

Herbs for Healthy Aging

Natural Prescriptions
for Vibrant Health

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Healing Arts Press
Rochester, Vermont • Toronto, Canada

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Introduction

YOU HAVE BEFORE YOU A GUIDE to using herbal medicines in addressing the health care needs of people older than age fifty. It emphasizes practical information that can be taken by anyone who wishes to use safe and effective herbs to promote wellness, prevent illness, and treat disease when necessary. It is not meant to replace professional medical help, and as a practical herbal, it makes no claim to be a comprehensive medical guide stuffed with references and citations. The focus is the potential herbal contribution to ensuring a healthy aging process.

WHY NOW?

The Relevance of Herbal Medicine

It works! This comes as a surprise to many people after years of being conditioned by the medical and pharmaceutical establishment to the idea that life was hell before the advent of steroids and antibiotics. Of course, there are limits to what herbalism can do, but within these limits herbalism is very effective.

It can be used in conjunction with other modalities. There is no need to choose between therapies, as with very few exceptions, medicinal plants can be part of any treatment plan.

It is environmentally clean. Green issues and environmental awareness are finally becoming part of our culture's worldview, and more people recognize that green medicine is healthy for the individual and for the environment.

It possesses viriditas. This Latin term (literally, "the green-ing power") was coined by the medieval abbess and herbalist

Hildegard of Bingen to describe the profoundly spiritual aspect of herbal remedies. The use of herbs allows us to experience the embrace of nature and, through it, the miraculous touch of the divine.

We can make friends with our medicine. Herbalism offers a unique opportunity to develop a relationship with our medicine. We can grow our own herbs and get to know them.

We are undergoing an herbal renaissance. A reawakening to the natural world is happening throughout our culture. One aspect is that herbalism is no longer considered weird or on the fringe of respectable knowledge but is increasingly recognized as a valuable healing modality.

The Potential for Personal Transformation

Self-help and empowerment. A sense of control over one's life and the experience of personal empowerment in taking responsibility for one's own health are vital. The simple skills of the herbalist offer such empowerment.

Relevance for aging boomers. A large number of baby boomers came of age thinking they could end the Vietnam War by 1969, banish world hunger by 1972, and heal the environment by 1990. For a multitude of reasons they did not fully succeed, but many are still attracted to the natural world, a tendency that is being compromised as they age and become greater medical consumers. The vision that was once so meaningful to so many can become more practically relevant through green medicine.

Societal Changes

A demographic shift in age. The demographics of our culture point to an ever-increasing proportion of people older than fifty. This is in marked contrast to developing nations, which are characterized demographically by an increasingly *younger* population.

Rising health care costs. The health care crisis facing our culture has created a situation in which many cannot afford insurance, and even when they can, it is often inadequate. The Patient

Protection and Affordable Care Act, recently postponed to ramp up in 2015, will address some of this problem, but there will still be many who cannot afford even the reduced rates.

The Constraints of the Current Health System

Iatrogenic illness. The United States is entering an ever-deeper health care crisis and paying the price for its infatuation with high-tech solutions. At a time when degenerative disease is reaching epidemic proportions, little or no attention is given to preventive approaches. Indeed, a new branch of medicine, called *iatrogenic medicine*, focuses on illness resulting from an action or attitude of a physician.

Orthodox medical treatment. Orthodox medical treatment has been called *battlefield medicine* for good reason: it excels in emergencies and acute life-threatening situations. Thank God that it does! However, this approach is inadequate to deal with the increasing challenge of chronic and degenerative illness. By contrast, herbalism offers the possibility of sustaining optimal health, in part due to its preventive capabilities.

HOLISTIC MEDICINE: THE HEALING CONTEXT

The new understanding of health that has emerged over the past decades in both attitude and approach, often referred to as holistic medicine, promises to contribute many valuable insights to health care. What is “health” from this perspective? The World Health Organization has provided a definition that wonderfully sums up the perspective of holistic medicine: “Health is more than simply the absence of illness. It is the active state of physical, emotional, mental, and social well-being.”

Holism assumes that health is a positive, active state and an inherent characteristic of whole and integrated human beings. From a holistic standpoint, a person is not a patient with a “disease syndrome” but a whole being. Thus the holistic therapist must appreciate not only the physical but also the mental, emotional, spiritual, social, and environmental aspects of patients’ lives. A holistic practitioner—of whatever

specific therapy—has a deep respect for the individual's inherent capacity for self-healing. This respect in turn makes possible a relationship of active partnership in the healing process, rather than one of expert on one side and passive recipient on the other.

The therapeutic tradition of relating to the whole person is, of course, not new. Indeed, it is a part of the healer's heritage: ever since the teachings of Hippocrates every doctor, every herbalist, every nurse has been guided toward the deeply caring support of the patient. The reemphasis of this direction in holistic medicine today is simply an attempt to correct the tendency in modern medicine to equate health care with the treatment of a "disease entity." Holism does not predefine any medical technique or theory. It is a context in which the whole person is considered, physical health as well as mental/emotional state, relationships, and life in the world. A medical doctor can be just as holistic as a medical herbalist or osteopath. The framework of holism embraces a wide range of therapeutic modalities, whether they are labeled "orthodox" or "alternative." All may be used in a relevant and coherent way while treating the whole of a person, not simply a set of symptoms or a syndrome picture.

Holistic medicine highlights the very personal nature of the healing process. An idea common to all holistically oriented therapists is that a human being is a self-healing individual; at best, the medical practitioner merely facilitates this profound inner process. Addressing a pathological condition is a relatively straightforward matter, but as the World Health Organization's definition reminds us, health is much more than the absence of disease; it is an active state of well-being. Self-healing is the birthright of all, for at the core of our humanness is a spark of the divine that moves us toward wholeness and fulfillment. This approach does not negate the importance of medicine and the healing arts but provides a broad context within which to view them.

The self-healing individual is intrinsically part of what might be called a *therapeutic ecology* in which various components are in relationship with each other and the wider world. The person is at the core of this therapeutic ecology, which in turn embraces four groups or branches of therapies.

The first branch comprises those techniques that involve taking

some “medicine” for healing purposes. Approaches included here are medical herbalism, homeopathy, naturopathy, and drug-based allopathic medicine. All have in common the use of some physical medicine that is taken into the body to achieve a therapeutic goal. The specifics vary, of course, but all such medicines can be seen as fruits of the earth. Whether herb or synthesized drug, they share a common origin in the physical world.

Second is “bodywork,” comprising those approaches that do something active with, or to, the physical body. Structural factors are focused on as either causation of or contribution to illness. This area includes the manipulative therapies, ranging from osteopathy and chiropractic to the many varieties of massage, as well as surgery.

The third therapeutic approach utilizes psychological techniques to identify and treat emotional and mental factors in health and disease. All the branches of psychotherapy are involved here, but especially the more holistically oriented approaches of humanistic and transpersonal psychology.

Finally, spiritual factors in human healing are increasingly recognized today even by materialistic Western medicine. This branch of therapy includes meditative and prayer-based techniques whereby the person aligns with higher spirit and those whereby a practitioner works with the “energy body” of a patient.

Holism tells us to focus on an individual’s unique situation and not simply treat a diagnosed disease syndrome. In the context of this therapeutic ecology it may be, for example, that one person diagnosed as having colitis will best respond to a treatment combining dietary advice, herbs, and osteopathic manipulation, while a second person will fare better with drugs, psychoanalysis, and surgery.

Practitioners often have firmly held opinions of the pros and cons concerning one approach or another, but the patient is always more important than any one doctor’s belief system.

Such therapeutic interrelationships, based on a structure of mutual support, can compensate for any weaknesses inherent within a particular therapy. Homeopathic remedies will not put a fractured arm into a splint; neither do antibiotics. From a more positive perspective,

cooperation can lead to synergistic support, with the whole of any treatment program being more than the sum of its parts. A geodesic relationship develops whereby extraordinary potential and strength can flow from cooperation between the therapies. Rather than giving rise to acrimonious debate and conflict, their differences can lead to a celebration of the richness of therapeutic diversity. The only fundamental obstacles to such a vision becoming a reality in our clinics are the egos of practitioners, professional organizations, and—most fundamentally—the profit motive of the medical power elite and drug companies.

This array of therapies simply represents different modalities within the broad “church” of medicine. With the healing professions changing rapidly, it would be a mistake to talk of medical herbalism as a form of alternative medicine. Is it an alternative to acupuncture, osteopathy, or psychiatry? Of course not; they complement each other, creating a complex of relationships in which the whole is much more than the sum of the parts. In light of the unique strengths and weaknesses offered by each approach, mutual support and cooperation is the way toward a truly holistic health service. All medical modalities are complementary within the perspective of a patient’s needs.

Language often blocks communication and shared endeavor in medicine. Apparent disparities in vocabulary may mask fundamental agreements of ideas and approach. On the other hand, lack of clarity obscures important differences in both guiding principles and technique. All too many people have a dogmatic attachment to words and specific formulations of belief, opinion, and theory, assuming that if the “correct” words or phrases are not used, the speaker must be wrong!

Entrenched confrontation between dedicated allopathic practitioners and dedicated holistic practitioners becomes irrelevant when seen in the context of therapeutic ecology. Open-mindedness and tolerance should be characteristics common to all involved in health care, whether as practitioners, researchers, or patients. Medical modalities that have their foundations outside the biomedical model should not be ignored or discounted simply because they exemplify a different belief system or challenge the status quo; rather, they should be respected as an enrichment of possibilities.

Everyone involved in health care provision can benefit by such a mutually supportive environment. Health service administrators will appreciate the economic savings gleaned from a drop in dependence upon costly medical technology. A proportion of procedures and treatments that currently utilize expensive drugs or surgery can be replaced by more appropriate techniques from another healing modality. For example, most run-of-the-mill gallbladder removals can be avoided by using herbs or homeopathic remedies, and certain costly orthopedic techniques could be replaced with skilled osteopathy.

What is the contribution of medical herbalism to this healing framework? An enduring strength of herbalism lies in the fact that it is deeply rooted in traditional healing on the one hand and relates fully to modern science and medicine on the other. Paradoxically, herbalism is both a wonderfully simple and staggeringly complex therapy. Its simplicity is reflected in the ease of picking cleavers from a hedgerow or chewing on a stem of chickweed; its complexity is seen in research that attempts to grasp the processes that underlie the multitude of biochemical interactions between a plant's chemical constituents and the metabolic basis of human physiology. The degree and depth of interaction are breathtaking.

Practitioners of medical herbalism have the unique possibility of introducing their patients to their medicine. A bridge can be built between person and herb, empowering patients to be present and responsible in the healing process. They can be given packets of herb seeds, thus receiving a direct experience of the life of the plant. This experience of herbal vitality will be translated into a deeper rapport with the otherwise impersonal "medicine" they take. Patients will receive not only the medical benefit from the herb but also the enlivening experience of growing and preparing their own healing. If there is no garden, part of the treatment might involve a window box.

WHAT HERBAL MEDICINE CAN CONTRIBUTE

Herbalism offers such an array of health care benefits that I should start by pointing out what it does *not* offer. This is a book about using herbs to augment wellness and treat illness—not about magic bullets

and “miracle herbs.” Its goal is to contribute to a meaningful and fulfilling improvement in the quality of an individual’s life, rather than to a cumulative year count.

The more extreme proponents of what has been called *the longevity movement* suggest that aging is simply the consequence of bad nutrition and cramped vision, and herbs are touted as part of their approach to “life extension.” An entire industry of expensive products has rapidly emerged to address the delusions of the consumer obsessed with living a long life. I must acknowledge my personal bias on these issues because of the very high cost of these products and because of the tendency in these circles to see illness as something we create or attract into our lives. On some level this may well be true, as illness can be a profound gift or a learning opportunity, but this insight has been distorted into a potent tool for intimidation and profit, as well as a source of guilt and judgment.

Appropriate nutrition can do much to improve the quality of life and health in general and relieve specific illnesses. Vision and spirituality have a similarly important role in human life. I deeply respect this role but recall that the Bible says, “Without vision the people die,” *not* that with vision the people live forever. The fundamental importance of vision and spirituality is qualitative, not quantitative, and by bringing such qualities into our lives we heal and transform ourselves and the world around us. Living for a longer chronological span is beside the point.

The search for so-called *longevity herbs* (often expensive imported herbs) is not unlike hunting the rhinoceros to near-extinction for its supposedly aphrodisiac horn. One view of this is of men who, seeking to regain their lost youth, cause rhinos to be killed—could this be death by testosterone poisoning? There are many herbal parallels. The Brazilian suma plant (*Pfaffia paniculata*) has recently become popular as an “immunostimulant.” Quite apart from the question of its efficacy is the fact that this vine is collected from gullies and water runoff in the Brazilian rain forest—gullies that are highly sensitive to erosion and disturbance. Isn’t it ironic that in their search for increased health and longer life, longevity herbalists may be contributing to rain forest destruction, the greenhouse effect, and thus a potentially dramatic

reduction in the life span of their children and grandchildren?

Although many of these “longevity herbs” are often therapeutically useful, the concept of longevity is unreal. As discussed earlier, health is an aspect of the whole system, and humanity does not live in a vacuum but within its many cultures and the planetary environment. The nurture of health in any meaningful way goes beyond high-tech intensive care devices or longevity herbs to take into account the health of family, society, and environment. Our culture’s lunge for more-faster-easier convenience is killing us and our world, and no “miracle” herbs will stop that. We ourselves must stop it.

Many herbalists and supplement manufacturers have jumped on the bandwagon, generating pages and pages of “information” that are fit only for the tabloid newspapers. Fortunately there are some important, noteworthy exceptions. Consider these ideas from Rob McCaleb, director of the Herb Research Foundation:

Life extension is not so mysterious as finding secret longevity pills. By and large, it involves identifying the major predictable causes of death and reducing the risk that you will fall prey to them. In America, our major causes of death are heart disease and cancer. The third leading cause of death is chronic lower respiratory disease, then stroke, followed closely by diabetes, kidney disorders, and influenza and pneumonia, which is often a euphemism for “dying of old age.” People who survive to an advanced age frequently die of pneumonia developing as a complication during bouts with influenza or cold viruses that have left their defenses weakened. Herbs and other dietary supplements can help us avoid succumbing to these diseases, or at least lessen or delay them. The strategy is simple: identify the risks and minimize them.

Protect your heart and arteries. Beneficial effects of herbs include lowering blood fat levels, including cholesterol; improving the ratio of high density to low density cholesterol; “thinning” the blood to resist clots, heart attack, and stroke; and cardiac toning—strengthening and slowing the heartbeat.

Reduce cancer risk. Many herbs are anticarcinogens or stimulate

the immune system, increasing the body's ability to detect and destroy aberrant cells.

Protect yourself against damage from pollutants and radiation—contaminants in food, water, and air; and self-inflicted pollutants, such as alcohol and refined sugar.

Take advantage of general protective effects of antioxidants and “free-radical scavengers.” These eliminate highly reactive ions in our cells that can cause liver damage and cell mutation.

Reduce your stress and improve sleep.

Increase your resistance to infectious disease, including colds and flu.

I could not agree more with Mr. McCaleb when he locates the herbal contribution of remedies that reduce identifiable risks. As will become clear in these pages, this can be achieved with safe, effective, and relatively inexpensive herbal remedies. He goes on to identify some important remedies that can contribute to achieving this goal. (All of them will be discussed again later in this book.)

Astragalus: A nonspecific stimulant to the immune system that promotes healthy activity of all its diverse functions.

Echinacea: One of the best-known herbal antimicrobials, it effectively increases resistance to infections.

Garlic: Garlic is a wonderful remedy with a range of useful actions. As an antimicrobial herb it helps the immune system resist and deal with infections. It lowers blood cholesterol levels and elevated blood pressure. Preliminary research suggests it may reduce the risk of developing some types of cancer, particularly of the gastrointestinal tract.

Ginkgo: This ancient plant stimulates peripheral and cerebral circulation and increases oxygen availability to the brain. It also has antioxidant properties.

Ginseng and Siberian ginseng: These two herbs are, in fact, different genera, and Siberian ginseng is ginseng in name only; how-

ever, the two contain similarly effective adaptogens that help the body cope with stress.*

Hawthorn: The safest of the herbal heart remedies, it dilates the coronary arteries, lowers blood pressure and cholesterol levels, and generally strengthens heart tone.

Milk thistle: Possibly the most important herb for treating or preventing liver damage due to toxins or liver disease.

Valerian: An example of a group of herbs that help ensure a deep and revivifying sleep.

BUT DO HERBS REALLY WORK?

In light of cultural amnesia and modern medical disdain for natural therapies, no one will be blamed for asking whether herbs actually work. In fact, plants can play an important part in health care, but this does not mean that herbs are always the preferred therapy. Herbalism is *not* the best technique when one is troubled with a broken arm or a life-threatening infection such as meningitis. The diversity of health care techniques available is something to celebrate, not a cause for conflict and exclusivity. All can work together and support one another in an integrated health care system. The strengths of one technique can support the weaknesses of another with much mutual benefit when cooperation rather than dogmatic conflict is the keynote. It bears repeating that the needs of the patient are always more important than the beliefs of the practitioner.

Herbs can play a unique role in all healing work. Any health problem that is medically treatable will benefit from herbal therapy, but it is especially relevant in preventive medicine and the treatment of chronic illness. For most common acute medical problems it will also be useful,

*Ginseng (*Panax ginseng* or *P. quinquefolius*) and Siberian ginseng (*Acanthopanax senticosus*) are in the same botanical family, the Araliaceae, but Siberian ginseng is not a true ginseng. It was given that name when it was introduced into the American market in an effort to boost sales. Until recently the Latin binomial for Siberian ginseng was *Eleutherococcus senticosus* and for many years it has been sold under the common name eleuthero. Now that the botanical genus name has changed, the common name for this adaptogenic herb will no doubt be changing again.

but the herbs may not act quickly enough or be sufficiently specific in their mode of action; this is especially the case with acute infections. Yet, with degenerative diseases of all kinds reaching epidemic proportions throughout the Western world, herbal therapeutics may now be coming into their own. Diseases that reflect a degenerative breakdown within the body, such as osteoarthritis, respond badly to orthodox treatments but may do well with appropriate herbal therapy.

How do these remedies work? Usually there is no answer to this question because academic research to find a mechanism to explain the clinical findings has not been undertaken. This may be because no researcher has been interested or funded, because the factors involved are so complex that coherent analysis is almost impossible, or because supplement manufacturers have allocated their budgets elsewhere. However, as this market continues to expand into the billions, we can expect more money to be spent on research, for financial reasons if nothing else.

Demonstrating or “proving” herbal efficacy is not always straightforward. The first step is to ascertain what form the “proof” needs to be for the person concerned. Some need only have the subjective experience of personal benefit gained from using herbal medicine or the similarly subjective observation of another’s experience. For the medical establishment, and for the many who perceive the world from this perspective, however, such subjective “anecdotal” experiences are invalid. There must be some objective, quantifiable, and reproducible data—laboratory or clinical findings that are then put through statistical analysis—so that evidence and proof become a dispassionate mathematical process rather than a messy human one. Thus, the striving for scientific objectivity has obscured the reality of working with human beings with all their diversity and idiosyncrasies.

A book like this one is not the place to explore the strengths and weaknesses of the scientific method. However, some clear problems arise for the medical herbalist in a world where the arbiters of medical veracity still consider statistical methodology to be the only valid measurement of truth.

On the most basic experiential level, it is often easy to show that

herbs “work”—in other words, that there is a range of remedies with a demonstrable impact upon human physiology. One of the most widely used plants in the world is senna, a laxative that works within twelve hours of ingestion through its biochemical triggering of peristalsis, the wave-like muscular contractions along the colon that lead to an emptying of the bowels. This effect does not involve belief, placebo effect, or even knowledge that the herb has been ingested. Similarly, the leaves of the common dandelion have a strong diuretic effect. The plant’s French name *pissenlit* hints at this function. Not an herb to take last thing at night!

The medical herbalists of the world have abundant evidence that their remedies work, as does the person using senna for constipation. However, the professional journals of medicine and science also provide a wealth of evidence. Anyone who considers herbalism quackery, or believes herbs to be placebo medicine at best, is simply demonstrating ignorance.

Choosing Herbs for Health

The therapeutic possibilities of herbal medicine in the hands of skilled professionals become most exciting when herbs are used to augment and nurture that which is “well.” The deep toning and nutritional and functional support that herbs often provide can particularly help the body in times of formidable change. A challenge for the medical herbalist is to transcend our conditioned perception of herbs as medicines suited for symptomatic relief only.

The alleviation of distress and suffering through treatment of symptoms such as pain or inflammation is certainly a vital role for the practitioner. Yet healing is not simply a matter of easing symptoms but a deeper process that must address pathology, psychology, and even spirituality. In the hands of a practitioner with the personal integrity and insight to embrace the holistic perspective, herbal remedies can bring about profound physical transformation, supporting the body’s innate striving to heal itself and move toward greater well-being.

Unfortunately, much modern herbalism remains mired in the allopathic mold that has affected medical practice for the past sixty years.

Perhaps the problem with herbal medicine is that it *does* work! Too often the practitioner uses herbs to treat a surface manifestation while avoiding the challenges of the holistic approach. The patient experiences the removal of symptomatic discomfort and even the “curing” of the disease, but the profound healing that is the goal of holistic medicine does not occur. Using the earth’s wealth of herbal medicines in a broad context opens possibilities for practitioners of all therapeutic modalities to work with the body and its metabolism in a safe yet profoundly transforming way.

Nothing inherent in a plant defines the way it should be used. The earth provides such a wealth of herbs that some coherent selection criteria are essential to guide herbalists in their healing work. More than half-a-million plant species are thought to be sharing the planet with us. Of these, a British medical herbalist routinely uses 250 species, whereas a Chinese herbal practitioner has about 2,000 readily available in community pharmacies. Some set of guidelines is obviously being applied to whittle down 500,000 to a more manageable figure, but what is it? There are a number of useful ways to group the relevant criteria, but three categories are most helpful in Western herbalism:

- Assessment of each herb’s impact upon the body and mind
- Use of herbs within the context of a system of some kind
- Nontherapeutic criteria, such as aesthetics, economics, and ecology

Applying these three sets of criteria facilitates the formulation of treatments that can be wholly specific for an individual’s unique needs and at the same time environmentally sensitive and economically reasonable. We will review each of them in more detail below.

Assessment of the Herb’s Impact

The herbal remedies of the world vary in strength from potential poisons (if taken at the wrong dosage) to gentle remedies that might be considered foods. The herbalist works with the underlying idea that the body is self-healing and the therapist simply supports this innate heal-

ing process. *Thus, the tonic herbs are of paramount importance, as this is exactly what they do.* Tonics are gentle remedies, having a mild yet profound effect upon the body. Not *all* herbal remedies are tonics, of course. Many have such a powerful impact upon human physiology that they must be used with the greatest respect, being reserved for those illnesses that necessitate strong medicine.

By identifying the intensity of an herb's impact upon the individual, a useful selection criteria is found. The remedies may be categorized as either "normalizers" or "effectors."

Normalizers

Normalizers are remedies that nurture the body in ways that support inherent processes of growth, health, and renewal. These are the tonic herbs mentioned above, which are often seen as "herbal foods." The value of tonic herbs lies first in their normalizing, nurturing effects, yet these invaluable remedies usually have some associated action that further indicates their *best* use. An excellent example is the cardiovascular tonic hawthorn, which tones the whole system while specifically dilating blood vessels and lowering blood pressure. Whenever possible, the herbalist focuses on the use of such remedies; stronger effectors are used only when absolutely necessary. The chemically based effectors—the foundation of modern allopathic medicine—are rarely used at all.

Tonics and gentle normalizer remedies not only avoid most side-effect complications but also offer possibilities for the maintenance of wellness and the prevention of many problems associated with aging. Indeed, the tonics can play a specific role in ensuring that an individual maintains a personal peak of health and vitality. This state of well-being will vary from person to person, but any individual should sense an improvement in general experience of life. Tonics may also be used specifically to ward off a known health problem or a family weakness by addressing a specific system of the body. Examples of remedies that act as tonics for the various systems of the body are listed below.

Cardiovascular: Hawthorn, ginkgo, and garlic.

Digestive: No one herb is an all-around tonic, as the digestive

system is so varied in its form and functions. The bitter tonics are often helpful, for example gentian, agrimony, and dandelion root. Chamomile and meadowsweet are so broadly useful to the digestive process that they may also be considered as general tonics.

Infection: Garlic, echinacea, and system-specific antimicrobials, such as bearberry for the urinary system.

Liver: Bitter tonics, hepatics, and especially milk thistle.

Musculoskeletal: Celery seed, bogbean, and nettle will help prevent any systemic problems manifesting as disease in this system. Horsetail can help strengthen bones and connective tissue.

Nervous: Oats, skullcap, St. John's wort, vervain, and mugwort are all excellent tonic remedies.

Reproductive: For women, consider raspberry leaves, false unicorn root, and other uterine tonics; for men, try saw palmetto and possibly sarsaparilla.

Respiratory: Mullein, elecampane, and coltsfoot.

Skin: Cleavers, nettle, red clover, and most of the alterative remedies (see pages 219–20) will help.

Urinary: Bearberry and corn silk.

Effectors

Effectors are remedies that have an observable impact upon the body. Used in the treatment of the whole range of human illnesses, they can be divided into the two following groups, depending upon how they work.

Whole plant actions. Here the effects are those of the whole plant upon the human body. An example would be the antimicrobial remedy echinacea, or the anti-inflammatory herb meadowsweet.

Specific active chemicals. With these a specific impact is so overpowering that whole plant effects are not usually seen. Such intense chemicals are potentially poisonous if taken in the wrong dosage or in the wrong way. The cardioactive herb foxglove and the opium poppy are examples.

Using Herbs in a Holistic Context

The medical herbalist formulates prescriptions based on a model that addresses the needs of the whole person. The herbal component must be used in a context of nonherbal factors, such as diet, lifestyle, and emotional, mental, and spiritual components—all within a specific socioeconomic context. Such a model enables the practitioner to identify and address a whole range of issues, from symptoms and disease pathology to constitution and whole-body toning.

This model is not new; little is truly new in such an ancient field as herbalism. Rather, it is a formulation of well-established and proven approaches described in holistic terms. Choosing specific remedies from the vast range that nature offers can be a daunting task. The herbalist/prescriber must first have a basic grasp of human physiology and the disease process and then take into account the following five factors: herbal actions, system affinity, specific remedies for the illness in question, herbal biochemistry, and intuition.

Herbal Actions

Herbal actions are the ways by which the specific remedy or remedies affect human physiology. Since plants have a direct impact on physiological activity, by knowing what body process you want to help or heal, you can select the appropriate action. Obviously the selection of actions that are suitable for a specific person will depend on accurate diagnosis.

Much pharmaceutical research has gone into analyzing the active constituents of herbs to find out how and why they work. A much older, and far more relevant, approach is to categorize herbs according to the kinds of problems they help to treat. In some cases the action is due to a specific chemical in the herb (as with the antiasthmatic effects of *ma huang*); in others it is due to a complex synergistic interaction between various constituents of the plant (as with the sedative valerian). However, it is best to view the actions as attributes of the whole herb, and any understanding of the chemistry as simply an aid in prescription. The remedy selections used throughout this book are based on actions, and these are categorized as follows:

Adaptogen: These herbs increase resistance and resilience regarding stress, enabling the body to avert various problems and avoid collapse by adapting to external pressures. Adaptogens work through support of the adrenal glands. Examples include Siberian ginseng (also known as eleuthero) and panax ginseng.

Alterative: These herbs gradually restore proper functioning of the body, increasing health and vitality. Some alteratives support natural waste elimination via the kidneys, liver, lungs, or skin. Others stimulate digestive function or are antimicrobial, while others “just work.” Examples include burdock and cleavers.

Anticatatrrhal: Anticatatrrhals help the body remove excess mucus, whether in the sinus area or elsewhere in the body. Catarrh is not of itself a problem, but when too much mucus is produced it is usually in response to an infection or serves as a way to remove excess carbohydrate from the body. Examples include goldenrod and eyebright.

Anti-inflammatory: These plants soothe inflammation or directly reduce the inflammatory condition of the tissue. They work in a number of different ways but will rarely inhibit the inflammatory reaction as such; rather, they support and encourage the body’s natural processes. Examples include chamomile, meadowsweet, and wild yam.

Antimicrobial: Antimicrobials help the body to destroy or resist pathogenic microorganisms. They help the body strengthen its own resistance to infective organisms and throw off illness. While some contain antiseptic chemicals or act as specific poisons to certain organisms, in general they boost the body’s natural immunity. Examples include echinacea and garlic.

Antispasmodic: Antispasmodics ease muscle cramps, alleviate muscular tension, and, as many are also nervines, can ease psychological tension as well. Some antispasmodics reduce muscle spasm throughout the body; others work on specific organs or systems. Examples include cramp bark and valerian.

Astringent: Astringents have a binding action on mucous membranes, skin, and other tissue, due to chemicals called *tannins*

(after their use in the tanning industry). Such herbs have the effect of precipitating protein molecules and thus reducing irritation and inflammation by creating a barrier against infection (especially helpful in wounds and burns). Examples include agrimony and oak bark.

Bitter: Herbs with a bitter taste have a special role in preventive medicine. The taste triggers a sensory response in the central nervous system, releasing digestive hormones that in turn lead to a range of effects including stimulation of appetite; general stimulation of the flow of digestive juices; increased bile flow, an aid in the liver's detoxification work; and stimulation of the gut's self-repair mechanisms. Examples include agrimony and gentian.

Cardiac remedies: This is a general term for herbal remedies with a beneficial action on the heart. Some of the remedies in this group are powerful cardioactive agents, such as foxglove, whereas others are gentler, safer herbs such as hawthorn and motherwort.

Carminative: Plants that are rich in aromatic volatile oils stimulate the digestive system to work properly. They soothe the gut wall, reduce any inflammation present, ease griping (sharp) pains, and help to remove gas from the digestive tract. Examples include lemon balm and peppermint.

Demulcent: Herbs rich in mucilage soothe and protect irritated or inflamed tissue. They reduce irritation down the whole length of the bowel, reduce sensitivity to potentially corrosive gastric acids, help to prevent diarrhea and reduce the muscle spasms that cause colic, ease coughing by soothing bronchial tension, and relax painful spasm in the bladder. Examples include marshmallow and slippery elm.

Diaphoretic: These herbs promote perspiration, the process of elimination of waste through the skin, thus helping to ensure a clean and harmonious inner environment. Some produce observable sweat, while others aid normal perspiration. Diaphoretics often promote dilation of surface capillaries and thus help to improve poor circulation. They support the work of the kidneys

by increasing cleansing through the skin. Examples include bone-set and ginger.

Diuretic: Diuretics increase the production and elimination of urine. In herbal medicine, with its ancient traditions, the term is also often applied to herbs that have a beneficial action on the urinary system. They help the body eliminate waste and support the whole process of inner cleansing. Examples include dandelion and bearberry.

Emmenagogue: Emmenagogues stimulate menstrual flow and activity. In most herbals, however, the term is used in the wider sense of a remedy that normalizes and tones the female reproductive system. Examples include false unicorn root and pennyroyal.

Expectorant: Strictly speaking, these herbs stimulate removal of mucus from the lungs, but the term is often used to refer to any tonic for the respiratory system. Stimulating expectorants “irritate” the bronchioles, thereby causing expulsion of material. Relaxing expectorants soothe bronchial spasm and loosen mucus secretions, helping in cases of dry, irritating cough. Examples include mullein and horehound.

Hepatic: Hepatics aid the liver. They tone, strengthen, and in some cases increase the flow of bile. In a broad holistic approach to health they are of great importance, because of the fundamental role of the liver in the working of the body. Examples include dandelion root and gentian.

Hypotensive: These plant remedies lower abnormally elevated blood pressure. Examples include hawthorn and linden blossom.

Laxative: Laxatives stimulate bowel movements. However, stimulating laxatives should never be used long term. If this appears to be necessary, diet, general health, and stress should all be closely considered. Examples include senna and yellow dock.

Nervine: Nervines help the nervous system and can be meaningfully subdivided into three groups: Nervine *tonics* strengthen and restore the nervous system. Nervine *relaxants* ease anxiety and tension by soothing both body and mind. Nervine *stimulants*

directly stimulate nerve activity. Examples of relaxing nervines include skullcap and valerian.

Rubefacient: Herbs in this category generate a localized increase in blood flow when applied to the skin, and thereby promote healing, cleansing, and nourishment. They are often used to ease the pain and swelling of arthritic joints. Examples include mustard and ginger.

Tonic: The tonic herbs are gentle remedies that nurture and enliven. See the description and examples on pages 15–16.

Vulnerary: These remedies promote wound healing. The term is mainly used to refer to herbs for skin lesions, yet the action is just as relevant for wounds such as stomach ulcers. Examples include comfrey and calendula.

Tonic Affinity

Some herbs show a tonic affinity for certain organs, body systems, or even specific types of tissue. They work as specific tonics or nutrients for the areas involved. Many herbs can be used freely and safely as part of one's lifestyle without thinking of them as "medicines." They are at their best when used to nurture health and vitality. During illness, system affinity herbs will enhance the general health of the organ or system concerned when combined with remedies selected for their specific actions. They are especially useful where a tendency toward illness is recognized but no overt disease is present. In this way herbs may help to overcome a weakness that could lead to disease later in life.

Specific Remedies

The wealth of herbal knowledge that has been garnered over many generations is rich in plants that are traditionally specific in the treatment of certain diseases or symptoms. While holistic healing aims at going beyond symptomatic therapy, knowledge of specific remedies can add much to a prescription based on appropriate herbal action and system support.

Herbal Biochemistry

Increasing attention is being given to the biochemistry of herbal active constituents. This has led to the development of many lifesaving drugs but is limited as an approach to using whole plants. In the hands of an experienced herbalist, knowledge of plant pharmacology can add to the healing possibilities, but not as much as is often thought.

Intuition

There is a flowering of intuitive rapport between herbalists and their plants. Intuition has a special role to play in healing, and the unique relationship between plant and person augments it well. Rarely can such insightful intuition be made to flow, but it should be embraced when it does. Intuitive knowledge should always be verified if at all possible. For example, if a practitioner is not clear on the difference between bearberry, barberry, and bilberry, it might lead to an unfortunate misunderstanding.

Nontherapeutic Criteria

In addition to the therapeutic criteria used to select an herbal remedy or remedies, further help in selection may be obtained by considering a number of nontherapeutic factors.

Aesthetic Criteria

There is no reason for herbal medicines to always taste unpleasant. When the choice arises, take into account taste, aroma, and visual appeal. Such factors are a matter of personal taste, and it is fine to select herbs from among those indicated by a combination of therapeutic criteria and personal aesthetic preference. Bitter herbs make the only general exception here—if bitterness is indicated, then the bitterness must be actually tasted; otherwise the healing value is lost.

An example is a cough remedy widely used in France, composed of the flowers of herbs that ease the cough reflex and help remove phlegm from the lungs. It is straightforward enough to make an herbal cough mixture that works well, but such effective combinations are often composed of acrid or unpleasant-tasting plants. In this case, the same thera-

peutic results are achieved, but in addition there is a wonderful aroma, delicate taste, and beautiful color.

Economic Criteria

Ideally, herbs should be free of charge. Nature does not impose a financial levy on herbs, as they grow wild and free. There may be environmental costs incurred from the impact of picking, but that is another matter. When the choice arises, use common and inexpensive herbs. Expensive, rare, or imported plants may not be any more effective in a particular case than common (and not very glamorous) nettle or cleavers. Naturally, the fast-developing herb industry has a financial stake in the promotion of expensive “new wonder herbs” from exotic parts of the world—but just remember that Fresno and Massapequa are exotic locales to most of the world.

Environmental Criteria

Seeing ecological relationships as having a bearing on the healing arts can lead to some important conclusions. The choice of the most relevant therapy should be based on individual needs; however, Donne’s insight that “no man is an island” is crucial. In a world where human impact has become life threatening, the broader implications of health practices must be taken into account. In addition to the range of criteria already described, environmental impact can be used as one way to identify appropriate or inappropriate treatments.

THE “ILLNESS” OF HEALTH CARE

Far too many illnesses occurring in the years after fifty are directly due to previous medical treatment. The impact of years of medications (including their various side effects) combined with subjection to medical procedures of all kinds eventually takes its toll in the increased incidence of iatrogenic disease; that is, illness caused in some way by previous medical treatment.

Obviously, if symptoms are recognized as being produced by some commonly prescribed medication, the best treatment in such a case is

abstinence from that pharmaceutical agent. It may not be appropriate, however, and may even be dangerous, to simply stop taking a prescribed medication. In consultation with the doctor involved, a useful strategy of elimination of one medication at a time, with close observation, can often be negotiated. (In fact, the usefulness of occasional “drug holidays” is widely recognized.)

PREVENTIVE CARE

Except where some specific pathogen or causal factor is involved, prevention of illness is an outcome of promoting health. Health is more than the absence of illness, and the active experience of wellness can be achieved, not merely accepted when (or if) it occurs. Balance and harmony in all areas are the keys to successful preventive medicine:

- ***Nutrition*** must be of a quality that nurtures the body in a way that ensures health and wholeness.
- ***Structural factors*** must be addressed, by skilled practitioners if this is indicated, but also through appropriate exercise, dance, or any enjoyable expression of the body. The structure of general alignment of the skeleton has a profound effect upon all aspects of human life, and, of course, herbs can’t move bones around.
- A conscious and free-flowing ***emotional life*** is fundamental to achieving any inner harmony. This does not mean that everyone must get involved in psychotherapy but that attention must be given in the appropriate form to each individual’s emotional needs. (Not that everyone should be smiling all the time. What’s “appropriate” in this case might mean being present with one’s anger or grief.)
- ***Mental factors*** are crucial, as we are what we think. Without a personal vision, life becomes a slow process of degeneration and decay. Attention must be given to self-image, personal purpose, and so forth.
- Some openness to ***spirituality*** is vital. This may take the form of being uplifted by a beautiful sunset, being touched by poetry or art, spiritual or religious belief, or a dogma-free joy in being alive.