

Herbs: useful plants

Sir Francis Avery Jones FRCP

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The use of plants for food medicine goes back far into the mists of time. In the Stone Age the hunter-gatherers would have learnt by hard experience which plants were useful and which were hazardous. Over the eons they could have recognized plants which dulled pain, induced sleep, healed wounds, or poisoned animals or their enemies like *wolfsbane*. All this information would have come down to the early agriculturists. The Ancient Briton knew much about plants but unhappily the uses became linked with magical rites. For the Druid priest-healers the seven 'sacred' herbs were *clover*, *henbane*, *mistletoe*, *monkshood*, *pasque-flower*, *primrose* and *vervain*. This herbal knowledge may go back further than has been thought.

In Iraq there is a well-preserved grave of Neanderthal man, dated to some 60 000 years ago, with grains of flower pollen thickly scattered around the bones. The pollen came from eight different species still grown in Iraq today, some having recognized medicinal uses. The use of plants for dyes was already known and made memorable by the use of *woad*, which beside being blue had healing properties for wounds. No wonder, therefore, that some of the first records produced by early civilizations were lists of useful plants. Very early documents from China, Egypt, Sumaria and India describe the uses of *anise*, *mustard*, *caraway*, *mint*, *saffron*, *thyme*, *cardamom*, *turmeric*, *cloves* and *pepper*. The herbals reached their peak in the first century AD when the Greek physician Dioscorides assembled his vast *De Materia Medica*, recording the name, description, habit and medical use of some 600 plants.

ROMAN BRITAIN

The Romans were particularly interested in cultivation because they liked tasty foods, both sweet or savoury. Some writers speculate that this was because lead intake from pipes and pots caused loss of appetite and a metallic taste in the mouth. *Peppercorns*, *ginger*, *cumin*, *caraway* and *mustard* were particularly prized, and they made liberal use of sauce made from fermented entrails of fish, using it with sweet dishes as well as savoury. Many of their culinary recipes have been discovered showing skilful use of herbs including *balm*, *bay*, *burnet*, *borage*, *caraway*, *chives*, *chervil*, *coriander*, *dill*, *fennel*, *horehound*, *horseradish*, *hyssop*, *lovage*, *lavender*,

marjoram (both sweet and pot), *mint*, *rosemary*, *rue*, *sage*, *savory*, *sorrel*, *tarragon*, *thyme* and *wormwood*. They also brought in *acanthus*, *myrtle* and *sweet briar* plants. When they left Britain it was many centuries before we regained their high standards of living. Herbal prescriptions were recorded in an army manual written by a military surgeon, Scribonius Largus. The *madonna lily* was always associated with Roman camps and was known as the wound herb. *Mustard* was freely used as a warming poultice for chest infections and also as an emetic. Roman quartermasters always ensured huge supplies of *garlic* for their campaigns, not only as part of their staple diet but also for its use in wounds. Its juice and pulp have antiseptic properties and indeed in the First World War the British government paid one shilling a pound for garlic to be used with *sphagnum moss*, helping the healing of war wounds. In Roman armies pain relief could have been achieved with *mandrake* enabling the use of surgical instruments that were not matched in Britain until the eighteenth century. The Legions received a daily ration of *liquorice*, which helped the long marches by allaying thirst. *Mullein* (probably from the Latin *malandria*, for various cattle diseases, particularly those of the lungs) was known as *cow's* or *bullock's lungwort*.

It is from the Roman palace at Fishbourne, near Chichester, that much has been learnt about life in Roman Britain. The gardens were formal in design, cut by symmetrical rows of trees and hedges into cool shady avenues. *Vines* and *roses* were trained to pergolas, and fruit trees in espalier fashion; the Romans knew the technique of grafting. There was little emphasis on flowering plants apart from *roses* and *lavender* but there were probably *lilies*, *acanthus*, *rosemary*, *ivy*, and native wild flowers such as *violets* and *periwinkles*. Discreetly placed out of sight was the vegetable garden, manured with kitchen refuse. The Romans made a great impact on horticulture in Sussex and had all the garden tools we have today except for the trowel.

ANGLO-SAXON TIMES

After the withdrawal of the Romans the Anglo-Saxons founded Norwich in the sixth century having spread out from Selsey in the south. With the encouragement of King Alfred, the first medical book to be written in Old English was penned in Winchester by the scribe Cild of Bald in the early part of the tenth century. *The Leech Book of Bald*

provides a remarkable record of medical practice, offering a fascinating blend of folk law, superstition and herbalism. It describes the practice of the Anglo-Saxon leeches (healers) but much of it had come down from Greek and Roman sources. They used a great selection of herbal remedies, wine being a common ingredient. With their blood letting and cupping they were the forerunners of the Barber-Surgeons. That Bald was a kindly thoughtful caring man comes through in his writings. Further afield, in Wales, there were the Myddfai Physicians who established a tradition of holistic and herbal doctoring that continued for over a thousand years, but it was not until the beginning of the thirteenth century that a written record was made. The most important contemporary medical centre at the turn of the first millennium was at Salerno, in Southern Italy. Myddfai and Salerno offered the best professional health care available in medieval Europe—holistic, sensible, humane, and demanding high standards of professional concern and attention. Centuries would pass before anyone improved on it.

THE TUDOR TIMES

Tudor times saw an increasing interest in medicinal and culinary herbs, with flower gardens as distinct from the gardens of useful vegetables. They were arranged in rectangles and squares divided by broad walks, with *box*, *lavender* or *santolina* scenting the ladies skirts as they passed by. The plants did more than give pleasure in the garden; the insect-repelling properties of many of the traditional herbs added much to the comfort of living indoors, and the strewing of herbs on the floor could add a much needed fragrance. *Balm*, *cleavers*, *costmary*, *marjoram*, *meadowsweet* and *tansy* were commonly used. Bunches of *balm* were sold in the London markets to make an infusion for colds on the chest. *Hyssop* was popular for strewing and diverse domestic purposes; its oil was used on heads to remove lice. Queen Elizabeth liked to have *meadowsweet* in her chambers; Gerard wrote of it with affection,

The leaves and floures of meadowsweet farre excell all other strewing herbs for to deck up houses, for the smell makes the heart merrie and joyful and delights the senses.

There were other ways in which fragrance was brought into the home and indeed some of the great houses including Parham had their own 'stille room' under the charge of ladies. They were originally so-called because they were fitted with stills, to distil the cordial waters. Here the bunches of *tansy*, *mint*, of *southernwood* and *wormwood* would dry and be made into bags to hang within the closet. Here the *lavender* flowers, the sweet *woodruff* and the drying *hops* would be prepared for making pillows. Here too the pot-pourri would be made. Petals would be gathered young, at



Figure 1 The herb garden at my former home, Mill House, Nutbourne, Pulborough. We decided to turn the old rose garden into a herb garden having seen the design awarded the Gold Medal at Chelsea in 1986 to Hollingtons Herb Nursery, near Newbury

noon on a dry day, and dried quickly indoors. Rose petals were a main ingredient. Other produce included pomanders, sweet bags, nosegays, rose water for the hands or to 'perfume clothes in the folding being washed', odoriferous candles ('against Venome and the Plague'), perfumed gloves, and rose pastilles to burn in a sick room as an inhalant and to sweeten the air. What imagination and ingenuity were shown by the ladies in charge of the stille room. The Mistress of the Stille Room also had charge of herbs against fleas and other insects and doubtless also 'the making of poysins to afright away the mice and the killing of rats'. Another of her important functions was to prepare the lotions and potions for treating the maladies and providing first aid for the household.

The use of herbs in historic times demonstrates the tremendous scope for using common plants to overcome the problems of daily living and also the ingenuity of men and women in finding so many simple solutions.

TODAY

Many garden-lovers are now rediscovering the delights of herbs (Figure 1). Moreover, academic centres and pharmaceutical laboratories are recognizing the hidden wealth of potentially useful substances in plants. Clues from traditional medical practices are being pursued; and there is a programme to encourage the conservation of native medicinal plants.

Tribute should be paid to Nature for her skill and ingenuity in devising so many complex chemicals with which to attract pollinators and discourage predators. There are riches yet to be discovered.

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