

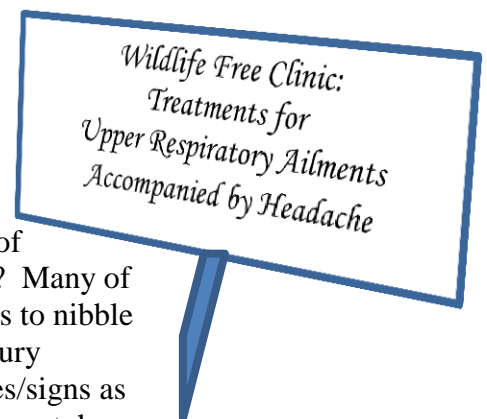
HERB HISTORY: How Do We Know What We Know About Herbs?

by Yvonne Dinish

One day last summer, I went to the window to watch the birds visit the feeders. But, the first thing I saw by the steps in my front yard was a ground hog standing on two legs, chewing some greenery which was hanging from the side of his mouth. I kept watching him to see what it was he was eating – he had a mouthful of feverfew (*Chrysanthemum parthenium* or *Tanacetum parthenium*). He chewed quite a bit of it before moving to the lemon balm (*Melissa officinalis*) and then to the malva (mallow in the *Althaea* family). I watched him for about fifteen minutes, and then proclaimed aloud, “That ground hog must have the flu!” All of the plants on which he was feasting have historical medicinal associations with ailments of the respiratory system accompanied by headache.

He returned every two or three days for about a month, and always nibbled on those three plants before eventually ending his plant-eating adventure by ingesting some chamomile. At this point, I was certain that he was medicating himself, because after the month was over, I never saw him again. But, I did think about making a sign and placing it in that section of my yard which includes several herbs. Having decided that the critters could not read it, I did not install the sign; and had no more visits from critters seeking relief from the common cold or the flu. [:-)]

But, this experience did get me to wondering how people discovered which plants could be used to treat which ailments. Was it trial and error? Not very efficient and potentially costly because of the possibility of depleting the supply of “test” subjects. Did they emulate what animals do? Many of us are aware of the folk wisdom relative to animals knowing which plants to nibble on for food and/or health. And, there is Jacob Boehme’s seventeenth century publication, “The Signature of all Things” advocating that plants give clues/signs as to how they can be used to benefit the human body. This concept, in large part, has been abandoned except in pre-modern cultures.



Okay, so how did people discover that plants (herbs) could be beneficial for human health, since they have been used in this manner for over 2000 years. Prior to modern times, for the most part, people did not grow plants for purely ornamental purposes. They were cultivated for health and only by the few people who knew the “medicinal science of plants”. Practically every culinary herb we use today has a history of medicinal use – whether for physical or emotional ailments.

For example, that ubiquitous herb, garlic, was widely used as an antibacterial agent as recently as during World War II to prevent wounds from becoming septic. I am sure none of us were aware of the fact that the root bark of the Virginia fringe tree (*Chionanthus virginicus*) was used as a liver remedy. How about the wild pansy (*Viola tricolor*)? Wild pansy was a popular ingredient in love potions; and, as its common name (heartease) indicates, its juice was used to “ease the pain of separating from a loved one”. Despite just tasting good in baked goods, cinnamon (*Cinnamomum zeylanicum*) is “a digestive aid helping to relieve gas and bloating and assisting in the digestion of fats”.

The list goes on and on, and I still do not know how we learned what we know about herbs and their uses other than as culinary enhancements. The ground hog knew, or at least I think he did. I am keeping an eye out for him or his buddies and will watch what they eat when they visit my yard.

SOURCES:

1. *Healthy at Home*, by Tieraona Low Dog, M.D. (faculty member at the University of Arizona Center for Integrative Medicine)
2. *National Geographic's Guide to Natural Home Remedies*, foreword by Joe and Terry Graedon of The People's Pharmacy
3. *American Nature Guides: Herbs*, by Anna Kruger