

# USNEA

a BotanoLogos Monograph

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## About Usnea

Usnea has been used as a potent treatment for infections for thousands of years. It is not a vascular plant but rather a lichen. Lichens are organisms composed of an algae (or cyanobacteria) and some type of fungi species growing together in a mutually beneficial relationship.

Though there are approximately 3,600 known species found in North America, usnea is distinctive and you can easily learn to positively identify it using the tips below.

If you find usnea growing around you, you can collect your own but it is also available from the commercial market. See the BotanoLogos [Resources Page](#) for a list of reputable herb companies.

I use it for respiratory infections, including bronchitis, strep throat and pneumonia as well as bladder infections and cystitis. I have also seen it recommended for fungal infections, and peritonitis but have no direct experience with this. Usnea has no known contraindications as is considered a very safe herbal medicine.

## Finding and Identifying Usnea

Usnea grows on wood, usually on tree branches, occasionally on wooden fences or siding, but only in forests where air pollution levels are low. It is an indicator of good air quality so if you live in an urban area you may not have any around.

You will see many types of lichen in the forest in a range of colors from muted gray to lime green or yellow, and a variety of shapes. Usnea has a distinctive structure, with tiny branches covered with hair like threads, often with small flat disks at the terminal end. The botanical term for this structure, thallus, is defined as the body of a plant without leaves, stems and roots. This term is also used to describe algae, fungi and some bryophytes. Because it is difficult to distinguish between different species of usnea you'll often see its botanical name listed as *Usnea thallus* or *Usnea spp.*



**Notes from Patricia**

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To positively identify usnea, hold a piece of fresh usnea between your hands and gently tug on a strand. It should pull apart in such way that you'll see a tiny white thread inside the outer green/gray cortex layer. Usnea is the only lichen with this tiny thread. It may take a couple of tries and may be difficult to see if the usnea is too dry.

### Harvesting Usnea

Collect usnea from fallen branches in wooded areas, especially after a windstorm. Pluck usnea clumps from the branches one at a time. You'll usually get some small pieces of bark as well; pinch these off and discard.

It takes quite a while to collect enough usnea to make tincture as it weighs nothing when dry. I dry my usnea harvest on the porch scattered around on tray and out of direct sunlight. When it is dry enough to crumble easily, I transfer it to a jar with a lid until I have about 4 ounces. Sometimes, due to a literal windfall, I'll find a big branch just covered with usnea and can collect several ounces at once.

### Making Usnea Tincture

This method for making usnea tincture is one I learned from herbalist [Christopher Hobbs](#), one of my first herb teachers when I was a student at the California School of Herbal Studies many years ago. His method uses heat to extract active chemical compounds.

After you have enough dried usnea to work with you need to grind it up. I've found that my usual tool for doing this, a Vitamix, is too powerful and that an electric spice or coffee grinder works best.

Grind the dry usnea until the gray-green outer layer (the cortex) is powdered. The inner thread-like cord will not be ground up. The next step is to sift the usnea through a fine mesh strainer to separate the ground cortex from the inner cords. Discard the cords.

The powdered usnea is extremely irritating so wear face mask or damp bandana over your nose and mouth while processing the powder.



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## Making Usnea Tincture (cont.)

Usnea tincture is made at a weight to volume ratio of 1:5. If you are new to tincture making, this means for every part of usnea powder by weight, you will need five parts of menstruum by volume. You will need to weigh your usnea on a scale and measure your menstruum with a standard measuring cup. For more details, see my Simple Guide to Medicine Making (download from the "Resources" page of [www.wildhealingherbs.com](http://www.wildhealingherbs.com)).

The menstruum or solvent used is 190 proof ethanol, also known as grain alcohol.

Put your ground usnea in a quart canning jar, add the menstruum and stir a few times to mix. Put the jar (without a lid) in 2-quart saucepan with a heavy bottom, pour water in the pan so that it comes up about halfway up the side of your jar.

Over a medium flame, bring the water in the pan up to a simmer. Don't let it boil!

After 20 minutes, remove the jar from the pan and let it cool. As this happens phenolic acids will precipitate to form a thin layer of sediment at the bottom of the jar. You want this sediment so be sure to include it when you pour your completely cooled usnea tincture into bottles for storage and always shake it well before use.

## Usnea Dosages

2 ml or 1/2 teaspoon of tincture every few hours in a small amount of water to treat an acute infection. Christopher suggests adding the tincture to garlic honey for an even stronger dose of antimicrobial activity. Don't forget to shake well before dispensing.

## External Preparations

It isn't clear if usnic acid and other phenolic acids in usnea will extract into fixed vegetable oil. Christopher recommends making the hot alcohol tincture described above and then adding it to a lotion. The tincture should be emulsified in a fixed oil such as almond, using gum arabic as the emulsifier. Essential oils can also be added. Shake well before using.

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