

Plants That Cure Us

Isn't it amazing the way we use the things that grow? We eat them of course, make furniture, thatch roofs, build houses, ferment them into celebratory beverages and cure our aches and pains. It is that last use that has become strange to us as we assume pills and potions come from drug companies forgetting that the chemicals involved were first found in plants.

Experimentation by indigenous peoples centuries ago resulted in the practice of using plants to alleviate pain, fatigue, and illness. As long ago as 3000BC people used two plants that are still around today, ephedra that comes from ephedrine, and morphine/codeine, from poppies. Today it is cheaper to synthesize drugs having learned the components of the original plants. However, environmentalists and scientists are attempting to prevent the destruction of wild places such as the rain forests because of the pharmaceutical wealth they may contain.

There is a certain enthusiasm for the use of herbal medicine by people wishing to avoid side effects associated with conventional meds. Scientists are re-studying herbal medicines more critically to screen them both for their helpful substances and for those having merely a placebo effect. Some actual plants are still being used in medicine making: foxglove is still used as the base for a heart med, Digitalis, and another one, the poison and muscle relaxant, curare, made from species of *Strychnosa chondrodendron*.

Aspirin has been such a universal medicine we forget that it was mentioned in the first century AD by Dioscorides as a pain killer. A Greek, Dioscorides, called the father of medical botany, was the author of *De Materia Medica*, a work describing a great variety of plants with their characteristics and medical uses. Over the centuries other herbalists used his work as a source for their own writings and the original text was translated into English in 1655 and eventually published in 1934.

Aspirin was made from the bark of the white willow, *Salix alba* and the active ingredient was isolated in the 19th century and named salicin. A similar ingredient was isolated from meadowsweet, *Filipendula ulmaria* (at the time called *Spirea ulmaria*) and called salicylic acid. More effective when combined, the resultant medicine was called aspirin: a + spirea from the mistaken name of *Filipendula*.

Our dosages of choice to ease the small aches of life are coffee and tea, supplanting the hot cocoa that was a childhood comfort. Coffee is our early morning lifeline and there are teas for every occasion. A friend recently brewed a pot of mint and lemon balm from her garden and it was a perfect restorative for a hot day. For reasons learned in seventh grade science class and long forgotten, hot tea is actually more cooling than an iced drink?

Cocoa beans were 'food of the gods' to the pre-Aztecs. The beans were once so valuable they were used to pay taxes because until 1887 the beans were currency in some places. Do you suppose that is the origin of the expression, 'haven't a bean'? The Aztecs used vanilla to flavor chocolate, a custom we have adopted for cooking and baking. Vanilla comes from an American orchid, *Vanilla plantifolia*. The long yellow seedpods have to be gathered before they ripen and

the flavor develops over a curing period. Pure vanilla, the real thing, we notice is more expensive than the imitation, understandably.

The cocoa bean was not the only moneyed spice. Black pepper was known to the Romans and used as a medium of exchange. As late as the Medieval period rents were paid with pepper, giving rise to the term “peppercorn rent” which today means a mere pittance. Black pepper is unrelated to the vegetable peppers, the capsicums, which belong to the same family as potatoes.

Along with pepper, salt had value. For one thing, it was essential for preserving food before refrigeration. The Romans paid in salt, which eventually gave us the term salary. It was also a luxury, adorning the tables of the more prestigious. In olden days if you were placed at table ‘below the salt’ you were not dining with the elite but eating with the rest of us.

Now that salt has become the ingredient of choice to mask any failure of the recipe to produce real flavor, we are doing all sorts of damage to our health at great expense. In an effort to break the over-salting habit, cooks are experimenting with the world of spices, a story for another day.