



GUIDELINES FOR SUSTAINABLE HARVESTING

Wild Medicinal Herbs

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Co-funded by
the European Union



Introduction



Harvesting wild medicinal herbs requires knowledge, care, and respect for nature. Plants are part of sensitive ecosystems, and irresponsible harvesting can lead to the permanent disappearance of species in certain areas. Follow these guidelines to help preserve the natural balance and ensure future generations enjoy the same richness that you do.

We are often led to think that foraging or the use of wild plants for our health and our daily routine is, in itself, a sustainable practice, that is, one that can satisfy the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to satisfy them.

In reality this is not always true!

To get used to thinking in a sustainable way, we can do the exercise of thinking about multiplying our individual actions for each inhabitant on earth. This is how, for example, 3 florets of St. John's wort become 24 billion florets, and 5 flower heads of marigolds 40 billion flower heads. It's an extreme of course... but you get the idea.

How can we, therefore, behave in a conscious and truly sustainable way?

It is first of all important to know the context in which we are operating: where are they? What are the territorial, environmental and cultural characteristics of this place? What rare species are present, such as invasive alien species? Who is the competent environmental authority in that place?

1. Get to Know the Plants Before Harvesting



It is necessary to acquire good knowledge for the identification of species in the field. Make sure you can reliably identify the plant before picking it. Misidentification can be dangerous.

- Use expert manuals, mobile apps, or learn from experienced individuals.
- Learn the optimal time to harvest specific parts (leaf, flower, root, etc.).

It is important to be able to correctly identify the plants (and their parts) that you intend to collect, to avoid collecting protected or otherwise rare (or toxic) plants. If we are not absolutely certain, we leave them there. Acquiring a list of rare, endemic or protected species in the area can help avoid causing irreparable damage.

If we are beginners, let's orient ourselves towards extremely common and easily recognizable species.

Once we have acquired this information and skills, we will be able to apply some simple but fundamental rules.

2. Know any local regulations and guidelines

- Before harvesting, check which species are protected by law and must not be picked (e.g., those on the Red List).
- Avoid harvesting in protected areas (national parks, nature parks, reserves).

If we are in a Protected Area (National or Regional Park, State or Regional Reserves, Natura 2000 Site, etc.) we most likely need authorization for the collection of plant material (provided it is granted), or in any case there will be some restrictions relating to the species that can be collected and the quantities.

Find out from the managing bodies, the Municipality, or from the Forestry Carabinieri Station Command responsible for the area in which you intend to collect.



3. Harvest only what you need in a respectful way

We harvest always thinking that the following year we will have to return to the same place and find the same species in the same quantity, taking into account the cycles of pollination and dissemination.

Even if there are no limits imposed by the regulations, it is important not to exceed the quantities by collecting only what we need and in any case never more than 25% of the plants of the same species that we can observe in the place where we are.

If we need only one part of the plant (flowers, fruits, leaves, seeds, twigs, etc...) we are careful not to collect everything from the same individual, but to leave at least half of what we are collecting on each plant.

If we need the entire aerial part, we are careful not to tear it or uproot it, but to make a clean cut with scissors or a sharp knife above the collar, so that the plant can possibly vegetate again.

If we need the root, we uproot with caution, taking care to close the hole created in the ground, trying to restore the continuity of the turf.

4. Protect the Habitat and Environment

Harvest Moderately and Selectively - never pick all the plants from one location – leave at least two-thirds untouched. Choose plants from different spots to avoid exhausting a single area.

Do not pick plants that are damaged, diseased, or endangered.

Do not uproot the plant unless it's absolutely necessary (e.g., if the root is the part used – harvest very rarely and selectively).

Walk on existing trails whenever possible. Avoid stepping on plants and disturbing the soil.

Do not leave any waste – take everything with you, including organic matter.

In general, always use the utmost respect for all the other elements of the ecosystem: plants, animals, soil, rocks, etc.

Don't collect more than you realistically need.

For commercial use or larger quantities, permits are required and specific regulations must be followed.



5. Contribute to the containment of invasive alien species

During collections, you may come across invasive alien species. If we are aware of the methods of containment of that species, where possible, we can actively contribute to combating this serious threat to native biodiversity (e.g. *Senecio inaequidens*)

6. Report rare species

During collections, you may come across rare, endemic and endangered species.

In this case it is important to report them to the competent authorities, who will be able (in the case of new reports) to include them in their archives to be able to effectively monitor and protect them.



7. Report sightings of threats to the environment and territory

You may also notice some form of threat or pressure on the environment: fires, illegal landfills, carrying out unauthorized activities.

Also in this case it is good practice to report it to the competent authorities.

8. No sowing and planting in a natural environment

Contrary to what one might think, sowing (including the practice of seed bombing) or do-it-yourself planting, not organized or authorized by the relevant bodies and without precise indications on the correct methods, can be very harmful to the ecosystem, as they can favor the entry and expansion of invasive alien species or non-native ecotypes.



9. Use Proper Tools and Method

- Harvest by hand or use sharp scissors/a knife to avoid damaging the plant or its roots.
- Use breathable cloth bags or baskets instead of plastic bags – herbs won't sweat and rot.

10. Follow Nature's Rhythm

- Don't harvest during or immediately after rain, as wet plants are more prone to rotting.
- The ideal time for foraging is a sunny morning, after the dew has dried and when plants are rich in essential oils.

Reminder:

Nature is not a store – every plant has its role in the ecosystem. If we harvest with respect, nature will repay us many times over.