



Bitters

Transcript – Module 1

Hey ya'll, my name is Judson Carroll and I'm an herbalist. The good folks of The GrowNetwork have asked me to talk to y'all about bitters. Well, there two kinds of bitters. There are medicinal herbal bitters and there are aromatic cocktail bitters, but really, they're made the same way for most of the same, so we'll get into all that. And in the episode two, the second lesson, I'm going to show you how to make some of them. But first of all, I think it might be good if I told you a little bit about myself and how I got into bitters. Well, when I was about five, I developed really severe asthma, the deadly kind. My mother used to have to rush me to the hospital in blizzards and it was really bad. And it was bad growing up honestly. The medications they had for me at the time were somewhat like amphetamines and I don't do well on anything like that.

I remember when I was maybe 12 or 13, I likened it to having a big jar over my head. Everybody else was going through the world interacting, school and friends and everything and I was cut off, enclosed like in a jar or aquarium. Anything that's speedy at all makes me have a bad headache, irritable, depressed, takes my energy from me. So, I was detached, and it was difficult, but on the other hand, it got me interested in herbal medicine and when I was about 15 or so, I really started taking it seriously and reading books. And my mother and I had moved back up to the mountains of North Carolina and she got to know a fella named Marvel Hicks [phonetic] who's a storyteller, real character and he took us up to meet Ray and Rosie [phonetic] his relatives. Ray was an Appalachian character the likes of which few have ever been. He spoke a language that was about half Gaelic and the other half just pure Ray.

Most people couldn't understand a word he said, but Rosie his wife, her real name is Rosa but everybody called her Rosie, she was half Cherokee and she came from a long line of herbalists and we began to learn herbs from her. Now, the Hicks family, they made a good bit of their living wildcrafting, going out in the woods gathering herbs, and taking them down and selling them at, I guess it was the Wilcox store. I think maybe Mass General Store at one point. So, ginseng, goldenseal, even galax for floral ranchers; that was a big part of their lives. So, I learned a great deal about herbs in a very short period of time in a really unique place not there anymore. They're gone. They're all gone, and we don't have that anymore. And what I mean by that if you can imagine sitting up there on the backside of each mountain, pure, clear sky because you're above the clouds, and there's no electricity.

There was only one electric light in Ray and Rosie's house: just a light bulb hanging from the ceiling. Rosie cooking on the woodstove, us sitting around telling stories and singing songs and Rosie cooking on the woodstove. Ted was their son. We'd go out in the yard or the woods right around the house and he'd show me one plant or another, and Rosie would tell us how to use them, and Ray would tell stories. Wonderful times but life goes on and eventually I learned to manage my asthma pretty well on herbs, using herbs and diet. To put it mildly, the vegetarian diet did not work for me. I tried it and it made me sick and weak and miserable and I'm a big guy. I need a lot of meat and fat and I do real well if I get a lot of meat and fat and gravy. I love my gravy.

Those asthma medications started giving me chest pains and I had to get off them. I had to find different way to do things and I did. Herbs like turmeric, simple turmeric that a lot of people take for arthritis or other inflammatory conditions. Well, it'll ease the inflammation in lungs. Valerian, valerian is antispasmodic. It stops that pulsing that I guess it's a peristaltic contraction just gets out of control. It's going one way or another. It's gives you that asthma attack. There are other herbs that are bronchodilators, lobelia. When I was growing it was called labella, but I hear it's called lobelia. It's really good bronchodilator. So is tobacco, by the way. Tobacco, natural, heirloom tobacco. I understand some people can't use it. I understand it's a very controversial subject. When I'm having a bad asthma attack and

nothing else will work, if I get a cigar or pipe full of some barley, got my old corncob pipe, I can take a few puffs on that and my lungs start to loosen up, take a swallow bourbon. Again, relaxing, warming the lungs, things start to loosen up.

Other herbs like Angelica, wonderful herb for asthma. I could go on and on with various herbs, but I had it under control pretty well. But a little more than a decade ago, I had to start spending some time in the Sandhills of North Carolina. Now, the Sandhills are a completely different world than high up in the Blue Ridge Mountains. I mean, I was doing okay in the mountains. About September every year, the ragweed comes up and I'd have a flare up. I did okay when I lived down in Georgia. Oh my gosh, around Athens, Georgia, I didn't have any trouble at all. I don't know why. I just didn't have the allergens there that set it off. Also, back then we had Primatene Mist. Primatene Mist was an over the counter epinephrine inhaler.

Not really the best thing for you, but it worked in an emergency and I could use it. Well, government regulations change. Somehow, they figured that little bit of gas in that little canister was a dangerous greenhouse gas. Okay, I got a feeling some pharmaceutical companies put some money in some people's pockets. Get rid of the over counter stuff, make them go on prescriptions. Well, it finally came back and when it came back, it's just not the same thing. It doesn't do the trick, but in an emergency, if you puff one cigar, pipe, classic bourbon does the trick. But down here in the Sandhills, like I said, it's a totally different environment.

Just for instance, I kept a sourdough starter for quite a while. I sat it on the counter down here and within a week it turned black and rancid. I mean there's so much mold and mildew. And the main thing I'm actually allergic to is pine trees and if you've ever been in this area like you come down to Pinehurst to play golf, that's all you can do right here. That's all there is to do around here, golf. I don't play golf; you might have figured that out from my intonation. Well, you know, it's nothing but pine trees. I mean, this is the layout of the lonely pine. It's pure misery for me down here. So anyway, things got bad again and first thing I tried was an herb called dang shen, codonopsis. It's a Chinese herb, wonderful, reduced my symptoms by 50%. Great, right? I mean better than any prescription I ever had. Next thing, I started drinking water kefir or kefir, I usually say kefir, every day and kombucha. That helped a lot too and for a while, again, I was getting close to symptom-free. Then something flared up again, who knows. The water down here is horrible. They soak it with chlorine, chloramine. It's actually radioactive. We've got my old Monsanto Superfund site, not five miles from here that the water is so contaminated, they say you can't even water the grass with it. It's really bad stuff. I would not recommend drinking that water, trust me.

Things flared up again. They started getting worse and worse. It got to the point where I would take a bite of food, especially for breakfast, and it would get stuck about halfway down and I would start having esophageal spasms, run to the bathroom, throw up, wheezing, gagging, coughing up all the stuff that's stowed in my lungs for the night. It was horrible. Now see, I love to eat. Anything that messes up my diet is not something I'm going to put up with for long, but you know, I got family obligations and I'm kind of stuck here. So, I was doing Michael Moore's [phonetic] Southwestern School of Botanical Medicine course and he mentioned that one of the main triggers for asthma is not necessarily food allergy, but upper GI deficiency. And what that means is when you eat something and it comes down, it gets down there, you don't have enough acid in your stomach to break down those proteins in time for your body to recognize those proteins. Instead of seeing it as food, your body recognizes it as an invader, and you have an allergic reaction.

Well, that's exactly what was going on with me when I started eating and throwing up. So, he said one thing that would help with that was bitters. I had never really thought about bitters before. I mean, sure, you know, I have a strong taste for bitters. I actually really like bitter foods and dark chocolate. I mean, you name it, coffee. Yeah, but he said, go get a bottle of Angostura bitters and see if it helps. So, I did. I went down to the grocery store. I got a little bottle of bitters, took a half teaspoon before a meal. I noticed saliva increased. My food went down smoothly, it digested well, and I didn't have an asthma attack after I ate. Before then, for about four to six months, I'd been having an asthma attack after every single meal; that's no fun. It's not quite as annoying as the dog over there that keeps scratching while I'm trying to do a class. Come here, buddy. Alright, anyway, my little buddy. If you're on The GrowNetwork and you've been on the forums, you have definitely seen a picture of this dog.

Alright, say hey to the people, buddy. Yeah, he's my little buddy. Okay, so anyway, I knew that bitters at that point was going to be a great herbal ally for me. And I started looking into all the history of bitters and it's fascinating. I mean...okay, so one of the first herbal medicines ever record is being used by humans is bitters. Believe it or not, in the pyramids, they find evidence. So, the ancient Egyptians were mixing bitter herbs with wine. You can look at Hippocrates, you can look at all the ancient Greek writers, Pliny, Dioscorides, Galen, all those guys, they were using bitters. In the Bible, what did they give Christ on the cross? It was wine mixed with gall and myrrh.

Wormwood features prominently. Why all these bitter herbs? Well, bitter herbs, they not only stimulate the upper digestion, they not only help with allergies, and appetite, and everything else that people deal with on a daily basis, they also stimulate the lower GI. That means the liver, that means the gallbladder, that means the small intestine. When you take herbal bitters, whether it's in...or cocktail bitters, whether you put them in a cocktail or not, you can take them. They make a wonderful drink, just taking some Angostura or any of the other traditional brands; apacia [phonetic] with a little bit of club soda or seltzer over ice, a few drops in there and you got a really nice, pleasant, refreshing drink. When you say bitters, don't think of as sharp. Think of it as a pleasant bitter because they are, especially the commercial brands, which are bittersweet. They're not straight bitter.

Well, really, in the history of medicine, one of the first things people look at this old concoction called theorack [phonetic]. Now, theorack, I'm not going to say that's actually bitters, but it was certainly bitter. We're going back now over 2500 years. There was a king who started experimenting with his own poison remedies. Apparently, a lot of people tried to poison people back then. He had this idea, which you'll find throughout the history of herbal medicine, that if you take a little bit of something toxic, it will kind of immunize you against a more massive dose of something toxic. You can think of this as like if someone says have local honey for your allergies, okay? Well, that local honey, the bees are making it from local flowers that are the pollens that bother you and if you have a little bit of local honey, your body, your immune system kind of builds up a resistance to those pollens. It may sound old-fashioned and crazy, but isn't that exactly what a vaccine is? You get a little bit of the virus, your body gets the antibodies, you don't react to the virus; your body knows how to fight it off.

You know, we find this over and over, but see the old theorack, it wasn't just plants. It was viper flesh and all kinds of crazy stuff. So, I'm not going to call that one bitters necessarily, though it definitely would have been remarkably bitter. Gentian is really the one of the first stand out. Gentian is a plant. It's a beautiful flower, it's one of my favorite flowers. In Central Europe, going up through the Alps, up into Germany, all throughout Poland, all in that region, yellow gentian is used traditionally. And it was actually named after a king. Gentius I believe was his name, if memory serves, who developed a bitter tonic and used it as a, not just a digestive but as a medicine actually to combat the plague. Well, if you look at the old ancient Greek writers, they adopted his formula and Gentian bitters became one of the first, I guess you would say, truly ancient prescription medicines in the world. And today's Angostura bitters, you know that I got down there at the grocery store that helped me out, main ingredient Gentian. The same plants used for the same purpose, you know, year in, year out throughout the generations.

Well, they kept developing and there's so many different bitter herbs. You can make bitters out of licorice root. Licorice is bittersweet. It's more on the sweet side, but it can be combined and make a nice balanced bitter. You can make bitters out of the tops of plants, too. It doesn't just have to be the roots. I mean, when you think of roots, you're thinking wormwood, you're thinking barberry. I'm speaking of wormwood for a [indiscernible]. What's one of the most famous bitters? Absinthe. Well absinthe, the one that artists used to take supposedly to make them hallucinate, probably didn't make them hallucinate. It was made with a very strong alcohol. I mean, we're not talking like your normal 80 proof, we're talking more like 180 proof. So, they may have had a little something else going on there, but that is wormwood-based bitters with licorice flavor. What a great concept, right? Bitter with bittersweet, with sweet in a nice alcoholic beverage. That's just going to make 1920's jazz music sound delightful and 1920's jazz music always sounds delightful. Anyway, I say that as tenor banjo player, so I'm a little biased.

The history of bitters goes on, probably most outstandingly, when the British began to colonize the Americas, boy. Well, they weren't the only ones. I mean, the French, the Portuguese, the Spanish, but we really associate this one with the Brits. And that's because of the gin and tonic, that classic drink. You see, when they got over here, malaria was a big

deal. And when they got over here, it was actually a, I'm pretty sure it was a Jesuit priest who discovered the natives were using a certain tree bark to treat malaria. Now that tree bark also goes by the name Angostura, which is a little confusing, but it became quinine. Quinine was a medicinal herb to treat malaria. We've seen similar things recently with hydroxychloroquine with Covid19. I'm not saying they're the same, but you know, this system of medicine, this way of thinking goes back to the discovery of quinine. That quinine was then incorporated with classic British gin and tonic. That's tonic water add a little bit of lime that they've been using to prevent scurvy, and well, we have the beginning of cocktail bitters. You could say that's one of the first cocktails; there are others.

So many bitter herbs are used in so many alcoholic beverages around the world. You think about the wonderful licorice flavor of a good, who's...like who's...anissette pruneaux. So many. A lot of these concoctions were developed by the Benedictine monks in the Middle Ages; the same people who gave us vermouth. Going back to the monastic medicine of the Middle Ages, we see a really incredible system of bitters begin to develop. St. Hildegard of Bingen, Father Kneipp who's famous for his water cures. They all encourage the use of bitters for digestion, general health, and it all kind of came together with a certain concoction who may say called Swedish bitters. Now, Swedish bitters some say was developed by Theo Frests [phonetic]. He was quite a character, sort of a idiosyncratic, eccentric, Polish genius who put together a lot of herbal formulas and turned a lot of tradition on its head. It probably went back a long way before him. He may have just been the one to really formulate it because like I said, these same herbs were being recommended by Saint Hildegard I guess 500 years before.

The large Swedish bitters and I'm going to show you an example of that in the next lesson, is 22 herbs. I mean, this contains everything from aloe to valerian and just about everything in between. I mean, it is...well, it's got myrrh in it, so it's extremely bitter. It smells like Vicks Vapor Rub. It has camphor in it. It's not a cocktail bitter by any stretch of the imagination, but Maria Treben brought it back to the attention of both Europeans and Americans in the 1980s, early 1980s, late 1970s with her lectures. She did a book called, Health Through God's Pharmacy, another Health Through God's Garden, I believe was the name of it, wonderful book. She based most of her research on Father Kneipp and St. Hildegard. She did both the...well now, she only did the 11 ingredient Swedish bitters, but she told the story of how they were developed and how they were found in an old manuscript by a pharmacist who lived to be I think it was 104 years old, and so did everybody in his family, and it was pretty much attributed to taking these Swedish bitters every day. So, we'll get into that in the next lesson, and I'll show you the Swedish bitters, and discuss their ingredients, but as far going back to Gentian and more simple bitters, I don't want you to be overwhelmed by needs to make a 22 ingredient Swedish bitters.

You can buy it; it's expensive. You can buy a lesser expensive version. I'll talk about that tomorrow or you can make it yourself. You can absolutely make any of these yourself, but you don't need to be overwhelmed by thinking oh my gosh, I've got to collect 22 herbs and I've got to make a giant tincture, use 22. No, it's crazy. Swedish bitters are on one end and a simple gentian bitters on the other end of the complexity scale. So, when I discovered just how effective the Angostura bitters were for me and I thought, well that's great, but I almost want something a little stronger, a little more medicinal, and a little less sweet. So, I thought, well I'll make mine bitters. So, I got some gentian root, and I got some Oregon grape root, and I'll discuss...well, I just go and discuss it now. Why did I pick those two? Well, Gentian is the classic upper digestive, bitter stimulant.

Oregon grape root is the classic liver stimulant. By combining the two together I mean, upper and lower GI stimulant. Oregon grape especially is sharply bitter. So I, again being inspired a little bit by the Angostura bitters, modified the bitterness a little bit by adding mandarin orange peels and some classic spices that are used in aromatic bitters; star anise, ginger, a cinnamon stick, and a few cloves. Put that in the jar, pour some vodka over it, sit it back in the cabinet, shake it up once a day. Two, three, four weeks you've got a wonderful bitters and I'll show you tomorrow. We'll talk about how I made it and I'll show you the finished product.

So, you can think about bitters in terms of taste, which is not unimportant if you're looking, especially at herbal energetics, the taste of an herb is very important. But you can also look at herbal bitters in terms of the medicinal properties of the herbs that go into them. If you think about all the medicinal herbs that have a bitter flavor, well the possibilities become almost endless of the number of combinations you can make to make medicinal bitters. Now, if

you're talking about aromatic cocktail bitters, possibilities maybe a little less because taste does matter. Trust me, you're not putting Swedish bitters in with a little bit of bourbon and thinking you got a cocktail. You'd probably throw it out, but we'll get into all that and I hope you'll enjoy this. It's really fascinating when you get into the history of something that is so...at one point, bitters, medicinal digestive bitters, were patent medicine. I mean, they were the heart of patent medicine. I've been going back through advertisements from the 1850s, from the 1830s, all up until the *Pure Food and Drug Act* put them out of business and I guess I should really discuss that.

So, before the *Pure Food and Drug Act*, there was no regulation on the practice of medicine or the practice of making prescriptions. We had such a thing called patents. You could order from your Sears catalog or go down to local drugstore or it was probably just going to be, you know, an old country store where they had two or three brands of digestive bitters. And the ads for these bitters read like a Barnum and Bailey advertisement, something the great Zig Ziglar would put together. These bitters will cure dyspepsia, scrofula, name any other archaic disorder you can come up with, general debility, hemorrhoids, piles, or what...I don't even know the differences between those two. I mean bad breath, falling hair, flaky skin. I mean it would go on and then they would have testimonials. Some little old lady from Philadelphia would tell about how they cured her constant ingestion and some retired general, the highly decorated in last war would tell how it had taken care of his gall issues or his blood sugar issues. I mean, it was a cure-all is how it was marketed.

Well, there actually is something to that. Remember, how I said there's upper GI deficiency, there's a lower GI deficiency and if you put together the right combination of bitters, you can treat both. And I don't mean treatment in terms of diagnosing or treating any medical condition in compliance with the Pure Foods and Drug Act. I am not diagnosing or treating or making any recommendation to treat any condition whatsoever. But in terms of traditional herbal medicine and how we think of things, those systems have a lot of interplay with other parts of the body but also the kidneys and the lungs are closely attached. You see, the liver tissue, kidney tissue, I'm sorry, liver tissue, small intestine tissue, and skin tissue are all very similar. When you go to an herbalist say for some skin disorder, I'm just hypothetically again not diagnosing anything, excellent. They may give you Oregon grape root because if you stimulate the liver, the liver then supports the skin. If you take licorice, it stimulates the kidneys. The kidneys are closely related to the lungs. So, if you went to an herbalist and say you had a lung issue, you had congestion, they may give you licorice if they think it's appropriate.

So, when we put together a bitters formula, well we can stimulate upper digestion; that's going to be everything from saliva, down through the esophagus, the stomach acids. It's going to send me a lower GI, okay? We're talking gallbladder, we're talking liver, we're talking small intestine. Could be that might help a diabetic? Could be that might help someone with insulin resistance, could be that might help someone with gall issues, could be it might help someone with skin issues, or liver issues, or intestinal issues. Maybe their digestion doesn't work quite right. Maybe they have trouble processing fats. Well, you get that bile going, you're going to help with the processing of fats. When that happens and the gut's doing better, that helps your immune system. When the kidneys are doing better and that helps your lungs. Just think of all the different systems of the body you just helped with one little ounce of medicinal herbal bitters. Now that's pretty cool. I can't think of very many things that do so much and can pack such a punch in one little half a shot glass of bitters or if you prefer droppers or teaspoons, whatever. But you can also make a lovely cocktail. Who doesn't like a lovely cocktail, right? So, I hope you'll enjoy this. I think you'll find it informative and tomorrow we're going to make some bitters. See you then.