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SPLISH! SPLASH! TAKING A BATH ALL ALONE ON A WORK-DAY NIGHT? TOSS IN THE HERBS, FLOAT A FEW FLOWERS, ADD ONE NUDE BODY AND LET YOUR CARES GO UP IN STEAM

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PSST . . . want to try something slightly wild? Risque enough to shake you right down to the blue swoosh on your Nikes?

How about floating nude in a little chamomile? Or cavorting among scented rose petals?

You could imitate Ninon de Lenclos, the scandalous French courtesan and celebrated beauty of the 17th century who had this thing about lavender flowers, rosemary and mint. She didn't smoke it, she soaked in it. And lived to age 85, reportedly a beauty to the end with her daily herbal baths.

Virginia Saso isn't particularly wild or risqué, but the herb expert from Saratoga says a bath scented with herbs and flowers from the garden is a real high.

"This is part of what's called aroma therapy," she says. "You smell the smell of herbs and flowers and it just makes you feel good. It's a psychological healing."

Saso says just about anything in the garden can be used to jazz up a bath. "But I wonder about marigold -- that's a pretty strong odor," she says.

An herbal bath using catnip, jasmine or chamomile, for instance, relaxes and soothes, unwinding the body for a peaceful night's sleep, she says. Basil, lavender or rosemary are stimulating bath herbs, while calendula, comfrey or spearmint are healing.

There is more than one way to dive into herbs. The easiest, Saso says, is to prepare herbal bath bags -- it's just like making a brew from a tea bag. According to "Herbs," edited by Lesley Bremness, (Reader's Digest, \$14.95), hang three or four herbal tea bags from the tap, or place a small herb-filled tea ball in the water. The warm water releases the herbal oils. You'll get the most benefit relaxing in the water for at least 10 minutes.

Saso favors sweet-smelling baths, and her favorites are lavender flowers and rose petals in cheesecloth or fine-gauze sacks. "You hold the sack under the hot water tap, so the water runs through the sack. The fragrance is wonderful," she says.

Another way is to make an herbal tea in advance -- this is called infusion -- and then pour it right into the tub. The Reader's Digest guide says you get the best results by infusing 10 ounces of dried herbs or a handful of fresh herbs in 2 1/2 cups of boiled water. Let the mixture steep for 10 minutes, then strain and pour into the bath water.

You could also simply float certain flowers or their petals in the bath water for a fragrant -- and slightly sinful -- feeling. Gardenia, honeysuckle, jasmine, lavender, lemon verbena, rose petals, scented geraniums and violets can go it alone, or in combinations, in the scented bath.

A note of warning, however, from Denise Diamond in "The Complete Book of Flowers," (North Atlantic Books, out of print) on floating flowers or petals: "This is a wonderful luxury but can also clog the drain. So be careful of floating blossoms unless they are large."

There are two ways to go about obtaining herbs for the bath. The easiest, Saso says, is to grow your own from seed or transplant, and then either use the herbs fresh or dried. Fresh herb leaves and flowers can be gathered by the handful. Most herbs are best when harvested from mid- to late summer and hung to dry.

Another route is through shops that offer herbs by the bulk, such as Cupertino Natural Foods or Bread of Life. Check the Yellow Pages under "Herbs" for other sources. The Crabtree and Evelyn shops sell three pre-mixed herbal bath blends for approximately \$2.25 for two ounces, and terry cloth bags to hold the herbs for \$1.75.

Herbs in the spice rack at the grocery store could be used but that would be a costly way to take a bath.

Herbalist Jeanne Rose calls an herbal bath the wonder cure. In "Herbs & Things: Jeanne Rose's Herbal," (Putnam, \$7.95), Rose outlines the ritual for indulging in the perfect herbal bath, either solo or with a friend:

Step 1: Take a minimum of 1/2 cup herbs and simmer in one quart of water in a covered non-metal pot for 10 to 20 minutes.

Step 2: While the herbs are simmering, take a quick shower or a soap and water bath to remove surface dirt.

Step 3: After the quick bath, fill the tub with warm or hot water (hot baths are enervating, warm baths are pleasant). Strain the decoction and pour the herb liquid into the tub. Wrap the solid residue in a wash cloth and tie with a ribbon or rubber band.

Step 4: Step into your tub and soak for at least 20 minutes, read a book, relax, and rub your body vigorously with the herbs that are tied in the wash cloth.

If all of that sounds like more time than you have to spare -- or worse if you only have a shower and not a tub -- you can still enjoy the good feeling of herbs all over. Follow Steps 1 and 2. Strain the decoction, wrap the solid herb matter in a wash cloth and rub the body vigorously. Use the liquid as a rinse after the shower and rub. "This is very invigorating and is most useful to men who don't like soaking in a tub," Rose writes.

Saso says the most important part of herbal and flower baths is to take it easy. "The idea is for this to be relaxing. Don't rush it. Sit back and soak. You'll feel wonderful," she says.

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