On Flying Ointments
Sarah Lawless
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The majority of questions I receive in emails from fellow witches are about flying ointments so I thought I would write out the information here in one place where anyone can access it for free. I won’t tell you not to experiment with dangerous poisons as it would be hypocritical of me, but I will say that if you don’t have at least a grasp of what the more dangerous plants are capable of, their side effects, and the proper dosages, you shouldn’t be fooling around with them period. Let me say that again — period. The one thing I will not share in this article (or by private email) is dosage of individual plants. If you want to use the *Solanaceae* that badly and learn their dosages, then do the research or undergo professional herbalist training to get your hands on them.

A Background and History

For those who may not know, a flying ointment is a salve or oil made with psychoactive herbs purportedly used by witches to fly to their Sabbath rites in the early modern period during the height of the witch hunts in Europe.

Animal fats were used as the base to extract the potent oils and alkaloids from these poisonous plants because animal fats were convenient and accessible even to the poor. Today with the help of modern science we know that our skin will absorb a salve made with hog’s lard more quickly and easily than any other substance because our genetics are so similar to a pig’s. Adding plant-based oils to an animal fat remedies the problem of absorbing a substance foreign to our bodies. Our ancestors were pretty clever weren’t they?

Some may think flying ointments only go back as far as the Middle Ages as the majority of written accounts and recipes are from that period. But if we look in mythology, ancient literature, and folktales, we find a rich source of lore that leads back to pre-Christian times. Flying ointments are mentioned in Apollonius Rhodius’ *The Argonautica* from 200 BCE, Lucius Apuleius’ *The Golden Ass* from around 160 CE, and the oldest possible reference is in Homer’s *The Iliad* from around 800 BCE where the goddess Hera uses an oil of ambrosia to fly to Olympus never touching the earth. To hear excerpts on flying ointments from these and other works listen to *HedgeFolk Tales* episode VIII: Flying Ointments.

So now we know flying ointments go at least as far back as ancient Greece and Rome, but what about even further back into history? Remains found of henbane, belladonna, and marijuana in Scotland and Northern Europe date as far back as the Neolithic period – that’s at least 10,000 years ago! (1) These plants were mostly found in the form of seeds and remnants of ritual alcoholic beverages so it is not known if they were used in salves by the magical practitioners of the time, but the pits upon pits of animal bone refuse show
that Neolithic peoples had easy access to animal fats. It’s not too far off, I think, to put the two together – but it’s just this witch’s hopeful estimation.

**What are the Herbs Used?**

Most flying ointment recipes include plants from the *Solanaceae* family; you may recognize some or all of them: belladonna, datura, henbane, and mandrake. Other traditional flying ointment herbs include the opium poppy, water hemlock, monkshood, and foxglove. Wherever these plants are to be found, so are witches. Our symbiotic relationship with these poisonous plants goes back into the far reaches of time

*Solanaceae* contain the alkaloids atropine, hyoscyamine, and scopolamine. The tropane compound within the *Solanaceae* family can cause heart problems or even heart failure among other issues when ingested, but if you use them externally they are much less dangerous, however careful dosage is still needed to avoid things like permanent blindness and death. The other well-known ingredients of foxglove, hemlock, aconite (also known as monkshood) should *never* be used in modern ointments now that we know better – they only poison and paralyze.

Traditional less poisonous plants used include balm of gilead, calamus root, cannabis, clary sage, dittany of Crete, mugwort, tansy, wormwood, and yarrow. There is a bit of controversy whether fly agaric or other psychoactive mushrooms were used and if their constituents are even fat-soluble, but there is currently no documentation on the subject to prove or disprove it. Balm of gilead (the buds of any poplar tree species) can be found in almost every flying ointment recipe from the Middle Ages as poplar salves were used for healing much more than they were used by witches for flying. Do not use balm of gilead if you are allergic to aspirin. The flying effects of calamus root are best felt from ingestion rather than topical application so I would only recommend adding it for its metaphysical properties and sweet smell. If you use calamus make sure it is the carcinogen-free species *Acorus calamus americanus* native to N. America.

Mugwort, oreganos (including dittany of Crete), sages (including clary sage), tansy, and wormwood contain thujone which is a stimulant and believed to be the cause of their psychoactive properties. Yarrow, while not having psychoactive properties, has been traditionally used by shamans for centuries to protect the body while the soul is journeying and to aid in bringing the soul and the person back to consciousness (3). Yarrow was more commonly burned as a smudge for these purposes, but can be smoked or added to a salve as well.

**Modern Flying Ointments**

“…despite the fact that none of the ‘modern witches’ themselves have any experience with the plants, they warn about the poisonous additives… [I]t is considered trendy to brew ‘modern flying ointments, guaranteed to not be poisonous.’ The recipes are nothing more than ineffective rubbish.”
Christian Rätsch, *Witchcraft Medicine*

Like Rätsch I’ve seen numerous “crafty” witch books in the neoPagan market carelessly list the poisonous ingredients of Medieval flying ointment recipes with no dosages and then, in bold font with many an asterisk, tell the reader to never to attempt to make or use the recipes. Then the authors proceed to list two or more non-toxic flying ointment recipes that usually contain herbs and essential oils completely unrelated to soul-flight and otherworld travel. Many online Pagan shops are selling such recipes right now. An ointment that smells pretty but does nothing is only going to result in very pissed off witches.

My advice to you is to avoid modern flying ointments lauding their non-toxic properties as all that will happen is you’ll have $10-40 less than you did before (unless it’s one of Harry’s ambrosial flying oils, of course).

### How a Flying Ointment Works

Psychoactive plants are believed to remove the barriers between our world and the world of the spirits and gods; they essentially are keys to the otherworld door and, some would say, to the entire universe. Consciousness is like seeing the world through a keyhole as there’s only so much you are able to see – we are too busy looking at the limited amount of what we can see, naming, cataloguing, and trying to explain everything in our field of vision, that we do not see what is beyond the keyhole or what is behind us in the dark. Now what if someone gave you a key? Would you put it in the lock and turn it to open the door and see all the wonders and horrors on the other side? Flying ointments are one such key.

Flying ointments are used to aid in trance, astral travel, and spirit work, to receive divine inspiration (awen, imbas, the cunning fire), to help release the spirit from the body, for hedgecrossing, for shapeshifting, or to enhance or access powers for magic, rituals, and spellwork.

### How to Use a Flying Ointment

Before you use an ointment in a ritual setting I recommend testing out its strength and your tolerance. Use only a small amount to test your level of tolerance – a small circle at the base of your neck should do. Wait to see how you feel. Always wait a minimum of 30 min to feel the effects before using more salve. If you are comfortable with the level of effects you are feeling, stop there, and then apply that same amount for ritual use.

To use for magic and ritual, apply the ointment after you have cast your protected ritual space and when you won’t be doing much moving around afterward. Whisper to your jar of salve and reveal your intent – do you want to achieve soul-flight, shapeshift into an owl, borrow the plant’s powers for a spell? Then say so out loud to the plants and any spirits and deities you have called. You could say something along the lines of “as I
anoint my body with this salve my spirit will loosen from its flesh and fly from here to [desired location].”

As a witch who makes and uses flying ointments I’ve found it is not necessary to anoint one’s mucous membranes for quick absorption (please don’t rape your broom or staff). Many of the plants used are very toxic and very potent and you do not want them near your sensitive bits unless the dosage of the plants is nice and low or you’ve used the less toxic herbs in your recipe. A milder recipe can be used for sex magic by anointing each partner’s sex organs before doing the deed. Magically, the best places to apply a flying ointment are the base of the neck for the spine’s connection to the World Tree, the third eye, over the heart, the armpits (for wings), and the soles of the feet. Where your neck meets your spine and the third eye are especially effective because they are doorways in and out of your body.

To get the most out of your experience use a flying ointment in an atmospheric setting; in your decked-out temple room, in a pitch black space, under the moon and starlight, a beautiful spot in nature, or a place of threshold power (a place with water, land, and sky all present, a place between civilization and the wilds, a hedge, etc)

**What to Expect:**

I need to say this as clearly as possible: YOU SHOULD NOT EXPERIENCE HALLUCINATIONS. If you hallucinate a) your body and brain are freaking out and don’t know how to handle the alkaloids in the poisonous plants because it’s your first time ever using them, or, b) you’ve overdosed and need to cut way back on the dosage (you might also need to make a trip to the ER if they’re severe enough). Hallucinations are the bodies’ way of dealing with foreign chemicals that have effects our systems aren’t used to. Those who have never tried shrooms, cannabis, ecstasy, LSD, acid, and, heck, even wormwood and damiana before are more likely to experience hallucinations than someone who has tried them and knows what to expect. The more relaxed you are, the less likely you are to experience hallucinations.

I’ve said it before and I’ll say it again: hallucinations are not visionary experiences, they’re hallucinations of imaginary experiences usually based on your fears. Flying ointments and their traditional plants are meant to be an aid for visionary experiences, not a wreaking ball to your sanity.

What does a healthy reaction to a flying ointment feel like? It should feel like you are stoned; lightheadedness, silliness, and euphoria at first. After that the experience should deepen and colour, sound, smell, sight, and taste will all be enhanced. You will experience the mundane world differently and you may feel awe, amazement, and wonder at what you see and feel. You may have profound thoughts and realizations you normally would not. You may hear whispers or see glimpses of things you would not in ordinary consciousness. And, when used ritually by those with the gift, you will be able to achieve things you’d never imagined when your spirit is separated from flesh;
shapeshifting into animals and elemental forces, long distance travel, dreamwalking, interacting with wights and shades…

**Contraindications:**

Do not touch your eyes, nose, or mouth after using the ointment. Keep away from children and pets. Do not use when pregnant or breastfeeding. Do not drive or operate machinery while under the effects of a flying ointment. Do not do any active tasks and try not to move around much at all. Side effects may include temporary dizziness, fatigue, and blurred vision (the latter especially if the ointment contains belladonna). Give yourself 2-5 hours to recover from the experience and get back to normal.

**Basic Salve Recipe**

1 cup fixed oil
0.5-2oz of dry herb*
1 oz shaved beeswax (per 1 cup oil)

Place the oil and herbs in a glass jar, place the jar on a baking sheet and place in the oven set at 100-160°F for 3-5 hours (you can use a double-boiler instead, but watch the temperature and the water). Stir once an hour. Strain the herbs from the oil. Measure the oil again, it will always be less than one cup after the herbs soak up some of the oil, add more oil to bring it back to one cup. Pour the oil into a clean jar and add the beeswax. Put the jar back in the oven or double boiler until the beeswax melts, then test a dab on a jar lid to see if the salve has the right consistency. If it does, pour it into jars. Store in a cool, dry place and it should last for up to 2 years if you add a preservative (balm of gilead is a natural preservative).

*The amount of herb will depend on the potency and toxicity – always try the least amount first. 2oz is the norm for a non-toxic medicinal salve.*

**References**