

The garden PHARMACY

A lifelong fascination with the healing powers of herbs inspired Davina Wynne-Jones to turn a Gloucestershire field into a garden packed with medicinal plants – the stars of her flourishing business offering natural remedies and hands-on herbal workshops

WORDS BY CATHERINE BUTLER | PHOTOGRAPHS BY JASON INGRAM



Getting to know a plant is a bit like getting to know a person. You look at them and become familiar with their smell, and their touch – you don't figure out their chemical constituents," Davina Wynne-Jones declares, as she bends to harvest some marjoram which, with its warming and relaxing qualities would be a particularly soothing plant to find out more about. For Davina, herbs are her old friends, and she has been fascinated by them since her early twenties when her mother, the garden designer Rosemary Verey, began collecting 16th- and 17th-century herbals. "They were the most important things to be written down at that time and were among the first books to be printed in movable type," Davina explains. "I found the old books so inspiring that my first garden was a herb garden and I would experiment with making my own face creams." But despite developing a love of herbs 30 years ago, it wasn't until 2005 that she realised her vocation as a plantswoman and launched her business Herbs for Healing in Barnsley, Gloucestershire, just a stone's throw from her childhood home Barnsley House and the garden for which her mother was famed.

"In the past I've tended to veer away from plants as a career, because when you have a parent who is an expert, you always feel ignorant," says Davina, who trained and worked as a printmaker for many years before deciding to go into business growing and selling plants and running workshops on herbal remedies. "Since my mother died I have felt guided by her – maybe I believe this to give myself confidence, or perhaps it really is the case – but being brought up by her has meant this change of direction ▷



OPPOSITE PAGE Davina harvests ingredients from the garden. THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT Flower heads are dried on muslin-covered frames; borage; dried calendula heads and sunflower oil are used in Davina's first-aid cream for cuts and bruises; feverfew





has come quite naturally to me. I've watched her take cuttings a thousand times, and names of plants just trip off my tongue now. I spent so much time in the garden as a child that the natural world just makes sense to me."

Despite her mother's obvious influence on her work, Davina has developed a garden with a simple, natural beauty of its own. It is late summer and the air hums with insects attracted by the heady scents and vivid colours of a cottage garden in full bloom. Bumblebees clamber over the lavender and butterflies drift between the beds of feverfew, yarrow, tansy and marshmallow. It is hard to believe that just four years ago this was an empty field on which Davina grazed horses and sheep. "My father gave me the field as a wedding present and I've put it to many uses over the years. But I think keeping

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animals on it is what has made the land so fertile and why the garden has thrived."

The most fascinating thing about this garden, however, is that everything can be used as a comfort or a cure. From pale, frothy-flowered meadowsweet – a natural painkiller – and tangy scented lemon balm, good for lifting the spirits, to echinacea with its pinky-purple shuttlecock-shaped flowers, known for its immune-boosting qualities. "I use herbs a lot in my everyday life," Davina says, as she picks calendula flower heads – one of her favourite multi-purpose herbs. "People don't realise what wonderful things they are, or that much of modern medicine merely imitates their properties. It's always quite exciting when I come down with something as I like to experiment on myself. I'm not a medical herbalist so I work on the level of everyday ailments – tea of thyme and sage for sore throats, or a syrup for coughs: I'm always medicating my family with things. They might take longer to get over them, but are less likely to get them back."

Davina is quick to warn, however, that a little knowledge can be a dangerous thing: although they might appear innocuous, herbs can be potent and, if used incorrectly, can react with existing medical conditions. "The golden rule is if you are already taking medication, or wish to treat something you would usually go to the doctor for, you should consult a qualified medical herbalist."

It is the proven home-grown remedies, therefore, that Davina and her expert guest tutors teach in her workshops – small classes that range from creating first-aid creams to essential oils and soap-making. They're held towards the end of the year when the plant sales begin to trail off and are based either in a yurt in the garden when the weather is fine, or inside her recently refurbished workshop – an old Cotswold stone goods shed from Glastonbury station that Davina's husband saved from demolition by moving it, brick by brick, to the field. Inside, there are shelves lined with corked jars of dried lime flower, mugwort, Moroccan mint and elder leaf. Empty bell jars wait to be filled and dark brown bottles and containers ▷



FROM TOP Pounding comfrey to make a poultice; plants thrive in the polytunnel; echinacea boosts immunity; Davina and friends at work





stand ready to hold syrups and ointments. "I am making a first-aid cream for cuts, bruises and minor burns," Davina explains, as she takes a muslin-covered tray of marigold flowers that have been dried, and begins stuffing their orangey-gold heads into a clear jar. "This is a wonderful plant – its Latin name is calendula because it can flower in every month of the year. You can use it in so many ways – as a footbath for tired feet, a hand bath for arthritis or as a tea to cleanse your system after illness. It's a little ray of sunshine."

Once the jar is filled with flowers she pours in sunflower oil. "At this stage, you have to leave the flowers to infuse in the sun for three weeks in an airtight jar, shaking it to remove any bubbles that form," Davina says, taking a ready-infused jar of oil and straining it through muslin to remove the flower heads. "It now needs

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to be heated in a *bain-marie* in boiling water for two to four hours at about 60 degrees." It will then be strained again and finally mixed with beeswax and shea butter and stirred together with a water-based infusion of yarrow and rosewater 'like mayonnaise' to form a creamy consistency. Finally, it is poured into a sterilised jar, ready to be kept handy in your medicine cabinet.

Davina sells a small selection of tried-and-tested soaps, creams and oils, and at some point hopes to expand her range. For the moment, however, she mainly focuses on teaching how to make the various recipes and remedies at home. "This is partly because my products are completely natural with no preserving chemicals so I can't be sure of their shelf life," she explains. "But it would also mean I'd have to keep to a specific recipe, and that's against my nature. I love being able to tailor each remedy to the individuals in my workshop. Sticking to one recipe would be too restrictive."

Whether it is high summer, early spring, or the depths of a snowy winter, the work at Herbs for Healing is never done and Davina welcomes the help of WWOOFers (World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms) and other volunteers to keep her to-do list down. She multi-tasks in order to make the business pay – from growing and potting-up plants for sale, to finding new experts to host her growing range of workshops. But this suits her personality and she loves the variety of her work. "It's physical, artistic, mental and sociable – and very different from my life before. All this colour is new to me: as a printmaker, I was used to working in black and white – I never knew gardening could be so much like being an artist," she says. "I couldn't do anything else now. It gives me such contentment – it's a bit like a calmer version of falling in love." 🌿

Herbs for Healing, Barnsley, near Cirencester, Gloucestershire (01285 851457; 07773 687493; www.herbsforhealing.net). Visit the website for details of products for sale and to download a map for directions. Open April-mid September, 10am-5pm.



FROM TOP A *bain-marie* is used to heat herbal ingredients; Davina collecting feverfew; calendula first-aid cream; the garden has a natural beauty

