

Herb and Flower Wines

Contributed by cab

While many of the best loved country wines you'll come across are made from flowers or herbs, these wines have a reputation among some wine makers for being difficult to make. Nothing could be further from the truth; with a little forethought and some care, these wines present some of the most intriguing prospects for the home brewer. This article builds on an earlier article, *Home Wine Making* which is an invaluable primer for a beginner. If you haven't brewed wine yet, I recommend that you read that article first. If you can find your way around a wine recipe, and know a demi-jon from a siphon tube, then read on. Why make herb and flower wines? Essentially, a home wine maker can divide his year into seasons based on what's available when. Most of the fruit wines you'll make (raspberry, blackberry, elderberry, black currant, etc.) are work for mid to late Summer. They'll yield fabulous wines, full bodied, with a great variety of flavour, and they'll form the backbone of your wine cellar; the table wines, the cooking wines, the wines that emulate those you buy. Then in Winter you'll be making vegetable wines and maybe 'kit' wines; these are the ones that often need longer to mature but which have a surprising depth of flavour. That leaves Spring and early Summer, when there aren't many ripe fruits around, not till the strawberries, gooseberries and apricots, and this is a time when many of the flowers and herbs in gardens and in the woods are at their very best. Not to exploit them seems almost wrong. The flavours you can produce from herbs and flowers are quite tremendously variable, as you'd expect, so the range of uses to which you will be able to put these wines is huge. From coltsfoot and dandelion, which are good white table wines, through elderflower and hawthorn blossom which are the kind of wines you will enjoy on a summer evening after dinner, all the way to water mint, orange blossom and rose, which are the strongly flavoured social wines to get out for parties and barbecues. Of all home wines you can make, it's those from herbs and flowers that may surprise and entertain you most. What do you need? The earlier home made wine article is an excellent primer, detailing nearly everything you need. The only thing that you desperately need above what's mentioned there is a good straining bag; you can purchase these from good home brew shops. Try getting a nylon bag, as you'll be able to use it over and over again without it degrading and without affecting the wine in any way. But when it comes right down to it, all the hardware you need is a really big pan, a gallon bottle with a stopper and air lock, a bucket and a length of tubing. Where to get herbs and flowers? It's relatively easy to grow enough herbs in the garden for kitchen use, but if you devote a little more space to them in the garden you'll easily be able to produce a few more ounces of thyme, an extra bag of mint, another rosemary bush, etc. And that's all you need, a little extra of a strongly flavoured herb will do for an odd gallon of herb wine. If you can't manage that, the other options you have are buying (fresh or dried; you need a lot less dried herb than fresh, but the flavour may not be so good) and picking wild. Picking wild herbs may sound like hard work, and I'm certainly not going to recommend that you strip our precious patches of wild thyme, but many herbs grow profusely in the wild if you know where to look. Water mint, for example, makes a superb wine, and is plentiful by rivers and lakes all over the UK. Flowers are a slightly different prospect; you need a larger volume of flowers to make a home made wine, so you have to choose flowers that are both plentiful and tasty. Whereas cowslip makes a superb wine, it's certainly not common enough to pick, and wild garlic can be as common as muck but I wouldn't fancy trying the wine... That said, there are all manner of targets for the home brewer; elderflowers, dandelions, coltsfoot, hawthorn, gorse, etc. are all used to great effect in home made wines. What else do I need to add? That all depends on what you're trying to make. To be honest, a wine made with sugar and flowers and nothing else is going to be a bit on the thin side. To make a good wine, you need some sugar, which ferments with yeast to produce alcohol, you need water, which is the medium in which the yeast lives, you need a nitrogen source and other trace nutrients for the yeast, you need something to make the mixture a little acidic, and you need something to give it flavour. Optional, but helpful, is something to give it 'body', something that won't ferment out that adds the extra substance that turns the wine from being a weak alcohol solution into a genuine wine. And if you're short of tannin in your ingredients, it'll benefit from a cup of black tea. So to provide body, many people choose to add some fruit juice (concentrated grape juice is good, apple juice), some raisins or some other fruit. All of that works, but another option is to use honey instead of sugar. Technically, that makes your wine a metheglin (spice or herb flavoured mead), but I won't tell if you won't. You can swap honey for the sugar in any wine recipe, but you need to add a little more. The only thing that is REALLY necessary to add is some kind of nutrient for the yeast; if you're not going to add some raisins or fruit, make sure you add some yeast nutrient, or the ferment will take forever. Okay, so how do I make this wine? There are lots of ways of getting the flavour from your flower or herb into the wine. Some people ferment the sugar for a week first, some people wait till the must is cold, other people boil the herbs. I don't do it any of those ways, but they'll all work. This is how I do it (this, in my opinion, is the easy way): (1) Boil the sugar or honey with the fruit juice (if using), yeast nutrient, acid, etc. If using honey, simmer the solution really gently until you've boiled and skimmed off all the scum. (2) Put the flowers or herbs into a nylon straining bag (with the raisins if you're using them), and put that into a sterile bucket/primary fermenter. (3) Wait till the solution has cooled from boiling; it wants to be good and warm (60C or so) but not boiling, and pour it into the bucket. When it's cooled, add the activated yeast. (4) Let this steep for a day or two, or until when you give it a taste the herb or flower flavour is sufficiently intense, and remove the straining bag. Now you can wait till the primary ferment dies down a bit, pour it into secondary, and treat it as you would any other wine. And it's as simple as that. To get you going, here are a few tried and tested recipes for you to play with. I've picked recipes with wild flowers, wild herbs, a dried flower, and one that uses a concentrated fruit juice. Treat these recipes as guidelines, and remember that if the flower is edible, you can probably make wine out of it (so that means NO daffodils!). A jaunt through some home brew books will yield tonnes of recipes, and a bit of imagination and you'll be making all manner of things. Happy brewing!

pints of water mint
 1 gallon water
 1 cup strong black tea
 1 tsp citric acid
 1 tsp yeast nutrient
 3lb sugar
 All purpose wine yeast
 Water mint can be found growing by lakes and rivers all over the country. It's a great wild herb, a tiny little bit more bitter than spearmint or apple mint, but well worth gathering. Making a wine from it will make the most of its flavour in a way where that little touch of bitterness doesn't matter, but do save some for new potatoes. Make this wine using the general instructions above; it's a nice, sweetish wine. You don't want it too strong so don't use a champagne yeast. This is a superb sweet social wine that works well chilled for warm summer nights.

Coltsfoot and Pear Wine
 1 bottle of pear juice concentrate
 1-2lb of sugar
 5 pints of coltsfoot flowers (pressed down gently, with most of the green calyx removed)
 1/2 teaspoon of citric acid
 1 cup of strong black tea
 1 tsp yeast nutrient
 Water to 1 gallon
 This is one of my favourites. Pick up one of the small bottles of concentrated pear juice you can find in health food shops, and use that to provide body and sweetness. Add in all of the ingredients bar the sugar and flowers, and check the specific gravity to help you decide how much sugar to add. Then you can treat this one as per the general instructions above. It's a really, really smooth, quick maturing wine that I use as a general white table wine.

Elderflower Wine
 1 1/2 pints of elderflowers, rubbed from the stalks and pressed down lightly
 1 gallon water
 Juice of 1 lemon
 2 1/2 lb of sugar
 1 pound of raisins
 1 cup of strong black tea
 All purpose wine yeast
 Put the elderflowers and raisins into the bag, and make as per normal instructions. It's best to pick young elderflowers, when they're dry, but some springs you just have to take what you can get!

Orange Blossom Wine
 1 bag of dried orange blossom (available from good homebrew shops)
 3 lb honey
 Water to 1 gallon
 1 tsp yeast nutrient
 1 cup strong black tea
 1 tsp citric acid
 This makes a medium sweet orange blossom mead (or, more strictly, a metheglin). It's a really easy wine to make, and it matures quite fast. Again, use the general instructions above.