

**North American Institute of Medical Herbalism.  
Fundamentals of Vitalism Seminar – 2006  
Herbal Actions**

1. The physiomedicalist view

- vital expression in health
- vital expression in response to crisis
- vital expression in response to therapy (e.g. A response of the vitality to the herb)
- vital reserve
  
- All actions are performed by the vital force, not by the medicine
- In some cases, the pharmacological properties of the remedy predominate
- In others, the vital response to the remedy predominates.
- In many, there is a mixture.
- The difference may depend on dose and duration.

2. **The problem of actions:** Contemporary actions come from three different paradigms, all bundled in together. These **may or may not guide the student or clinical to the best clinical use.**

- 1 Vitalist, humoral: eg: Alterative, demulcent, astringent
2. Allopathic/Empirical: eg: Antirheumatic, anti-asthmatic, anti-tumor (most anti-anything)
3. Allopathic/biochemical: eg: Anti-inflammatory, immunostimulant, prostglandin-inhibiting

From Sharol Tilgner. *Wise Wman Herbal from the Heart of the Earth*

abortifacient	antiparasitic	counterirritant	hypotensive
adaptogen	antiphlogistic	decongestant	immunomodulator
alterative	antipyretic	demulcent	laxative (bulk, via bile, stimulant)
analgesic	antiseptic	deoderant	lymphagogue
anodyne	antispasmodic	diaphoretic	lymphatic
anti-arthritic	antisudorific	digestive	mucilage
antibacterial	antitussive	diuretic	mucolytic
anticatarrhal	antitumor	emmenagogue	narcotic
antidepressant	antiviral	emetic	nervine (pain, tonic, sedative, nutritive)
anti-emetic	aperient	emollient	nervine tonic
anti-fungal	aphrodisiac	excharotic	nervine relaxant
antigalactic	aromatic	expectorant (soothing vs stimulating)	nervine stimulant
anti-hay fever	astringent	febrifuge	nutritive
antihelmintic	bitter	galactagogue	parturient
antihydrotic	bronchodilator	heart tonic	oxytotic
antihypnotic	calmative	hemostatic	pectoral
anti-inflammatory	carminative	hepatic	refrigerant
antilithic	cathartic	hepatoprotective	restorative
antimicrobial	cholagogue	hypnotic	tropho-restorative
antimycotic	choloretic	hypoglycemic	
antioxidant	circulatory stimulant		

rubefacient  
sedative  
stimulant  
stomachic  
styptic  
sudorific  
synergist  
tonic  
vasoconstrictor  
vasodilator  
vascular tonic  
vermicide  
vermifuge  
vulnerary

**BUT . . .**

The following  
“actions” actually  
describe *what the  
herb is used for*  
rather than a true  
action of the vital  
force.

abortifacient  
anodyne/analgesic  
anti-arthritic  
anticatarrhal

antidepressant  
anti-emetic  
antigalactic  
anti-hay fever  
antihelmintic  
antihydrotic  
antihypnotic  
anti-inflammatory  
antilithic  
antimicrobial  
antimycotic  
antipyretic  
vermicide  
vermifuge  
vulnerary  
anti-parasitic

anti-sudorific  
anti-tussive  
pectoral  
stomachic  
counterirritant/rubefi-  
ent/escharotic  
decongestant/mucolyt-  
ic  
febrifuge  
hypotensive  
lymphatic  
parturient/oxytocic

## **Problem #2 The textbook trap**

There is something in the human mind that has a weakness for the printed word, and mistakes it readily for reality. As student we learn the actions from books, but the complete process is then to **try the herb on yourself or another, and experience the action directly**. Its then known organoleptically and cataloged into the memory files of your inner instinctual genius for future recall. Memorizing lists of actions (on which very few books will have the same ones listed) is useless without grounding them in experience.

Ideally for a CLINICAL materia medica listing:

1. Plant name(s)
2. Vital actions
3. Clinical actions as seen in the tissues
3. A discussion of the uniqueness of the plant’s actions, its idiosyncracies, its contradictions.
4. Clinical Uses
5. Combinations and formulas
6. Also botany and chemistry (least important **clinically** )

## **Vital Actions**

- Stimulating, Relaxing, Tonic/Astringent, tropho-restorative (tissue or organ) per the physiomedicalists
- Warming, Cooling, Moistening/Drying per the Greeks/Arabs, Chinese, Ayurveda.
- Tonic (Supplementing) per Chinese system, to chi, blood, yin, yang, Chinese organ systems
- Affecting doshas per Ayurveda, ie pacifying or aggravating vata, pitta, kapha.

Each of these may have many subsets. For instance relaxing may include muscle relaxant, nervine relaxant, mucous membrane relaxant. Heating may include warming the metabolism, warming the skin. Cooling may include general metabolic cooling effects, cooling the digestive tract, cooling infection or inflammation.

## Herbal Energetics

The most important clinical qualities refer to temperature and moisture.

Hot – Cold  
Moist – Dry

Chinese system of temperatures:

Neutral	Cool	Cold	Very Cold
Neutral	Warm	Hot	Very Hot

In Four humors system, these may be ranked in degrees from 1-4 with 4 being the most intense

These states are critical to identify in the client, by degree, and also in the herb, by degree, in order to avoid constitutional aggravation. Sometimes administering the proper herb in the proper degree will correct a constitutional condition such that one or more diseases may dissipate.

Ayurvedic doshas are combination of these same qualities.

### Stimulant (Vital Stimulant)

**Note: All herbal actions that follow in the notes are taken from classical Physiomedicalist literature.**

In early Thomsonian medicine this implies a *warming circulatory stimulant*. By the time of Curtis, Cook, Lyle, and Thurston, it implies only the increase of vital expression in a tissue or organ, and most of these are *not warming* in nature. The following are all stimulants without mixed relaxant or diffusive effects, according to Physiomedicalist literature.

Achillea millefolium	Populus spp
Agrimonia eupatorium	Prunus serotina
Baptisia tinctoria	Rheum officinale
Capsicum annuum	Rumex crispus
Ceanothus americanus	Serenoa serrulata
Mahonia aquifolium	Salix alba
Collinsonia canadensis	Solidago spp
Coptis spp	Stellaria media
Echinacea angustifolia	Stillingia sylvatica
Euphrasia off	Symphytum off
Gentiana luteum	Taraxacum off
Hydrastis canadensis	Thuja occidentalis
Inula helenium	Urtica dioica
Iris versicolor	Viburnum prunifolium
Juniperus communis	
Levisticum porteri	
Lycopus virginicus	

## **Relaxants**

Pure relaxants and diffusives without stimulating qualities are invariably cooling.  
(from the Physiomedical literature)

Arctium lappa  
Arctium lappa sem  
Asclepias tuberosa  
Eupatorium purpureum  
Galium aparine  
Panax quinquefolium  
Sambucus nigra flos  
Sticta pulmonaria

But most relaxants also have stimulating qualities because of the increased vitality that can move through the relaxed tissue that was previously constricted or inflamed. Nothing can be said absolutely about the temperature of herbs with mixed stimulating and relaxing effects, but most are cool. For instance, Herbs with relaxant AND stimulating effects.

Allium sativum	Nepeta cataria
Angelica archangelica	Paeonia off
Anthemis nobilis	Passiflora incarnata
Aralia racemosa	Piper methysticum
Asarum canadense	Plantago major
Calendula off	Rosmarinus off
Caulophyllum thalictroides	Scutellaria lateriflora
Chionanthus virginicus	Smilax off
Cimicifuga (Actea) racemosa	Trifolium pratense
Stachys betonica	Tussilago farfara
Corallorrhiza odontorrhiza	Valeriana off
Eupatorium perfoliatum	Verbascum thapsus
Ferula assa-foetida	Verbena off
Glycyrrhiza glabra	Viburnum opulus
Grindelia spp	
Humulus lupulus	
Lavendula vera	
Leonurus cardiaca	
Lobelia inflata	
Mentha piperita	
Mentha pulegium	
Mentha spicata	
Monarda spp	

### **Relaxant and Tonic**

These actions are generally opposite, and few herbs contains them in a mixture of actions. Bitter sedatives, and herbs with idiosyncratic effects predominate

Anthemis nobilis  
Aralia racemosa  
Stachys betonica  
Leonurus cardiaca  
Panax quinquefolium  
Piper methysticum  
Scutellaria lateriflora

### **Diffusive**

Stimulant diffusive herbs are generally warming

Anethum graveolens  
Foeniculum vulgare  
Arctium lappa sem  
Barosma betulina  
Cinnamomum zeylanicum  
Citrus aurantium  
Curcuma longa  
Marrubium vulgare  
Myrica cerifera  
Panax ginseng  
Rubus spp  
Salvia officinalis  
Thymus vulgaris  
Xanthoxylum americanum  
Zingiber off

## **Tonic/Astringents**

Tonics and astringents without relaxant or diffusive properties are almost invariably cooling and drying

Achillea millefolium	Populus tremuloides
Aesculus hippocastanum	Prunus serotina
Aesculus glabra	Rhamnus purshiana
Agrimonia eupatorium	Rheum officinale
Arctostaphylos uva ursi	Rumex crispus
Ceanothus americanus	Serenoa serrulata
Chimaphila umbellata	Salix alba
Mahonia aquifolium	Solidago spp
Collinsonia canadensis	Stillingia sylvatica
Coptis spp	Symphytum off
Euphrasia off	Taraxacum off
Gentiana luteum	Urtica dioica
Geranium spp	Viburnum prunifolium
Hydrastis canadensis	Zea mays
Inula helenium	
Lycopus virginicus	

## **Other Physiomedicalist actions describe clinical expression.**

**Aromatic** – Refers to the organoleptic quality. All are to some extent warming, but may be contradictory, such as yarrow, or the mints.

**Bitter** – Refers to the organoleptic quality, and the universal tonic, cooling and drying effect that

**Alterative** – Refers to general effect on system of improving the assimilation or increasing detoxification.

**Demulcent** – Soothing, cooling, and moistening to the mucous membranes and skin. Also may be constitutionally moistening

**Diuretic** – Increases the flow of urine. All diuretics except the moistening herbs that increase urine indirectly by increasing moisture are drying constitutionally, unless modified by some mixed property. May act on tissues to “dump” water, instead of directly on kidney.

**Diaphoretic** – Increases circulation to the skin, and may thus moisten the skin or promote sweating. Diaphoretics are drying constitutionally

**Antispasmodic** – Reduce constriction and cramping in the muscle. May act through nervous system, or directly on the muscle.

**Carminative** – Specifically applied to reducing spasms in the gut. May act through nerves or through increasing circulation to the gut muscle

Expectorant – Increases the flow of mucous from the membranes. May do so through tonification or relaxation. Effect is not necessarily limited to or focused on the lungs, although this is the general usage. Most of these herbs affect any and all of the mucous membranes.

### **Clinical Actions**

These describe actions that you can actually see in your patient. They are *not abstract, or derivative*, such as biochemical actions are.

#### **General effects on moisture**

demulcent  
emollient  
astringent  
may use degrees from Greek/Arabic

#### **General effects on temperature**

hot  
warm  
neutral  
cool  
cold  
May use degrees from Greek/Arabic

#### **General effects on tone/structure**

tonic (tissue, organ)  
relaxant (tissue, organ)

#### **Effects on nervous system**

narcotic  
hypnotic  
nervine tonic  
nervine stimulant  
nervine relaxant  
sedative nervine  
nervine nutritive  
nervine trophorestorative

#### **Effect on metabolism**

alterative

#### **Effects on circulation**

circulatory stimulant  
diffusive  
vasoconstrictor  
vasodilator  
vascular tonic  
stimulant diaphoretic  
relaxant diaphoretic

**Effects on mucous membranes.** May extend to all mucous membranes, not just lungs  
expectorant (relaxing vs stimulating)  
astringent  
tonic

**Effect on muscles.** May be specific to either smooth or voluntary muscles  
antispasmodic  
tonic

**Topical effect on infections or wounds or normal skin.** May also apply to GI  
**antiseptic** is the general category. Many others fall under it, such as  
antimicrobial, antifungal, antiparasitic, antihelminthic  
vulnerary  
hemostatic  
styptic  
counter-irritant/rubefacient

### **Effects on digestive tract**

#### **General**

bitter tonic  
carminative  
demulcent  
antispasmodic

#### **Upper**

emetic  
anti-emetic

#### **Lower**

bulk laxative  
laxative via bile secretion  
stimulant laxative

### **Effects on liver**

choleretic  
cholagogue  
hepatoprotective  
hepatic trophorestorative

### **Effect on endocrine system**

adaptogen

### **Effects on immunity**

immunomodulating  
antiviral  
lymphatic  
lymphagogue

### **Effects on urinary tract**

diuretic

tonic

kidney trophorestorative

### **Effect on menses**

emmenagogue

hemostat

### **Effects on lactation**

galactagogue

### **Actions, Temperatures, and Tastes**

#### **Bitter**

Achillea millefolium (aromatic)

Anthemis nobilis

Artemisia vulgaris

Berberis aquifolium

Berberis vulgaris

Coffea arabica

Chelidonium majus

Chionanthus virginica

Eupatorium perfoliatum

Frasera speciosa

Gentiana lutea

Humulus lupulus

Hydrastis canadensis

Leonurus cardiaca

Marrubium vulgare

Populus tremuloides

Salix nigra

Scutellaria

Taraxacum officinalis

Verbena off

#### **cold and dry**

yarrow warm/cool

chamomile

mugwort

Oregon grape rt

barberry

coffee

celandine

fringe tree

boneset

green gentian

gentian

hops

goldenseal

motherwort

horehound

aspen

willow

scullcap

dandelion

vervain

#### **Carminative warm and dry**

Capsicum

Foeniculum vulgare

Juniperus communis

Matricaria recutita

Mentha piperita

Nepeta cataria

Pimpinella anisum

Salvia officinalis

Thymus

Zingiber officinale

Carum carvi

cayenne

fennel

juniper

chamomile

peppermint

catnip

anise

sage

thyme

ginger

caraway

**Demulcent**

Althaea officinalis  
 Chondrus crispus  
 Plantago major  
 Smilacina racemosa  
 Stellaria media  
 Symphytum officinale  
 Ulmus vulva  
 Glycyrrhiza glabra

**cool and moist**

marshmallow cool  
 Iceland moss cool  
 plantain cool  
 false solomon's seal cool  
 chickweed cool  
 comfrey cool  
 slippery elm cool  
 licorice neutral

**Vulnerary**

Aloe vera  
 Althaea officinalis  
 Plantago major  
 Symphytum officinale  
 Ulmus vulva  
 Calendula officinalis  
 Echinacea angustifolia

**cool**

Aloe moist  
 marshmallow moist  
 plantain moist  
 comfrey moist  
 slippery elm moist  
 calendula drying  
 echinacea drying

**Astringent**

Berberis aquifolium  
 Geranium maculatum  
 Quercus spp  
 Salix nigra  
 Rubus idaeus  
 Calendula officinalis  
 Salvia officinalis  
 Urtica dioica  
 Achillea millefolium  
 Hamamelis virginiana  
 Agrimonia eupatoria  
 Anemopsis californica  
 Cinnamomum zeylanicum  
 Schisandra sinensis  
 Myrica cerifera

**dry**

Oregon grape cold  
 geranium, cranesbill cold  
 Oak bark cold  
 willow cold  
 raspberry leaf cool  
 Calendula cool  
 sage cool  
 nettle cool  
 yarrow warm/cool  
 witch hazel warm/cool  
 agrimony warm  
 yerba mansa warm  
 cinnamon warm  
 schizandra warm  
 bayberry bark warm

**Anti-inflammatory**

Curcuma  
 Calendula officinalis  
 Matricaria recutita  
 Achillea  
 Stellaria media  
 Glycyrrhiza

**cool**

Turmeric very dry  
 calendula dry  
 chamomile dry  
 Yarrow dry  
 chickweed moist  
 Licorice moist

**Antiseptic**

Allium sativa  
 Caryophyllus aromaticus  
 Monarda  
 Anemopsis californica  
 Commiphora myrrha  
 Juniperus  
 Salvia  
 Thymus vulgaris  
 Baptisia  
 Berberis  
 Echinacea  
 Hydrastis canadensis

**dry**

garlic hot  
 clove hot  
 Horsemint hot  
 yerba mansa warm  
 myrrh warm  
 juniper warm  
 sage warm  
 thyme warm  
 Wild indigo cold  
 Oregon grape cold  
 echinacea cool  
 goldenseal cold

**Antifungal**

Juglans nigra  
 Hydrastis candensis  
 Berberis aq.  
 Chilopsis linearis  
 Maleleuca alterifolia  
 Salvia officinalis  
 Anemopsis californica

**dry**

black walnut very cold  
 goldenseal cold  
 Oregon grape root cold  
 desert willow cold  
 tea tree warm  
 sage warm  
 yerba mansa warm

**Antiparasitic cold and dry**

Juglans nigra  
 Chaparro amargosa

black walnut cold, dry  
 chaparro cold, dry

**Antispasmodic**

Asarum canadense  
 Monarda spp  
 Zingiber officinale  
 Angelica sinensis  
 Mentha piperita  
 Nepeta cataria  
 Valeriana officinalis  
 Dioscorea villosa  
 Matricaria recutita  
 Viburnum opulus

wild ginger hot and dry  
 horsemint hot and dry  
 ginger warm and dry  
 dang gui warm and dry  
 peppermint warm and dry  
 catnip warm and dry  
 valerian warm and dry  
 wild yam neutral and dry  
 chamomile cool and dry  
 cramp bark cool and dry

**Nervine**

Humulus lupulus  
 Leonurus cardica  
 Matricaria recutita  
 Scutellaria lateriflora  
 Verbena officinalis  
 Melissa officinalis  
 Rosmarinus officinalis  
 Valeriana officinalis

hops cold and dry  
 motherwort cool and dry  
 chamomile cool and dry  
 scullcap cool and dry  
 vervain cool and dry  
 lemon balm warm and dry  
 rosemary warm and dry  
 valerian warm and dry

**Lymphatic**

Baptisia tinctoria

Iris versicolor

Phytolacca decandra

Stillingia sylvatica

Galium aparine

Ceanothus americanus

Echinacea angustifolia

Commiphora myrrha

Trifolium pratense

**cool**

wild indigo

iris

poke root

Queens root

cleavers

red root

echinacea

myrrh

red clover

cold and dry

cold and dry

cold and dry

cold and dry

cool and dry

cool and dry

cool and dry

warm and dry

cool and moist

## Some Illustrative Applications

### Digestive symptoms and the Four Humors

#### Hot

**Give:**

Bitter  
Astringents  
Antiseptics  
Antifungal  
Lymphatic  
Vulnerary

Infection  
Inflammation  
Heartburn  
Sharp acute pain  
Burning pain  
Faster pulse  
Redder tongue  
Yellow coat

**Give:**

Vulnerary  
Demulcent  
Bitters with caution  
Lymphatic

#### Moist

Bloating  
Nausea  
Moist stool  
Diarrhea  
Mucous  
Coat on tongue  
Swollen tongue

#### Nervine

Antispasmodic

#### Dry

Dry stool  
Tongue clean  
Shrunken tongue

**Give:**

Carminatives  
Astringents  
Antiseptics  
Antifungal  
bitters with caution

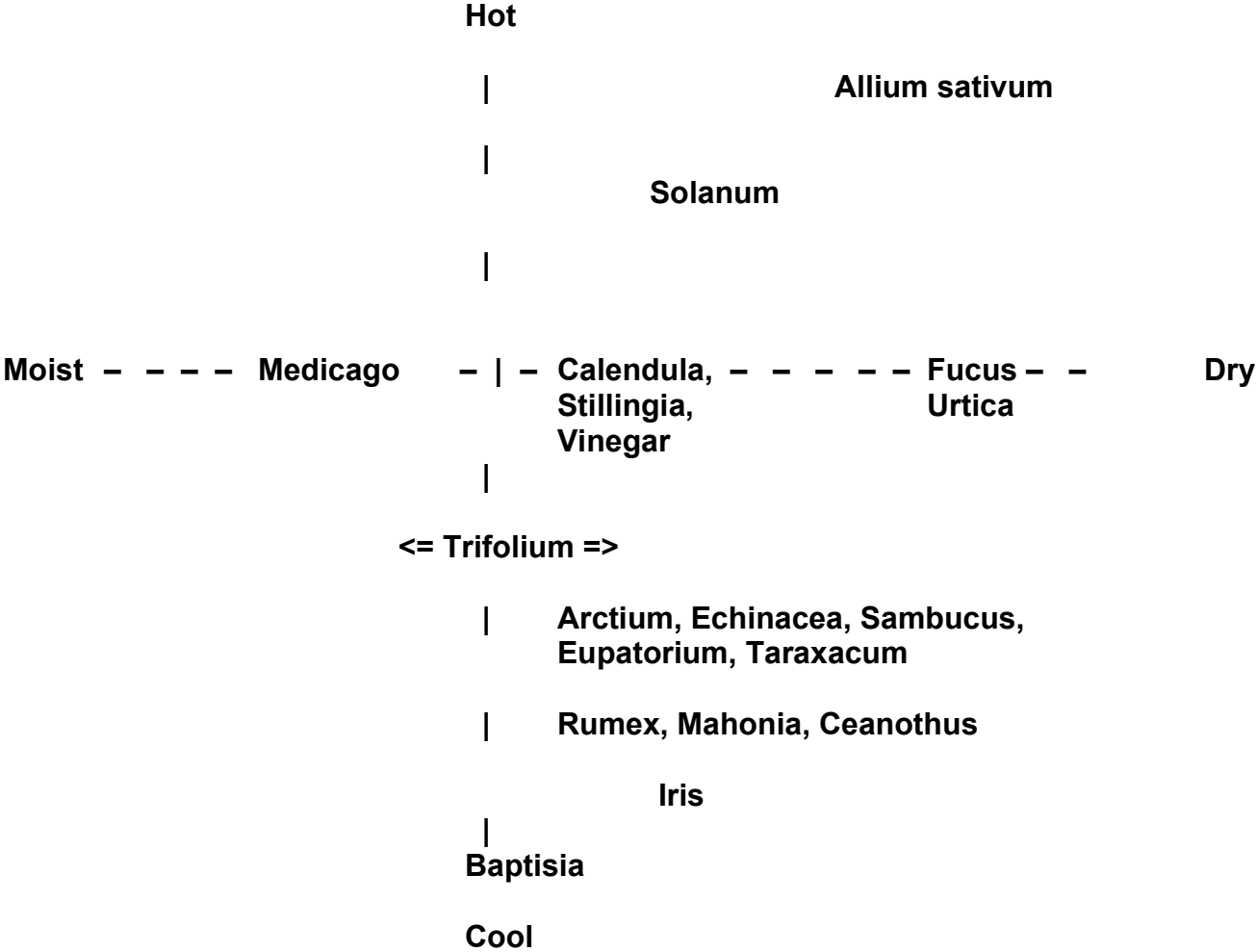
**Give:**

Demulcents with Carminatives  
Bitters with great caution

#### Cold

Weak digestion  
Undigested food in the stool  
Dull chronic pain  
Slower pulse  
Pale tongue  
White or clear coat

# The Herbal Energetics of some Alterative Herbs



The main clinical error in giving “blood purifiers” or “detoxifying” herbs is to ignore the energetics, and especially to give them to cold, dry, and deficient patients.

## Urinary tract conditions and constitution

Burning pain  
Sharp pain  
Inflammation  
Infection  
Yellow discharge  
Heat signs

### Hot

Mucous  
discharge

**Moist**

**Dry**

no discharge

### Cold

Dull pain  
Tearing pain  
Infection may be present  
White discharge  
Cold signs

Also consider:

### Excess

Tense, irritable constitutions  
Can't void due to tension  
Frequent urge

### Deficient

Lax pelvic tissues in general  
Prolapse  
Urinary incontinence.