

# Hawthorn, *Crataegus spp.*

Supportive Friend | Heart Strengthenener | Help During Transitions

## Hawthorn Fun Facts

Traditionally, hawthorn is a tree of the hedgerows of wild trees, shrubs and herbaceous plants. We find it along the edges of fields and roads, gracing the world with beautiful white flowers with pink stamen in mid-spring and bright red to burgundy haws in late summer and early autumn.

The name itself, hawthorn, gives a description of the tree. Haws are the true name for the berries and the thorns on the branches can be very formidable. Birds, deer and other wild animals feast on the apple-like haws when ripe and deposit the seeds with a convenient "compost packet" away from the mother tree. In early times, the thorns were used for piercing leather and fabric for sewing.

Cedar Mountain Herb School instructor Heather Bruno always puts a thorn in her hawthorn tinctures and elixirs as she says that it gives the person using the remedy energetic protection.



The most common hawthorns are the Western European species, *Crataegus monogyna*, and Black Hawthorn, *Crataegus douglasii*, a wild variety. Called Espino Blanco or white thorn in the Spanish language, referring to the white flowers and thorns, hawthorn is in the rose family. It can grow 20 -30 feet tall and prefers full sun and ample water. As it is closely related to apple trees, hawthorn is susceptible to the same rusts and diseases. Mulching with freshly chipped willow branches around the base of the hawthorn improves the tree's immunity and gives protection against many of the common pests and diseases, due to willow's high salicylate content.

## Making Hawthorn Remedies

The best time to harvest hawthorn flowers is when the stamen are pink. This means that the flowers are not yet pollinated. Once a hawthorn flower is pollinated, the stamen turn brown and the flower no longer carries the medicine of the unpollinated flower. At this point, it is focusing on making the seed. We can also harvest the mature, but not quite open white flower buds.

My favorite remedy to make in the spring is an 80 proof brandy tincture of the flowers and leaves. The flowers do not need to be chopped, but the remedy will be stronger if the leaves are minced. Fill the jar to the bottom of the ring with equal parts hawthorn flowers and leaves, then fill the jar to the top with brandy. The tannins in hawthorn can pull out cardiac alkaloids from the solution and they can fall to the bottom of the bottle. Adding a up to 10% of glycerine in the jar with the brandy allows for emulsion of the cardiac alkaloids. Let the tincture sit on a counter for 2 weeks, then strain.

I always make more hawthorn leaf and flower brandy tincture than I'll need during the summer as I can utilize the heart healing medicine for a few months and have enough left over to pour over mashed ripe haws in late summer. This makes a delightfully tasting and super charged remedy as, while there are common constituents in all three parts of the plant, each do have some medicine that is unique to their part.

## The Medicine of Hawthorn

The signature of the rose family of plants is that they aid in healing those who are dealing with matters of the heart. Roses themselves help to ground us when we feel brain fog and lightheadedness and aids in establishing love for oneself and others.

Hawthorn is the herb that helps us take a big deep healing breath and is supporting in trying times. I call hawthorn the "hope and faith that everything will be ok" herb. It walks along with us during times of grief and transition and helps us to cope with the big feelings and changes. It's like an herbal best friend who has our best interest at heart.

While the flowers are prized in spring, in fall we harvest the leaves and berries. The berries, leaves and flowers contain high quantities of flavonoid glycosides. Flavonoids in plants aid in the reduction of abnormal cells in the body by killing the free radicals which cause the abnormalities. The flavonoid glycosides in hawthorn aid in treating disorders of the heart such as angina, stroke, hypertension and palpitations. Think of it this way: when road construction crews on an interstate close lanes to funnel traffic away from the construction area, the same amount of traffic must flow through fewer lanes. This causes backups, traffic jams, accidents, and shenanigans. When all lanes are opened with fresh new pavement, the traffic flows well, and everyone is happy. Hawthorn flavonoids help the cardiac pathways flow freely.

Hawthorn strengthens the heart, physically and emotionally, with the help of water soluble flavonoid glycosides including *vitexin*. The antioxidant effect of flavonoid glycosides are said to lessen capillary weakness and bring about other positive heart benefits. Vitexin in hawthorn's leaves, flowers and haws has anti-inflammatory and antihistamine actions. Other health benefits of vitexin are its hypotensive action - helping the heart to work easier, reduces oxidative stress that chronic stress and anxiety can contribute to, and anti-arrhythmic contributions.

When stressed out or anxious, the digestive system can turn off. Hawthorn helps food move through the digestive tract and prevent sour stomach and bloating.

Hawthorn is valued in treating anxiety and panic attacks by relieving the effects of stress and insomnia. The flowers, leaves, and berries can be used. Hawthorn oxymel is amazingly tasty and super soothing to the nervous system.

Folklore says that the Greeks originated making oxymels to extract and preserve the medicine and nutrition of the plants that grew around them. To make a hawthorn berry oxymel, gather enough berries to fill 3/4s of a pint jar. Pour the berries into a bowl and, using a mortar and pestle or the bottom of the jar, mash the berries to break open the skins. The berries look and taste like mushy apples. As the berries oxidize quickly, don't dawdle with this part of the process. Now this next step is crucial - when filling the jar, leave plenty of open spaces, meaning don't pack the berries in the jar. Hawthorn berries contain large amounts of pectin. Pectin is released in the first few days of the process and act as a protecting fortress around the berries. The pectin will block off the honey and vinegar from being able to extract the medicine and nutrients. Leaving open spaces gives the menstruum (honey and vinegar) space to do their work. Each day for the first four days, poke and stir the berries to break up the plant matter to ensure an effective and strong remedy. To continue with the process, fill the jar 2/3rds full with organic raw apple cider vinegar, then top off the jar with local honey. Put on a lid and label and place the jar on the counter to macerate for 3-4 weeks, then strain. The oxymel can be taken by the dropperful, or sprayed into the mouth via spray bottle. The oxymel can also be used by adding a teaspoon to a tablespoon in fizzy water for a calming shrub.

When we are in transition, we can feel stuck, stagnant, in-between. That's called the liminal zone. It's a place that is different than before, but not where we will be in the future. It can be a very confusing place to be. Hawthorn helps us to rest and be calm in the liminal zone and trust that it is temporary and the next step in life is coming.

Chronic stress and anxiety can wreak havoc on the body's blood sugar levels. Hawthorn tincture and vinegar help to modulate blood sugar levels. It's a good idea to shy away from using honey can create a spike in blood sugar.

The yoga master of the herb world, hawthorn helps us to be resilient; bend, not break, stretch and rest.

## Hawthorn Activity

Dealing with grief is such a tricky thing in western culture. We're told to "get over it," "move on," "work hard and you'll forget," and other not very helpful advice. If our hearts hurt, they hurt. If we make attempts of masking grief with shopping, eating, sex, gaming, alcohol and drugs, etc, the grief will come out eventually. It may take years. Our hearts may speak to us through palpitations, arrhythmias and even heart attacks. We can have other physical manifestations of unresolved grief such as gastrointestinal disturbances, lowered immunity, diabetes, and chronic inflammation, which science says is the genesis of most diseases.

We must give ourselves permission, and time, to grieve. It's ok to allow the feelings. They may feel overwhelming, but feeling the feels can take us from sadness to peace. Only grieving can truly heal grief. Everyone grieves differently. What does grieving look like to you? When my mother died almost 2 decades ago, a dear friend came over and gave me a pedicure complete with a calf massage and foot soak. Her generous heartfelt care still brings a bittersweet smile to my face all these years later.

The lavender activity of writing down things that bring sunshine to your soul can be so helpful when caring for yourself during times of sadness and grief (see lavender for directions).

In Japan, there is a technique used for repairing broken vessels called Kintsugi. Using plant resin and gold or silver, the broken pieces are glued together to create a beautiful mosaic vessel. This vessel is held in higher esteem than the original, and is a metaphor for embracing the flaws and imperfections of life and of oneself. When in grief, hawthorn can "kintsugi" the heart, making it stronger and more beautiful than before. It says that we've made it through. We've gone from surviving to thriving. There is a beauty in that that is so touching. One of my pastors once said, "let your misery be your ministry." When we walk through the fire and come out anew, we can assist others dealing with the same issue.

Earthing under the hawthorn tree. Nature is a powerful teacher. To embrace transition, look no further than the hawthorn trees, who change color, shed their leaves, and grow anew with the seasons. These trees change in their own time, at the exact pace they're meant to, and without fixating on the last phase. That we know of, the hawthorn doesn't spend all winter missing their fallen leaves. There is a quiet confidence that new leaves will grow, and it is all part of the process. We can utilize time spent in nature as a safe place to feel the sadness and grief and begin to heal.

Take a blanket and a cup of hawthorn tea and lie down near a hawthorn tree. As it breathes in the carbon dioxide that you exhale, it gives you oxygen that can be so calming. Take long soothing breaths. The exquisite exchange between you and the hawthorn can slow down and gentle your heart, ease the pain, give you rest. The hawthorn can become your best friend and is strong to take in your cries while standing tall and resilient in the midst of your pain. Go ahead and cry if that happens. Tears are healing. Let them fall to the earth and be cleansed.

### **Hawthorn Chai Honey**

1 cup fresh hawthorn berries  
1.5 cups honey  
1 tbsp Fortify Chai Spices\*  
Pint jar

Hawthorn berries have a lot of pectin in them. Pectin is what makes jelly jell and we get it commercially from apples. Apples and hawthorn are cousins. Pectin has an immune modulating

#### **\*Fortify Chai Spices Recipe**

6 tablespoons roasted dandelion root  
4 tablespoons dried cinnamon chips  
2 tablespoons dried reishi mushroom pieces  
2 tablespoons dried ashwagandha root  
2 tablespoons dried crushed pine or fir needles  
2 tablespoons dried ginger pieces  
2 tablespoons whole cardamom  
1 tablespoon whole cloves  
2 teaspoons ground nutmeg  
1 teaspoon star anise

Directions for preparation:

Remove the seeds out of the cardamom pods. Roast them along with the cinnamon chips in a hot dry pan for a short minute, stirring constantly to avoid scorching. This helps to bring out the flavors. When cool, mix the herbs together in a bowl and keep in an airtight glass jar. Fortify Chai Spices will keep for up to 8 months.

## Hawthorn Chutney

4.5 lbs. hawthorn berries  
1 qt. apple cider vinegar  
22 oz. organic brown sugar  
2 tbsp. ground ginger  
1 tbsp. ground nutmeg  
½ tbsp. ground cloves  
½ tbsp. ground allspice  
2 tbsp. sea or mineral salt  
½ tsp black pepper  
A few sprigs of fresh thyme

### Instructions

Remove the leaves from the hawthorn berries and put them into a 6 quart pot. Add the apple cider vinegar and salt to the pot and bring to a boil. Once boiling, turn down the heat to simmer, cover the pot, and cook the berries until soft - about 45 minutes, stirring occasionally.

Pass the cooked hawthorn berries through a Foley mill or sturdy sieve to remove the seeds. The hawthorn paste will come out of the bottom. You should end up with 2 pints of pulp. This takes patience; put on some good music and dance a bit.

Rinse out your pot and put the hawthorn paste back in. Remove the thyme leaves from the stems and add them to the pot along with the sugar and spices.

Cook for 10 minutes on medium heat until the sugar is completely melted and is hot all the way through, stirring constantly to keep the sugar from scorching.

Spoon the hawthorn berry chutney into the sterilized jars, wipe the tops of the jars, put on the clean, hot lids, and hot water bath can for 15 minutes. So yummy, so good for you, and with every bite, you'll know that "Everything is going to be ok!"