

Herbs - Natures Bounty



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For many of us, our garden is a source of pleasure, recreation, and a sanctuary where we can recover from the problems of our frenetic society. This was recognized many years ago in the Arabic Golden Age, where the garden was a protected sanctuary for relaxation and pleasure. Many of the benefits of the garden are provided by the plants growing there. A lot of these, probably most, have medicinal, culinary or cosmetic properties, and these are known to us as herbs. They have provided us, at little or no cost, with tonics, soothing balms, delicious teas, perfumes, skin products, essential oils and vital cooking ingredients – and a vast range of medicines Today, more and more people appreciate and prize the benefits and natural qualities that herbs bestow.

Herbs were the source of many, if not most medicines used until quite recently. Even today, about 25% of modern drugs are based on extracts of herbs. In the past, chamomile was used by people with sleeping difficulties, deadly nightshade for heart failure, cranberries for urinary tract infection, willow bark for rheumatism ...'c9 the list is virtually endless. More than 12,000 plants with medicinal properties have already been identified worldwide, and this is just the tip of the iceberg.

Why do plants and herbs possess these invaluable qualities? We now know that plants create an immense variety of chemical substances. Many are there to ensure survival of the plant itself, by deterring insect predators, grazing animals and micro-organisms like bacteria and fungi. This is why insect repellents are often made up of certain herbs. A substantial amount of these compounds also have beneficial effects on us humans. When taken over time they act as tonics, and protect us from many diseases, partly by stimulating Physis and its immune system. For example, garlic is able to reduce excessive cholesterol levels, green tea is thought to prevent cancer developing, horse chestnut is effective in stimulating blood flow in the lower limbs, St John's wort improves mood, and the poppy provided blessed pain relief.

This was the situation in yesterday's world, before the arrival of modern science. Many of the herbs noted for their beneficial qualities were subjected to scientific scrutiny, and their active ingredients isolated and refined. Return on investment in this quest is impressive; many modern drugs are simple versions of substances found in herbs. The poppy flower, for example, provides us with morphine. So if you are suffering from intractable pain, and find relief in this drug, give thanks to the humble poppy flower. If you are receiving chemotherapy with the vinca alkaloids, then show gratitude to the periwinkle plant. If you are suffering from gout, and are comforted by colchicines, then you will appreciate the autumn crocus. And of course we have the most common herbs providing us with caffeine, from the coffee bush, used as a nerve tonic, and theophylline, from the tea bush, used extensively to mitigate chronic breathing problems like asthma.

Many of the recent so-called blockbuster drugs are based on herbs. The sex hormones used in fertility regulation and the menopause, are derived originally from Mexican succulents. Many anti-cancer agents are based on the yew tree and the periwinkle plant. This latter plant also provides us with vinpocetine, now popular as an 'in-drug' for poor memory due to blood flow disorders in the brain.

The poppy plant is particularly generous. Not only does it provide us with morphine, but also codeine. This is also a valuable painkiller, plus a powerful cough suppressant. Noscapine, present in many cough medicines, is also a gift from the poppy. Interestingly, the poppy not only supplies us with morphine, a seriously addictive drug, but with Naloxone, a morphine antagonist used to treat opioid addiction!

The herb world is therefore an attractive source for new drugs, and we can expect many in the future. At the same time, there is a world-wide swing back to natural herbal remedies, especially for chronic and recurring ailments, and as tonics. Herbs like Holy Basil, Ashwagangha and Black Seed are enjoying renewed popularity, especially in the West. There are several reasons for this: herbal medicines tend to be better tolerated over the long term, they are seen as being more 'natural', in keeping with the new philosophy, which includes concern for the environment. Another reason is that herbs contain many substances other than the active agent, and these act as checks and balances on its effect. The trend towards herbal remedies has been strengthened by misgivings about the downside of several drugs, particularly the antibiotics, some anti-depressants and the newer anti-inflammatory agents. There is also some disquiet about the consequences of long-term use of certain drugs for diseases like the common form of diabetes, circulatory disorders and heart problems.

In this restless, uncertain world we inhabit, it is an undeniable relief to admire and revere Nature's bounty, the plant kingdom and the herbs it generously provides. For many it reveals the sublime power that permeates the Universe, and is expressed in all living creatures.