

# The Nutritional ‘Weed’

**Steve Marquis** tells the story of Rosebay Willowherb, its medicinal properties and how to make your own richly flavoured tea

At one point in time, Rosebay Willowherb (*Chamaenerion angustifolium*) was all the rage in Britain. Its taste is reported to have been more popular than the classic black tea in the late 19th century, but the reasons for it falling out of fashion are less clear. Russian sources claim that the East India Company began a targeted smear campaign against ‘Ivan’s tea’. The aim was to discredit the delicious Russian brew so as to remove it as a competitor from the British market. Others point to the collapse of commercial production in Russia in the wake of the Russian Revolution. Either way, in the 21st century, Koporye tea, or Ivan’s tea, remains something of a hidden treasure.

Years before Chinese tea arrived in Russia, rosebay willowherb had been used by locals to brew a hot beverage renowned for its health properties and generally wholesome effects. When Chinese tea began penetrating Russian markets in the 19th century, rosebay willowherb tea was championed as a local, low-cost substitute. The recipe for its preparation mimicked that of the Chinese loose-leaf, and the resulting liquor strongly resembled the sub-tropical tea, even to the extent that it was sometimes fraudulently exported as ‘regular’ tea by unscrupulous merchants. Rosebay willowherb grew in particular abundance around the tea’s manufacturing base, in the village of Koporye, near St Petersburg.

A tall perennial herb with elegant pink flowers and a reddish stem, rosebay willowherb is found throughout the

northern hemisphere, where it has always been enjoyed by local peoples for its medicinal properties and for its plentitude, as a foodstuff.

The tall, striking plant graced the garden of 16th century herbalist John Gerard (1545–1612). He wrote:

‘A goodly and stately plant having leaves like the greatest willow or osier, garnished with brave flowers of great beautie, consisting of four leaves apiece of an orient purple colour.’

Gerard was the first to record rosebay willowherb as a British species.

The opportunistic plant has spread across the country with seemingly single-minded determination to become a familiar sight along railways, roadsides and its ‘crimson mantle’ has crept over wastelands with ease.

Where woodlands were cleared, buildings fell and fire scorched the earth, rosebay willowherb would rise like a phoenix from the ashes. Hence its other common name in North America where it’s known as fireweed, due to its rapid reclamation of land just scorched by forest fire. In wartime Britain, rosebay’s pink flowers were often seen amongst the rubble and ruins of buildings levelled during the Blitz and it became known as bombweed.

The young shoots of rosebay willowherb have long been collected by Native American peoples as a food, while the more mature stems were harvested for their pith – a rich source of vitamin C and pro-vitamin A.



In Alaska, syrups and jellies are traditionally made, and in Canada, where rosebay willowherb is the floral emblem of Yukon, shoots are boiled and eaten as 'wild asparagus'.

But it is of course the herb's Russian usage as a tea in which we are most interested. Although Ivan's tea will perhaps never regain its pre-19th century popularity as an internationally known export, it is still commonly sold and consumed in Russia.

The abundance, and wide accessibility of rosebay makes its production a very localised process, but the tea's processing method is a widely known recipe descended from its Koporye haydays, several hundred years ago.

While it doesn't have caffeine (it makes a good bedtime drink), it is oxidised in the same way as black tea is – letting fermentation do its magic to create a deeper, more fruity flavour.



## Making Rosebay Willowherb Tea

The popularity of rosebay willowherb tea perhaps lies in the similarity of its production to that of 'regular' Chinese tea. It too can be 'fermented' in the same manner as the leaves of *Camellia sinensis*, leading to a richly flavoured and deeply coloured brew that moves beyond the disappointing blandness of some herbals.

Leaves are picked when the rosebay willowherb is at the beginning of its flowering season, throughout July and August. They are then spread out on a cloth and left to wilt in the shade for about a day. [Editor's note: Rosebay willowherb is a rampant weed so it's best to forage from the wild than cultivate in your garden – it will take over!]

The leaves are best foraged when the plant starts to flower. They have quite a long flowering season, so it's nice not to have to rush about collecting all of it at once. You want to simply pick the leaves, leaving the flowers for pollinators. You can do this quite quickly by grabbing the top of the stalk under the flowers and sliding your other hand down, stripping handfuls as you go. It is such a rewarding process and you get a good amount of tea, quickly, always a bonus when foraging.

As with all foraging, only pick what you need. Once you have the leaves, simply leave them in a cloth bag or basket overnight to wilt. This helps start the oxidation process.

After they have wilted, you will take a few at a time and roll them to help move on the fermentation. Then pack them loosely into a glass container for 2-3 days.

The whole process is so magical, on top of having a great tea there is this moment on about day two of fermentation when all of the sudden the smell of the tea changes from grassy and green to deep and fruity.

Once they start to smell fruity, make a cup to check you are happy with the flavour. Add a few leaves to hot water and steep like you would any other herbal tea.

The final step in the process is the drying, which traditionally takes place in clay pots, cooked in Russian stoves. If you are happy with it, then you need to stop fermentation by drying the leaves.

Place your leaves onto baking trays and dry them in a low oven until they are completely dry (about 20-30 minutes). For added visual effect, try drying some of the flowers along with the tea.

Rosebay willowherb tea is a particularly interesting herbal because it is often aged in order to develop deeper tones and a richer flavour. The result is a substance that resembles conventional black tea in colour but that may boast a slightly stronger aroma. So storing it in a sealed container and letting it rest a few weeks will enhance the flavour.

With tea leaves now no longer costing the fortune as they once did, rosebay willowherb isn't drunk as a cheaper alternative to Chinese tea, the focus having shifted to its numerous health benefits.

Being caffeine free, and mildly sedative, rosebay willowherb is often brewed in place of regular tea closer to bedtime. Besides its relaxing effect, it is also well-known for its anti-inflammatory properties and as an aid to digestion. Rich in vitamin C and A, it is drunk as a general tonic for the whole system, but particularly at night and after meals.



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Having been an armchair permaculturist for a few decades **Steve Marquis** is now formalising his experience and he's started teaching permaculture. He lives with his wife Ness in the far north of Scotland on the edge of the Flow Country.