

GIFTS FROM THE GARDEN

...from Victoria's Secret Garden

Many years ago, with a loathing for shopping malls and most things commercial, I decided that I would give handmade gifts during the holidays. My idea of holiday shopping is a trip down the back stairs to my gardens – harvesting tomatoes for homemade marinara sauce, digging gingerroot that I'll make into candied ginger treats, and browsing my gardens to harvest a bounty of fresh herbs and hot peppers for infused wine vinegars. This “backyard shopping” allows me to avoid holiday traffic and crowded shopping malls while getting outside and enjoying our beautiful fall weather.

Since the holiday season is now upon us, let me share one of my favorite gifts from the garden – herb-infused wine vinegars. Infusing vinegars is the *perfect* way to use the abundance of herbs left over at the end of the growing season – especially the annual herbs that will die back at first frost. If you've never made herbal vinegars, you'll be surprised at the simplicity and delighted with the results. You can use these to make vinaigrette salad dressings, to de-glaze pans, and to marinate meats. Given in decorative bottles with the herbs showing through, these make lovely handmade gifts.

On a recent trip to Hills and Dales Estate in LaGrange, I attended an herbal vinegars workshop. Previously, I'd only made my rosemary-raspberry vinegar and I was anxious to learn more. Dee Smith, Horticulture Manager at Hills and Dales, taught the workshop and Renée Thompson, Auburn University horticultural intern, assisted her. These two ladies gave a wonderful presentation and graciously granted permission to share their expertise with my readers.

Dee's tips include: cut your herbs in the morning after the dew has dried; use a single herb or a combination of several; use non-reactive utensils (glass, plastic, porcelain, or stainless steel); wash thoroughly and sterilize all bottles and equipment; dry both your herbs and bottles before using; use vinegar with at least 5% acidity; use either white or red wine (white wines will make the herbs more visible, for a prettier presentation); and keep the herbs covered, topping off with

more vinegar as needed. With these guidelines in mind, making your herbal vinegars is easy as 1-2-3:

1. Heat just to boiling a mixture of 3 parts vinegar and 1 part wine.
2. Pour the wine vinegar over fresh herbs in clean quart jars. Cover and let steep for a couple of weeks.
3. Place new, fresh herbs into a decorative bottle. Strain the wine vinegar through cheesecloth over the fresh herbs, covering herbs completely. Use a cork or a screw-on cap to seal.

Two of my favorite recipes (following the general directions above):

Rosemary-raspberry vinegar

- Steep in one quart heated white-wine vinegar: 1 cup of raspberries and 3 sprigs of rosemary
- After two weeks, strain into bottles over 1 sprig of rosemary.

French country vinegar

- Steep in one quart heated wine vinegar: 1 sprig rosemary, 2 sprigs thyme, 2 sprigs oregano, 1 sprig savory, 1 sprig lavender, 2 bay leaves, 2 cloves garlic, 1 hot pepper
- After two weeks, strain into bottles over fresh herbs of your choice.

Tie raffia, ribbon, or ornament of your choice to the bottle necks and be sure to include a “fresh from the garden” or “homemade” gift card.

Please visit Hills and Dales Estate online at www.HillsAndDalesEstate.org for information on upcoming workshops (click “Educational Programs”, then click “Workshops and Lectures”). For more herbal vinegar recipes, email me at Victoria@VictoriasSecretGarden.info.

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