

Plant Magic

AN INTRODUCTION TO PLANT MAGIC

PRINCIPLES OF NATURAL MAGIC

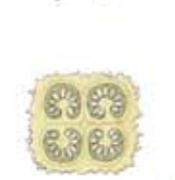
Why bother with plant magic? We already have so many rituals, methodologies, and techniques to work with in the SRC; why is natural magic to be considered of any value?

Natural magic is an important part of the history of magic. For example, Book One of Henry Cornelius Agrippa's famous *Three Books of Occult Philosophy* is dedicated to natural magic. Here, Agrippa discusses in detail the relationship between things found in the earth, and the heavens, stars, angels, and demons. He writes, for instance: "If thou dost desire to attract vertue from the Sun, and to seek those things that are Solary, amongst Vegetables, Plants, Metals, Stones, and Animals, these things are to be used, and taken chiefly, which in a Solary order are higher."¹ The premise is that there exists an intimate relationship between earth and heaven: As above, so below. This principle of correspondence is crucial for comprehending and practicing any magical work. It follows that one very useful way of accomplishing magic is by working with things of the natural world, which includes all things animal, mineral and vegetable.

The other principle that lies behind using the plant world to help us in our search on the magical path is that all things—plants, animals, minerals, planets, angels etc.—are animated by Spirit, or we could say that they contain the Quintessence. Accessing this force in plants is relatively easy. Plants happen to be everywhere around us, even among most city-dwellers: they share our physical world. They are physically alive in the way we are, and as such have a similar vibratory rate. A mineral also contains the Quintessence, but because it is not alive and has a very different vibratory rate, it is much more difficult for humans to access.² We also have a much less direct relationship to beings, such as angels, forces etc. which are not physical, and we therefore need lots of keys, formulae, and

1 *Three Books of Occult Philosophy*, Book One, Chapter xxxiv.

2 This is one of the reasons that plant alchemy is considered to be a preparatory step to the more challenging art of mineral alchemy.



rituals to reach them. For these reasons, plant magic has the great advantage of being a very direct route to access a particular force.

Nevertheless, just like any other magical practice, it is only through much determination and patience that an aspiring magician can be allowed to penetrate the many secrets and mysteries that the plant world offers. To understand the nature of plants, the correct state of mind is crucial: it is the Higher within us that must resonate with the Higher in the plant. Thus, working with plants becomes another method of mystical practice, as well as magical. By slowing the thoughts and by temporarily ceasing the endless internal chatter in our minds, we can achieve a state in which it is possible to speak directly to nature, and allow nature to speak to us.

Incense

Why are incenses valuable in magic? One reason is that we want to stimulate the sense of smell. The sense of smell is very important in our lives and holds a large reservoir of potential power. If you can conjure up the smell of your house when you were young, or of your mother, or perhaps of a lover you once had, you can see how smell is a key to open the door of imagination and emotion. In ritual, we try to influence all of our senses as much as possible to get our imagination

going, and to make the experience pervade us completely. This can increase our focus and give more power to what we are trying to accomplish. None of it is strictly necessary, but it is helpful to have props to keep the conscious mind aware of what it is trying to do, and at the same time activate the subconscious. Incense, then, is one way to help create a particular environment. Usually a good incense gives just that extra “spark” to a ritual.

In addition, incenses are (mostly) composed of plants, and following the principle of correspondence as mentioned above, each plant has attributions to elemental, zodiacal, planetary, and even angelic forces. Depending on the source, these attributions can vary, but many tend to be agreed upon. Marigold (*Calendula officinalis*)³, for example, is almost always attributed the qualities of the Sun, not only because it is brightly colored and opens and closes with the Sun, but because it cheers and strengthens the heart and comforts the spirit. I would remind the reader, however, that these magical attributions are not always just intellectual ideas that people have placed onto the plant because the plant “reminds” them of a planet (although that happens in the literature as well). On the contrary, I would argue that the best magical understanding of the correspondence between a species of the plant world and a planet and/or zodiacal sign came about due to a deep comprehension as to the nature of

³ In this essay, I will be giving the English name for the plant, followed by the Latin. Those of you who are curious can find the plant’s name in your own language by looking up the Latin name.





HYOSCYAMUS NIGER L.



both. An incense composed of these natural elements can act as a direct line to those forces. If you can tap into the properties of a plant, you can use it to great effect.

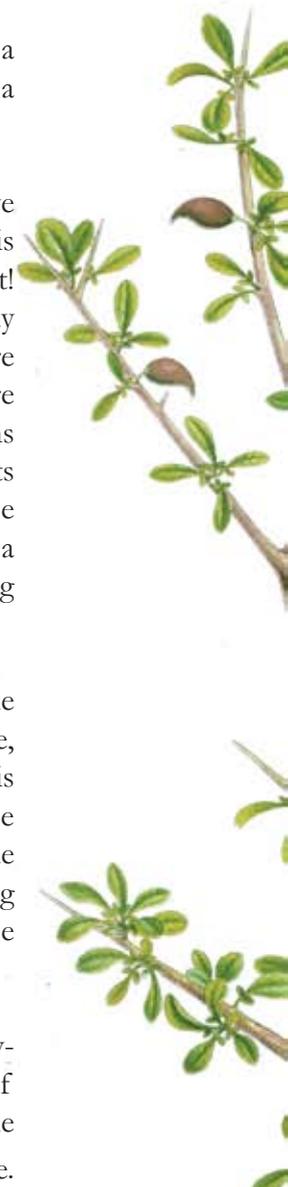
One of the central methodologies of natural magic is that we should work with nature, not against it. The main reason for this is that it is much easier to go with the tide than to swim against it! Magic takes a lot of energy, and it is counter to logic to waste any energy. Another reason is that nature knows a vast amount more than any of us as thinking individuals can possibly know. There are innumerable patterns in nature, and training to read those patterns is part of the Great Work. Learning to gather and work with plants serves just this purpose. Imposing one's will on nature is of course possible, but one should be very clear about why one does such a thing. The best way to start learning from nature is by following those of her rules that we already know.

So, when you make an incense, you should take into account the day of the week and where the moon is in its cycle. For example, if you were to make a Solar incense, it is recommended that it is made on a Sunday when the moon is ascending. The moon should be ascending for making all incenses, with the exception of Saturnine and Martian incenses, which are best made during a descending moon for maximum power. I also recommend making the incense at the proper planetary hour.

Another thing which is even more fundamental to making a powerful incense is the correct intention. See the actual making of the incense as a magical act. Try to make contact with each of the ingredients you work with, feeling their essence and relating it to its corresponding force. Praying to or invoking a force that you associate with the planet while actually making the incense is a wonderful way to put the right kind of energy into it. Believe in what you do as you do it; the importance of this cannot be emphasized enough.

Dried plant matter can make powerful tools when combined with other plant forms, for example vegetable oils, essential oils, and wine. They can also be mixed with non-vegetable matter such as crushed stones and minerals, honey, musk, and blood.

Some of the most famous incenses are Olibanum/Frankincense, Myrrh, and Sandalwood, so I will discuss them in a little more detail. Olibanum (*Boswellia thurifera*) is used very often by Western magicians. It is a resin, and we use it not only because it smells absolutely wonderful, but also because it has natural purifying qualities. It is therefore perfect to use when clearing a space, doing a banishing, or making a circle. Olibanum is included in many incense recipes from antiquity to the present day. The ancient Jews, Egyptians, Babylonians, Persians, and Assyrians all used it. In terms of planetary forces, it is found in Sun and Jupiter incenses, as it is very bright and uplifting in its nature.



Myrrh (*Commiphora myrrha*) is also a resin, coming from trees that grow in eastern Africa. It was used by the ancient Jews and Egyptians, in incense but also as a medicine and, in the case of the Egyptians, in embalming. We have a written record of its use in ancient Egypt from about 2000 B.C.E., and it is mentioned several times in both the New and Old Testaments of the Bible. It is still used medicinally to some extent by herbalists, often as an antiseptic. Its character is much earthier than Olibanum, and it is used in Earth and Saturn incenses.

Sandalwood (*Santalum album*) is the inner bark of the sandal tree, which grows in India and other places in Asia. It is the primary ingredient of incense, as well as oils and perfumes, in that part of the world. The fragrant wood is also used in funeral pyres. Its medicinal disinfectant qualities reside in the oil which is extracted from the wood, and herbalists still prescribe its use as an aphrodisiac. This characteristic, as well as its spicy, fragrant character lends itself to Luna and Venus incenses.

Making incenses with exotic ingredients is a real pleasure. However, to work with plants and herbs that you have gathered yourself is not only immensely satisfying, but the very act of gathering plants by hand gives much greater power to the plants used. There are many plants in your area, wherever you live. As well as ingredients in incense, herbs and plants can be used magically in a great variety of ways: for protection, for medicine and healing, and for magical tools. Plants are also used in alchemy, which can produce the most complete herbal medicines of all. So, if at all possible, I recommend using plants you have gathered yourself.

Gathering Plants

The first thing one must do in order to pursue gathering plants is to learn about the plant world in the physical sense. This means studying the

area in which you live and finding out about the plants that have medicinal or magical value which grow around you. I must admonish all potential plant magicians to be very careful about gathering plants, since many plants look alike, but while some are beneficial, others can be extremely poisonous. Therefore, taking the necessary time to study plants in order to identify them correctly is not only beneficial in order to comprehend the properties of a plant intellectually, but also compulsory so as to avoid any accidents! It is a good idea to start with only a few plants, so as not to feel completely overwhelmed. I would suggest selecting perhaps three or four medicinal plants that are well-known, easy to identify, and grow profusely in your area. Study how they look, where they grow, and their medicinal properties. It is a good idea to memorize their Latin names.

Once you start researching your chosen plants, you will see how truly extraordinary they are. They each have a long, complex history, with associations with various mythologies, literature (both old and new), folk-medicine, herbal medicine (from ancient to modern), folk tales, and lots of superstition, as well as their relationships to the planets and other forces. In general, you will find that most of the cultures and time periods before the beginning of the Industrial Revolution had a much deeper understanding and relationship with nature than our present-day societies. The reasons for this are quite obvious; all medicines, soap, cosmetic products of all kinds, ink, paper, and hundreds of other things that we take completely for granted were all made of products found directly in nature. It follows logically that those cultures and peoples who were so dependent on nature had a much closer relationship with it, whether they were royalty in a great urban center in ancient Egypt or a medieval town in England. Therefore, it is worth exploring these sources at length.

Plants should always be gathered using the same logic as listed above: that is, gathered on



the proper day, with the moon on the ascent (with the exception of Saturnine and Martian plants, as always), and preferably at the correct planetary hour. This is even more important with gathering plants than with making incense. Certain plants love the full moon and gathering them at this time is ideal; others, mostly Saturnine plants, will come into their power at the new moon.

Where should you gather your plant? It is important that you do not take any plants that are near busy roads or large residential areas, for obvious physical reasons: fumes of cars and other such poisons can contaminate plants, making them potentially toxic and also less potent as magical tools. Other than this very practical advice, it is also extremely important that the place from which you take the plant “resonates” with you. We all know instinctively what that means. Certain places, be they houses, streets, parks, or areas of forest have what we call a “good vibe,” and others less so. We are drawn to some places, and repelled by others. By making this feeling conscious, we can choose a place in nature that is conducive to doing magical work.

Very often it is best to explore an uninhabited area first, and create a type of relationship with it. This can be a city park (if you are a city-dweller without any chance of getting to a forest), but the best is to be as far from humans as possible. There are two reasons for this. Firstly, the less influence humans have on a natural area, the more nature’s patterns can emerge freely. Humans have a rather negative influence on wild nature generally, since they tend to impose their will on nature rather than listening to what nature has to say; nature therefore tends to retreat into itself if there are too many humans around. Secondly, when you work with gathering plants, you will be reading these patterns, which means stopping, listening, smelling, meditating, and then talking to the plants. If most humans see you acting in such a way, you might be carted off to a mental hospital, which is really not an ideal place for continuing to do magical work! That aside, being observed while doing this type of work is a sure way to make you self-conscious, which will impede any instinctual understanding you might otherwise gain.

Just like in the making of incense, taking a plant for magical use should be thought of as a magical act, or as a kind of ritual. Before setting out to gather your plant, it is very important to have the right state of mind. You can sit and meditate, do a ritual, or pray; the important thing is that you work from the state of mind of the Higher within yourself, not your standard everyday ego. By doing this, you are already in a good state to start communicating with nature, and allowing her mysteries to reveal themselves to you. Then form the firm intention in your mind that you wish to gather plants for magical purposes. Then go to the place, find a plant, and ask permission from the plant to give itself to you for this purpose. Sometimes a plant will refuse; if so, I would strongly suggest that you listen! If you have already established a relationship with the place, however, most plants will be willing to help you out.

Now, it is only a question of how you physically gather the plant. Those readers who are interested can easily find recommendations as to the best ways to gather roots, leaves, and stems; the best times of year, the best times of day, what tools to use and so on. Magically, there are also some traditional rules that you can choose to follow. For example, traditionally, a plant should not be cut with iron; nor should a cut plant

fall back on the ground once it has been cut; and the magician should either be naked or wearing white natural fibre when gathering. These and lots of other charming tips abound in “folk magic” literature; how seriously you wish to take them is up to you.

As you work with plants, you will find that you can comprehend and relate to some plants more than others. This is exactly like being able to relate to some people more than others. It is a matter of personal chemistry. Those plants that you can communicate with more directly can be great sources of knowledge and power, and you will find that a lot of the mythology and old folk tales associated with them make more sense. The part of your mind that opens up to the plants gives you a glimpse into the Quintessence.

Medicine and Poison

You may have noticed that I recommended choosing medicinal plants to gather, not just random pretty flowers. Why are we interested in medicinal plants? It might seem an obvious question, but let’s take a look at it carefully. Of course it is nice to heal, but that is not the only reason. All plants have, as stated before, that animated Spirit within them. But each species also has an individual stamp. Our understanding and relationship to a plant is defined by that stamp, so in context to humans, a medicinal or poisonous plant is a plant of power. This type of plant affects us directly. You will find that most of the plants in incense recipes are medicinal for this very reason. As magicians, we are most interested in things that have power which can give us a kind of “short-cut” in our evolution, so of course powerful plants fall into this category.

Many medicinal plants can be poisonous if too much is used; conversely, poisonous plants can provide important medicines. Poisonous plants have the greatest affect on us of all, and can take us to madness, illumination, or even death. This is why poisonous plants have long been revered around the world in shamanistic contexts. A shaman or medicine man, by imbibing such a

plant, could achieve a state of mind wherein he or she could go to the spirit world in order to heal a sick member of the community. Poison therefore leads directly to medicine—in this case, not necessarily a physical medicine. Such plants could also help the practitioner achieve a state of trance for personal transformation.

In a Western context, it is often the Saturnine and Lunar plants that are poisonous and/or psychoactive. Many Saturnine poisonous plants grow near garbage dumps, for example Datura (*Datura stramonium*) or Henbane (*Hyoscyamus niger*). If you are lucky enough to find such plants, make sure to ask their permission before you cut them, and use them carefully. Remember that their nature is dark and can be extremely dangerous, both for the body and for the mind. Poisonous Lunar plants, such as Wild Lettuce (*Lactuca virosa*) or Opium (*Papaver somniferum*) tend to be sleep-inducing, heavy plants. Medicinally, they are used as sedatives and pain killers. A very small amount of any of these plants in an incense will lend great power to it, and if carefully done will not affect the practitioner physically.

Working with poisonous plants can be very difficult and also very rewarding. Because they are plants of power, the rare ones will only allow themselves to be found when they consider you to be ready. All plants should be treated with respect, but poisonous plants have a lot more power than other, standard herbs. They can be tremendous teachers and allies, and they are no exception to the rule that “when the student is ready, the teacher will appear.”

We are all in this Order because we want to develop ourselves, evolve, and discover our greatest potential as human beings, and I hope I have managed to show that plant magic can be an aid to this process. My hope is that this essay has inspired some of you to start investigating the vast world of natural magic.

Soror V.E.M.

