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Medicinal Herbs

by Mary Sisson Eibs

By the time you read this article the lovely, cool temperatures of winter will be just a sweet memory we all cling to as we start down the long road toward summer. The tour of organic gardens was a wonderful success. I spoke with at least 40 participants as they wandered through our yard. We pinched leaves of marjoram, thyme, and oregano, brushed the soft leaves of scented geraniums and mints, releasing their fruity aromas, and shared stories of success and failure in the herb garden. I enjoyed myself thoroughly and was sorry to see the day end.

As the temperatures rise I am thankful that the tour served as a planting deadline for my new herb plants. They are thriving, with a few exceptions. The "problem children" this time are the fern-leaf lavender (*Lavandula multifida*), saffron crocus (*Crocus sativus*), and Comfrey (*Symphytum officinale*). The fern-leaf lavender was a tiny plant to begin with and should probably have remained in a pot until it had grown larger. Unfortunately, it did not survive and simply disappeared one day. A few of the saffron crocus bulbs appear to have died as their leaves have turned yellow. I fear they are receiving too much sun, not enough water. I will watch the surviving plants carefully. Comfrey, it seems, has an invasive, creeping habit similar to mint. I learned this from one of the garden tour participants and, fearing another pineapple sage-like episode, I immediately transferred them to pots where they are happily expanding.

The remaining new herbs and the stalwart survivors from years past are rewarding me with bright new leaves and I am encouraged. My experience with herbs has always been with their culinary, ornamental, or craft uses. However, this year I have added herbs with which I am much less familiar. Many have ancient and modern medicinal uses which I will briefly discuss here. For more in depth information consult books such as *Herbs For The Home* by Jekka McVicar, *The Roots Of Healing* by Deb Soule, *The Complete Medicinal Herbal* by Penelope Ody, or *Growing and Using The Healing Herbs* by Gaea and Shandor Weiss.

Hyssop (*Hyssopus officinalis*) was used in ancient times to clean and purify people and places. Currently it is used for pulmonary complaints and a compress of leaves is said to relieve muscular complaints. Comfrey (*Symphytum officinale*) leaves and roots contain allantoin, which aids in cell growth. Leaves and roots are used to heal skin wounds. There is some recent concern about the toxicity of this plant, so use caution. Bee balm (*Monarda*) or Oswego tea grows wild near Oswego, NY and was used by Oswego Indians as a tea to relieve colds and bronchial complaints. Today it is used to relieve nausea, flatulence, menstrual pain, and vomiting. The leaves of lovage (*Levisticum officinale*) were chewed by ancient Greeks and Benedictine monks to aid digestion and relieve flatulence. An infusion of the seed, leaf, or root of lovage is said to reduce water retention.

Who among us has not heard of using horehound to relieve coughs and other pulmonary complaints? A tea made with horehound leaves and drunk three times daily is believed to expel mucus related to colds. The roots of valerian (*Valeriana officinalis*) are used as a sedative and antispasmodic and to relieve insomnia, cramps, and head aches. Sweet woodruff (*Galium odoratum*) was used in the 14th century as a strewing herb and is a main ingredient in May wine. It is not recommended for medicinal use. Foxglove (*digitalis purpurea*) leaves contain digitalis, a powerful diuretic. Although this plant is lovely and easy to grow it is highly toxic. Recent research suggests that feverfew (*Tanacetum parthenium*) is useful for migraine relief. The leaves are also used as a sleep aid and a moth repellent. The fresh leaves of yarrow (*Achillea millefolium*) are used to relieve tooth ache and to stop bleeding. Tea made with leaves, flowers, or stems can be applied to skin rashes.

Garden sorrel (*Rumex acetosa*) contains vitamin C and is thought to aid in blood cleansing and purifying. However, it contains oxalic acid, which can be damaging to health and should not be used in very large doses. Fennel (*Foeniculum vulgare*) was eaten by ancient Greeks to inspire courage and a long life. A tea made of fennel seeds and consumed 2 to 3 times a day can soothe stomach distress and increase milk production in nursing mothers. Purple coneflower (*Echinacea purpurea*) is advertised as one of today's "wonder herbs". Native Americans sprinkled its juice on hot coals during sweat baths and used infusions of its roots for many complaints. Today it is popular as a blood purifier and antibiotic. Happily spreading across my front yard are the dainty white flowers of my favorite, Chamomile (*Anthemis nobilis*). I use the flowers combined with rose hips and orange peel in a hot tea as a calmativie and a digestive aid.

I look forward to becoming familiar with these herbs. While compiling information for this article I was struck by the centuries of information available concerning the medicinal use of herbs. Herbs have always fascinated me for their culinary and ornamental value and I am finding myself expanding my interest to include their uses in historical and current medicine. However, if I decide to experiment with these uses, I will proceed with extreme caution and will consult the books previously listed.