mineral-rich plants like chickweed and dandelions.

Another job we had was clearing areas near the inside perimeter fences, this mostly involved strimming curbs or pulling plants out of the gravel. It was here that I encountered plants like mallow and plantain who loved the sandy stony soil.

Of course, I was not allowed to take plants back to my room, so began a daily adventure of how the hell to smuggle things back. We were searched after every shift on the gardens party which involved a pat-down by an officer. I learnt all manner of tricks of putting leaves in my bra or underwear, or carrying them in my gloves and doing a bit of sleight of hand before being searched. If I had a library appointment after being in the garden, it would mean I could even smuggle plants around pressed into my books. Fortunately, I think officers suspected I wasn't a drug user because of what I had been sent down for, so they didn't search me as vigilantly as folks who they suspected were trading or passing drugs around the prison. Little did they know that I'd often take herbs back for friends on my wing or make them cups of tea when they had period pains or tummy cramps. Other than bringing things back to my room, I'd also just eat plants there and then when I was weeding. My palate became adapted to the more bitter taste of wild plants.

When we built the vegetable gardens in the main courtyard, I asked the prison officer in charge of the garden party if we could grow some rocket. This plant is so nutritious - full of vitamins and minerals, including zinc and vitamins A, B6, C and K. It is also super easy to germinate - it spreads everywhere. I soon did some 'guerrilla planting' where I would take the seeds and spread them in

the various courtyards of the prison to maintain my supply of fresh greens and so that others could access them too - if only more of the prisoners knew what they were and that you can eat them!

In addition to working in the prison gardens, I was also incredibly lucky to access some financial support from a charity to undertake a distance learning course in horticulture and permaculture design, as well as a short distance learning course in herbalism. It sounds so cheesy to write this, but these courses really did change my life. On release, I learnt to grow on a bigger scale and have now taught hundreds of other low-income families to learn how to grow food. The workers cooperative that I started now has multiple community gardens, a mushroom farm, wildflower park, forest garden and more, as well as a 4.5-acre permaculture project where I now live.

My passion for herbal medicine has only grown over time and in 2018, I decided to apply to train as a clinical herbalist. Scared that my conviction would be a barrier, I finally found a school that did not discriminate and so I am now halfway through a four-year training, meaning that soon I will be able to more proactively help people with their health by accessing herbal medicines. I also started the Solidarity Apothecary project which you can read about more at the back of the book.

The herbal medicine course that I studied in prison, as incredibly inspiring and interesting as it was, made herbalism feel abstract for me in the context I was in. I could never make any of the things that the assignments suggested, whether it was tinctures or salves and ointments. Likewise, most or nearly all the plants they included were unavailable to me at the time. Therefore I wanted to write this herbal book as a way of bringing herbalism alive to people in prison. I know that many people will still read these pages and feel an intense heartache because these plants are still out of reach to them (like the ingredients in the canteen section which I would have killed to have access to when I was in prison). But I hope, for everyone, that there is at least one plant that calls to them which they can find.

**CONNECTING WITH PLANTS IN PRISON IS NOT JUST ABOUT MAKING MEDICINE, IT IS ABOUT FRIENDSHIP. IT IS ABOUT CONTENDING WITH THE ISOLATION, DESPAIR, TRAUMA AND VIOLENCE WITH SOMETHING ALIVE AND BEAUTIFUL.**

A part of one of the tattoo sleeves on my arm reads ‘never alone’. I got it before I got sent down because I wanted to remind myself that I am not alone - during years of state repression, I felt isolated and betrayed by the movement I grew up in, I felt like any grassroots or revolutionary struggle to change things was ultimately weaker than those with power and control, I felt small and vulnerable - but plants remind me that they are on our side. All the plants, animals and ecosystems in the world want recovery, they want freedom, they want health - and with them as allies, we are never alone.

I would, therefore, encourage people not just to make things with the plants they find or use them for health ailments, but to try to make friends with plants. In the herbal world, they are commonly called ‘plant allies’. I’ve written a whole section about what this means in practice. The short version is that we can build friendships with plants by simply hanging out with them, sitting with them, drawing them, tasting them.

In prison, I used to sleep with a dandelion root under my pillow. It made me feel safer, it literally made me feel grounded. Before I had read many herbal books or worked through my coursework, I would have vivid dreams about plants. I dreamt once about plantain talking to me and telling me it was useful for ‘woundage’ before looking up in a book that it is one of the best plants to apply to wounds. I would make a mini altar under my bed with dried plants from the garden and bring it out after bang up as something that made me feel comforted. As we all know in prison, it only lasted as long as the next cell search, but the process of creating that sacred space was so valuable to me.

The relationships with plants that we build - they stay with us for life. Every time I’m driving to a prison visit, stressed about being late or anxious about the intensity of what might happen and I pull up at motorway services and see a patch of dandelions, I feel strengthened. When I get bitten by a spider at a gig, I know which plant to look for in the city streets outside the venue. Each time I see yarrow now I feel like I’ve bumped into an old friend. This stuff probably sounds mega-hippyish, but it’s the truth. Once you become familiar with different plants, that familiarity and comfort never goes away.

I hope that this book can be the start of a journey that you can continue and deepen for the rest of your life. Creating a relationship with the wild, inside and out can sustain us in even the darkest moments.

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## PREPARING PLANT MEDICINES IN PRISON

There are so many different ways to prepare plant medicines. On the outside, we might make alcohol extracts (called tinctures) or extracts using glycerin (called glycerites). Or we may be able to craft all kinds of oils, ointments, capsules, potions and lotions! But in prison, our options are limited. However, there are still some great ways to successfully use plants and these methods are certainly in no way inferior!

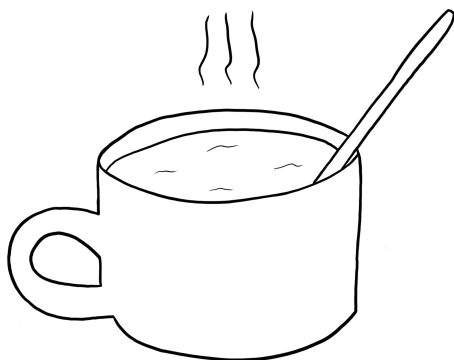
This section introduces the different options possible. I know how ingenious and creative prisoners can be so I am sure you will find even more creative ways to make medicines.

### Teas

Herbal tea at its most simple is adding hot water to a herb and drinking it. The same way we make a 'normal' tea, which usually comes

in a tea bag. To make a herbal tea in prison, you can add about a teaspoon of dried herb or two teaspoons if it is fresh. Cover with hot water and leave for 5-10 minutes before drinking to make sure it is really brewing up in strength. I'd also just really encourage you to experiment if you prefer things tasting less strong etc.

On the outside people will use different things to mean you don't get bits of the plant in your mouth while you sip! Some people use small coffee





percolators or teapots. In prison, I would just use my spoon to either hold plants down at the bottom or to scoop them out before I drank the tea. If you were able to steal a bit of mesh from the kitchen this could be helpful, even a hat of the people that work in the kitchen servery can be used as a way to strain plants out.

If you add milk it will go funny so it's not recommended but if you need a sweetener then sugar etc is okay. It's worth trying teas without it just so you know the flavour! Also, a lot of the healing properties of plants are in the tastes and the effect they can have in the body.

### **Hot infusions**

A hot infusion is basically the same as a tea but brewed for longer. For some plants, you might want to leave them brewing overnight to get maximum strength. If you do leave them overnight, then make sure you take out all the plant material the next morning. I've tried to indicate in the plant profiles which plants benefit from this kind of long infusion.

If you are making a tea or an infusion with an aromatic plant (such as chamomile) then it is best to cover the container with some kind of lid so that the aromatic oils don't escape as much.

In the prison where I was, we were given a tea flask which meant we had



some hot water for tea after we were locked in (because having your own kettle was allegedly a privilege). I used to add plants into my flask and fill it with hot water then drink in the morning. These flasks are good because you can open the lid slightly and pour out the water without too much plant material getting out. You can then easily scoop out the plant and wash out the flask.

### **Cold infusions**

Some plants make more powerful medicine when covered with cold water rather than hot. This is mainly plants with large amounts of mucilage (aka healing slime!), such as mallow which is included in this book. It's generally best to let these cold infusions brew for as long as possible - ideally 12 hours if possible.

### **Decoction**

A decoction is basically where