Icelandic Herbs

and Their Medicinal Uses

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Foreword

The North Country presents a fascinating biological region. In the southern hemisphere continents are widely spread and plant populations have long been isolated. In the north, on the other hand, the continents are close together. This has created a unique biome where plants from Scandinavia to the tip of eastern Siberia, and on to Alaska, Canada, Greenland, and Iceland, are closely related, nearly identical, actually identical, or can only be separated through genetic profiles. This region also includes the northern British Isles, the European Alps, the Rocky Mountains, and Appalachia. What this means is that the same herbs or very similar cognates are used throughout this enormous region. It also means that an herbal written about the flora of an isolated island in the north Atlantic is pertinent to herbalists almost everywhere in this bioregion.

Another aspect of Northern herbal flora is that *there is not so much of it.* Unlike the rainforests, where there are thousands of different plant species per acre, in the North Country the sparse amount of flora, the contiguous biological region (supporting cross-pollination), and the short growing season (not supporting as much genetic mutation) have left the plant population smaller (though widespread).

The confluence of these factors means that the herbal folk traditions of these regions depend upon pretty much the same herbs. A Viking in Iceland, a Scottish Highlander, an Aleut medicine man, a Native American medicine woman, a Tyrolean healer, even an occasional Chinese herbalist, and many a Western herbalist, are all going to be using an overlapping selection of medicinal plants.

This is why two herbalists from Minnesota and Alberta find themselves excitedly reading *Icelandic Herbs* and providing a foreword for the American edition: we use many of the same plants. We have used these plants in the clinic and have compared notes with other herbalists. We are, therefore, excited to know what the herbal medicine of Iceland can teach us: either by supporting established uses, introducing similar but new ideas, or completely new approaches. We thank the authoress for making her tradition available to us in an enjoyable, readable, informative manner.

We have both enjoyed visiting with Anna in person. On a visit to Iceland last summer, Robert had the opportunity to walk with Anna among the wild Angelica, Rhodiola, and Creeping Thyme in the pristine countryside. Sharing traditional plant medicine knowledge with another northern herbalist is truly a blessing and gift.

One final word: there is a big difference between an herbal written by a practicing herbalist and one penned by a "journalist." Authenticity rings out in the lines penned by someone who has used the herbs they are discussing. This is the case in *Icelandic Herbs.*

—Matthew Wood, MS (Herbal Medicine), RH (AHG) and Robert Dale Rogers, BSc, RH (AHG)

Biting Stonecrop

Sedum acre

Crassulaceae—Helluhnoðri

Habitat

Biting Stonecrop is found all over Iceland and grows mainly in gravel, cliffs, and scree.

Parts Used

The entire plant is used, except for the root.

Harvesting

Biting Stonecrop is collected all summer.

Constituents

Flavonoids (rutin), alkaloids, mucilage, and tannins.

History

The Latin name *acre* indicates that the leaves have a strong taste. Other English names (e.g., Wall pepper and Wall ginger, also refer to the taste). In older times, Biting Stonecrop was part of a well-known British recipe for eliminating worms from the bowels. Another old Latin name is *vermicularis*, which indicates that Biting Stonecrop was thought to be auspicious for killing worms; the appearance of the plant indeed resembles worms.

> This herb is blood cleansing, fluid thinning, dissolving, and prevents infection. It causes vomiting and diarrhea. It is therefore good against scurvy, kidney stones, colds, coughs, constipation and impurities in the stomach.
>
> *Oddur Jónsson Hjaltalín,*
> Icelandic Botany, *1830*

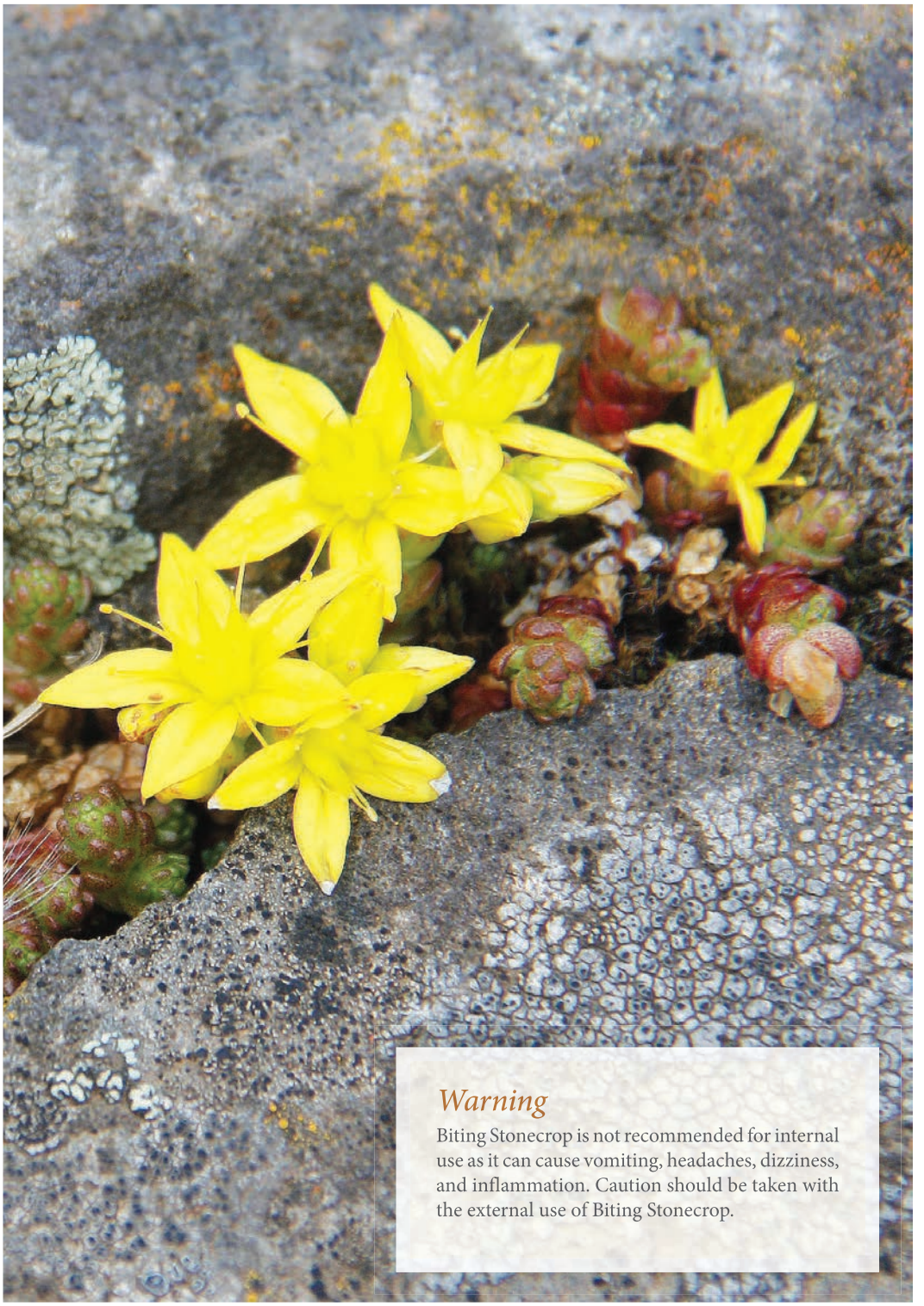
In old sources, there are conflicting opinions about whether Biting Stonecrop was good as a medicine; some found it useful for various things, others were against it on the grounds that, due to its strength and toxicity, it was not thought safe to use, especially internally. It has been used for scurvy, both as a mouthwash for gingivitis and in an infusion to wash wounds characteristic of scurvy. Biting Stonecrop has also been used for edema, fever, cancer, and epilepsy as well as for lowering blood pressure. The herbalist Pliny, who lived around AD 60, recommended Biting Stonecrop for insomnia but not for internal use: "Wrap the herb in a black cloth and place it under the pillow of the patient, without his knowledge, otherwise it will have no effect." In China, many species related to Biting Stonecrop are used topically to heal wounds.

Action

Astringent, rubefacient, causes blisters, removes warts, vulnerary.

Uses

Biting Stonecrop is not used much in Western herbal medicine today. The fresh juice from the leaves is used on warts and corns. Be careful that the juice does not get onto the skin as it can cause blisters. It is also possible to use the juice to heal



Warning

Biting Stonecrop is not recommended for internal use as it can cause vomiting, headaches, dizziness, and inflammation. Caution should be taken with the external use of Biting Stonecrop.

Bladderwrack

Fucus vesiculosus

Fucaceae—Bóluþang

Habitat

Bladderwrack is common on stony beaches all over Iceland.

Parts Used

The entire seaweed.

Harvesting

Early summer.

Constituents

Phenols, polysaccharides (fucoidan), iodine, vitamins, and minerals.

History

It was traditionally used as a fertilizer for potatoes and vegetables in Iceland and Britain. Bladderwrack is rich in minerals and is ideal for cooking (e.g., in soups); the newly formed fronds are best for eating. Iodine used to be extracted from Bladderwrack.

Action

Stimulates the thyroid gland, stimulates metabolism, and is nourishing.

> This seaweed is the most convenient of all marine plants to gather in heaps and allow to decompose to use as manure on fields or in vegetable gardens, where the air in the bubbles also helps a lot.
>
> *Björn Halldórsson,* Uses of Herbs, *1783*

Uses

Bladderwrack is thought to stimulate the production of thyroid hormones and is traditionally used for hypothyroidism. When weight gain is caused by an underactive thyroid, Bladderwrack can help the person lose weight. It is also considered to be effective for arthritis, used both internally and externally.

Research

Most of the following research is based on the isolated polysaccharide fucoidan that is found in Bladderwrack. Both *in vitro* and *in vivo* tests indicate the blood-thinning properties of fucoidan. In one such test it was shown that fucoidan had a much stronger effect than the blood-thinning drug heparin.[1–5] Bladderwrack is also an antioxidant[6-11] and anti-inflammatory.[3,4] It lowers cholesterol[12] and blood sugar,[13] heals wounds,[14] protects the skin against aging[15] and prolongs the menstrual cycle.[12] Research shows that Bladderwrack stimulates the immune system,[16–18] protects white blood cells against radiation,[19] and has an inhibiting effect on HIV[20] as well as cancer cells.[4,21] Research also shows that it reduces oxalates in urine, a high content of which indicates the presence of kidney stones.[22]

Dosage

Tincture: 4–8 ml three times a day (1:5, 25%).

Infusion: 1–2 teaspoons in a cup three times a day.

Infusions, tinctures, compresses, and ointments used externally.

Warning

Large doses of Bladderwrack can cause hyper- or hypothyroidism. It is contraindicated for hyperthyroidism and if medication is being taken for thyroid diseases. It is not recommended for pregnant women or breastfeeding mothers or for children under 12 years old. Long-term use of Bladderwrack can interfere with the absorption of iron from the digestive system, affect the absorption of salt and potassium from the gastrointestinal tract, and cause diarrhea. Bladderwrack absorbs heavy metals, so care should be taken not to collect it where the sea is polluted.

Bogbean

Menyanthes trifoliata
Menyanthaceae—*Horblaðka*

Habitat

Bogbean is common all over Iceland and grows in wetlands and small lakes.

Parts Used

Leaves.

Harvesting

Bogbean is collected after blooming in June.

Constituents

Iridoids, alkaloids, lactones, flavonoids (rutin), triterpenes and phenolic acids.

History

The Icelandic name "Horblaðka" (emaciation leaf) arose because the plant is so bitter that livestock would starve to death rather than eat it. Another name for Bogbean is Riding Grass, as rhizomes of the plant, which are both tough and firm, were believed to make good back protection for packhorses. The names "kveisugras" (colic herb) and "ólúagras" (not tired herb) were also used for Bogbean and refer to its healing powers.

> This herb is considered to be particularly good against scurvy and leprosy, edema and joint pain, also for foot pain, and with the last-mentioned it works best in unboiled milk. It is very good for paralysis, also for colds, colic, stomach and colon pain, and eye diseases. It works against fatigue and kills worms in people, drunk both as a juice, pressed from the herb, and also as a decoction. The herb can be steeped in ale and then it becomes a blood cleanser and is healthy for depressed people. Poor folk in Sweden brew the herb instead of hops, which makes a healthy but not tasty ale. Bitter, it is said to be, and so is the bread made in hard times from the root of this herb. For this, the roots are collected, ground and cooked together with flour of rye and other grains.
>
> ***Björn Halldórsson,* Uses of Herbs, *1783***

Of all the Icelandic medicinal herbs, Bogbean is by far the most bitter. The Native Americans have been using Bogbean as a medicinal herb for a very long time. Unlike European herbalists, they have also used the root, not just the leaves. Bogbean is thought to be good against colds and flu, flatulence, constipation, and arthritis. It was also used for stomach cramps and blood spitting, and for recuperating after illness. Topically, Bogbean compresses were used for inflammation and snake bites. When life was tough, the roots were also dried and ground down for cooking, even though they were not considered to be tasty. Bogbean has been used to brew beer.

Action

Hepatic, cholagogue, carminative, diuretic, febrifuge, and laxative.

Uses

Bogbean is extremely bitter; bitter herbs characteristically stimulate all digestive juices, which helps in the absorption of nutrients from the digestive tract. It is considered good for liver and gallbladder diseases, as well as being a laxative and relieving colic and flatulence. Bogbean is also used internally for skin diseases, to increase appetite, and to stimulate slow digestion. There is a long tradition of using Bogbean for arthritic diseases such as rheumatism, osteoarthritis, fibromyalgia, and gout, especially when accompanied by little appetite, weight loss, and weakness. Bogbean, like many other bitter herbs, is seldom given alone, but is instead blended with other herbs. In Chinese herbal medicine, Bogbean is thought to be good as an analgesic and hypnotic as well as being a febrifuge.

Research

In vitro tests done at the University of Iceland on Bogbean indicated that it contains active constituents that could possibly help with mitigating autoimmune diseases.[1] *In vitro* research done on 100 herbs showed that Bogbean was one of seven herbs that showed the greatest potential in suppressing the growth of cancer cells.[2] Bogbean has also shown efficacy in balancing the immune system and as an anti-inflammatory.[3] It is also thought that Bogbean could have anticoagulant properties and so have an effect on blood-thinning medication.[4]

Dosage

Tincture: 1–3 ml three times a day (1:5, 25%).

Infusion: 1 teaspoon in a cup three times a day.

Warning

Large doses of Bogbean can cause irritation in the digestive tract, diarrhea, stomach cramps, nausea, vomiting, and headaches. Those suffering from colitis, dysentery, or diarrhea should not take Bogbean. It is not recommended to use Bogbean with blood-thinning medication or during pregnancy.

Butterwort

Pinguicula vulgaris

Lentibulariaceae—*Lyfjagras*

Habitat

Butterwort is common all over Iceland and grows mainly on dry heaths.

Parts Used

Leaves.

Harvesting

The leaves are collected just before bloom in June. Butterwort is rare and is endangered in many countries. Although common in Iceland, it is small and grows sparsely and not in wide expanses, so collection of Butterwort for medicinal purposes is not recommended.

Constituents

Mucilage, tannins, cinnamic, benzoic and valeric acids.

History

The Icelandic name "Lyfjagras" (rennet grass) refers to its use for curdling milk, as this type of rennet used to be called "lyf." Butterwort was used in the past in Welsh herbal medicine for its laxative properties. In Scandinavia, Butterwort was associated with witchcraft and was believed to protect both people and their dwellings, especially livestock, milk, and butter. Canadian Inuits believed that Butterwort brought good luck, and they preserved the dry root so they could enjoy this luck when needed. Butterwort is one of the few herbs in Iceland that is insectivorous: insects stick to its slimy leaves, where they eventually dissolve and are then used for nourishment by the plant.

> This herb is vulnerary, good to put over children's wounds, their rashes and lice. When the herb is boiled in water and used to wash a child's head, it kills lice, cleans the scalp and allows the hair to grow. The herb curdles milk and gives it a yellow color. Liquid, pressed from this herb, heals inflammation and cracks in cows' udders. A decoction of this herb kills all manner of lice and also protects clothes from them if these are soaked and then dried in it. The leaves of the herb, eaten in meat soup, loosen the bowels. If it is bruised, boiled and placed in a bag, it is good to put on painful hips.
>
> ***Björn Halldórsson,* Uses of Herbs, *1783***

Action

Antitussive, expectorant, vulnerary, and demulcent.

Uses

Butterwort is not used much in Western herbal medicine nowadays. It was used in the past for coughs and lung diseases and was thought to have similar properties to Sundew, which is still used today for these purposes. Both of these herbs were considered to be very powerful against whooping cough. The fresh leaves were thought to heal chapped skin and sores.

Dosage

Tincture: ½–1 ml three times a day (1:5, 60%).

Cold infusion: ½ teaspoon in a cup of cold water; allow to stand overnight. 1 cup twice a day.

Syrup: 1–2 teaspoons three times a day.

Infusions, tinctures, compresses, and ointments for external use.