

Herbs - a brief history and catalogue

Long before recorded history herbs were used for culinary and medicinal purposes. First documented by early civilisations...Babylon, 2000 BC being the first reference. The Egyptians imported the herbs and spices along with the knowledge of their use from Babylon and India. Garlic, Anise, Caraway, Saffron, Coriander and Thyme were used in foodstuffs, medicines, cosmetics, perfume, disinfectants and in the process of embalming. The ancient Greek, Herodotus in about 500 BC listed about 700 herbs and their usage many of which remain valid today. Dioscorides in the 1st Century AD produced a herbal guide which is still a reference today in the practice of natural medicines.

The Romans were as enthusiastic as the Greeks in the use of herbs and when the Legions of Rome marched conquering and colonising most of Europe they took with them the seeds and plants to cultivate for their use. Of the 200 herbs (approx) introduced into Britain Sage, Fennel, Betony, Hyssop, Borage, Parsley, Thyme and Rosemary are but a few.

After the invading Barbarians tore down most of what the Romans built only the Monasteries and their gardens survived with some immunity. The monks kept alive the Roman knowledge of herbal use to treat those who lived outside the Monastery walls. Some of the herbs they grew and used are Poppies, Burdock, Marshmallow, Houseleek, Rue, Lilies, Fenugreek, Savory, Parsley, Mint, Cummin, Fennel, Iris and Rosemary. Herbal medicines many of which form the basis of today's liqueurs were often mixed with wine to make them taste better. These recipes of digestive herbs were and are often taken to combat chronic indigestion and flatulence often caused by badly prepared food.

A sense of peace came with the Middle Ages and with it came the kitchen garden and orchards that were planted outside the castle walls. Favourite herbs included Roses, Iris, Lilies, Columbines, Lavenders, Dianthus, Wild Thyme, Avens, Borage, Parsley, Orach, Honeysuckle and Fennel. The first English herbal published in 1551 by William Turner was a scientific study of 238 native British plants provides the basis of two, less rigorous works, the Herbals of Gerard and Culpepper, both of which are still available today.

In the Victorian and Tudor periods the "still room" was often used. Wines, sweet bags, pot-pourri, medicinal salves and burning perfumes as well as the culinary preparations were all made there, plants with insecticidal or disinfectant

properties were particularly in demand. Seeds and recipes were taken upon the colonising of America. With the help of the American Indian (for which we can thank for the deliciously refreshing Earl Grey Tea flavoured by the oil of Bergamot) much was learnt about the native herbs and their use.

With the incoming Industrial Revolution people were robbed of their traditional livelihoods and went in search of work in the towns. They no longer had the room to grow herbs and patent medicines and manufactured condiments took their place. Herb gardening in Australia during the First World War received a shot in the arm when herbal remedies achieved importance and a whole new generation learnt about plant cultivation and the usage through the work of Maude Greive author of " A Modern Herbal ". The books editor was the founder of an early British Herb Society and such societies throughout the world have done much to ensure that those wartime lessons are not forgotten.

Aloe Vera: a succulent resembling cactus and belonging to the Lily family. Produces two different substances that are used for medicinal purposes. One is a juice contained in the cell underneath the skin that is used in laxatives. The other a clear gel exuded from the broken leaf that contains amino acids, proteins, vitamins, enzymes, carbohydrates and saponins this gel has a healing effect on burned or abraded skin.

Angelica: originating in Northern Europe and used for its disinfectant and antiseptic properties.

Anise: seeds aid digestion whilst oil distilled from the seeds is used in toothpaste, cough mixtures and throat lozenges.

Balm of Gilead: its camphor / citrus smelling leaves are used in pot-pourri and for inhalation by sinus sufferers.

Lemon Balm: aromatic soothing tea credited with improving the concentration and prolonging life. A cosmetic herb also used in relaxing healing baths.

Basil: mostly used for its culinary use, medicinally used to treat digestive disorders whilst the oil can be used in the manufacture of perfumes.

Bergamot: characteristic flavour in Earl Grey Tea with leaves containing Thymol a natural antiseptic, helps in the treatment of coughs, sore throats and fever, it also aids in the relief of nausea and flatulence. Oil of Bergamot is used in the manufacture of perfumes.

Borage: the tea is used to treat rheumatism, chest complaints and to stimulate the kidneys. Cucumber tasting leaves rich in calcium, potassium, natural saline and other minerals. The plants high saline content makes for a soothing wash for wounds and inflammations.

Caraway: the tea is used to treat chest colds, increase the milk production in nursing mothers also aids in the digestion.

Catnip: a medicinal tea with mild sedative properties also helpful in cases of cold or fever as it encourages perspiration.

Chamomile: the small white daisy-like flowers with yellow centres are dried to make a soothing tea that encourages sleep and aids digestion. They are also used for distilling and the oil is used in cosmetic and hair care products.

Chicory: rich in vitamins and minerals promoting a healthy liver and gall bladder. The Chicory root is roasted and makes a good substitute to coffee.

Chives: mild antibiotic properties containing iron and other minerals are also helpful with the digestion of fats, stimulates the kidneys and has a tonic effect on the body in general.

Coriander: aids in digestion and is used medicinally to relieve stomach cramps, flatulence and to stimulate appetite. Ointments and liniments containing Coriander are said to be of assistance for rheumatic complaints. Still used in the perfume industry for pot pourri and some homemade cosmetics.

Dill: rich in sodium, silica, potassium and other minerals. Soaking brittle fingernails in an infusion may help strengthen them. A powerful digestive aid and is used to aid the relief of colic.

Elderberry: medicinally Elder leaves and flowers are used to reduce fever, assist in respiratory conditions or taken as laxatives and diuretics. Juice from the berries is said to relieve migraine and neuralgia by raising the pain threshold.

Fennel: aids in digestion and as a tea may be helpful to dieters as it allays hunger pangs, it may also be taken to relieve nausea and flatulence.

Feverfew: medicinally used to lower raised temperatures and reduce fever, useful in the prevention and treatment of migraine headaches. Best taken as a tea, the crushed leaves may be rubbed into the skin to relieve itching caused by mosquito bites etc.

Garlic: traditionally used by the ancient Greek physicians for its anti biotic and disinfectant properties. Fresh leaves contain Alliin, a powerful antibiotic and an effective treatment of high blood pressure, atherosclerosis, bronchitis and the common cold, a useful deterrent of insects in spray form. Chewing Parsley or Peppermint leaves will reduce telltale traces on the breath.

Heartsease: containing saponins and salicylic acid compounds makes it a useful treatment of feverish, catarrh, rheumatism, gout and certain skin conditions.

Heliotrope: distinctive vanilla-cherry fragrant flowers make it also known as "Cherry-Pie". Used in perfumery and pot-pourri.

Honeysuckle: flowers are used cosmetically in hand and face preparations for their antiseptic properties. Lotion is used to relieve sunburn whilst a gargle will soothe inflamed throats.

Horseradish: contains Vitamin C and mustard oil. Small doses of the latter will stimulate the gastrointestinal tract, dispel mucus from the nose and chest and assist in some urinary and menstrual troubles. In ointment form may be rubbed into rheumatic joints and chilblains.

Hyssop: a cleansing and strewing herb. The mould that grows on its leaves has been found to produce penicillin. Similar to sage and when taken internally aids digestion, eases inflamed throats, catarrh and inhibits sweating. A compress will reduce bruising and is also a recommended treatment for a black eye.

Juniper: tea from the leaf as well as the berries aid digestion and stimulate the appetite. Medicinally used as a diuretic and laxative.

Lavender: taken from the Latin word "lavare - to wash" and traditionally used to scent bath water, bathing wounds and to scent linen. The oil can be rubbed into the temples to relieve headaches and the liniment for aching joints. Powdered lavender was once used to stimulate the appetite and soothe the stomach. In addition to being used commercially in the manufacture of perfumes and cosmetics lavender is an ingredient to a wide range of homemade skin and hair care products. It can also be used in sleep-pillows, moth repellent sachets and pot-pourri.

Lemon Grass: long pointed aromatic leaves with a swollen, fleshy and bulbous base is a good source of Vitamin A.

Lemon Verbena: highly palatable and refreshing tea taken in moderation relieves indigestion, nausea, vertigo and palpitations. A popular bath herb, which can be put into sleep-pillows and pot-pourri while crushing a leaf or two, will rid your car of unpleasant odours. Also has moth and mosquito repelling properties.

Lovage: rich in vitamins and with a long history as a deodorant and bath herb. Taken internally it acts as a diuretic and an appetite stimulant.

Marigold: anti-inflammatory properties, also used in indigestion remedies, moisturisers and ointments for bruised, blemished or sun burned skin whilst a tea is said to improve circulation.

Marjoram (sweet): included regularly in the diet it is said to give protection to stomach ailments. The leaves may be chewed to give slight relief to tooth aches whilst the oil used as an ointment may be rubbed into stiff joints.

Mint (peppermint): a good digestive tea and flavouring to confectionery and tooth pastes etc. Oil may be inhaled to relieve nasal congestion and rubbed into painful joints.

Nasturtium: slightly peppery tasting leaves are rich in Vitamin C, therefore a tasty addition to salads.

Oregano: a disinfectant herb and a digestive, also an expectorant.

Parsley: rich in vitamins A, B, C and iron, calcium, sodium and magnesium, fatty acids and pectin. Stimulates the kidneys and the digestive system. Parsley tea is a favourite to slimmers as it is a diuretic; the leaves can be chewed to freshen the breath, especially after the intake of Garlic.

Pyrethrum (true): crushed dried flowers mixed with hot soapy water make an alternative insecticide, which is harmless to mammals.

Rosemary: a long revered herb with beneficial effects on hair and skin. Oil rubbed on temples will relieve headaches and tension whilst the tea is taken to improve memory and concentration.

Sage (clary): mucilage from the seeds was used to cleanse the eyes. Used to flavour wine and in the manufacture of perfumes. Its dried leaves are an excellent fixative for pot-pourri.

Salad Burnet: an infusion soothes sunburn and the leaves may be used in face creams and cleansers.

Sorrel: because of its antiseptic properties an infusion can be dabbed on pimples or used to gargle to relieve sore throats.

Soapwort: traditionally a washing herb and still recommended as a washing agent for old laces, patchwork and naturally dyed fabrics. Also used in a variety of homemade cosmetics.

Speedwell: medicinally used as a diuretic, particularly in pre-menstrual tension

Thyme: containing a natural antiseptic, Thymol. Thyme oil is used to treat respiratory and digestive upsets, an antiseptic gargle and mouthwash. Thyme tea is said to be a cure for hangovers.

Valerian: rich in phosphorous it is an important herb as its aromatic roots contain an effective combination of ingredients, none of which have much therapeutic value when taken alone. Together they soothe the nervous system, aid insomnia, migraine and muscular spasms.

Violets: having laxative and diuretic properties used in cough mixtures and bronchitis remedies. Past uses include insomnia and nervous headache remedies. Extensively used in the perfume and cosmetics industry also an ingredient for many homemade cosmetics.

Wormwood: main use as a repellent but is still used to cure seasickness and gastric diseases.

Yarrow: will staunch bleeding, reduce inflammation and help fight infection. May also relieve toothaches and inflammation of the gums. Taken as a tea as a tonic and diuretic, also relieves gastric upsets.