

HERBS, Our Heritage

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Preface

In the last Southeastern Floriculture, Paul Thomas presented ("Growing Into Herbs. . .Successfully") Denise Smith and Wayne McLaurin's tips on successfully producing herbs commercially. That being the prime objective, the relationships between man and herbs throughout mankind's existence were not included. In researching material in preparation for the just released Clemson University Extension Circular 694 (Herb

Selection, Culture and Use), I found this historical aspect extremely interesting. Believing that readers might find it entertaining too, I submitted the following for publication. References for this article are included in the just mentioned Circular...

"And Nature, the old nurse, took The child upon her knee, Saying, 'Here is a story book Thy Father has written for thee.'"

*'Come, wander with me,' she said,
Into the regions yet untrod;
And read what is still unread
In the manuscript of God.'
And he wandered away and away
With Nature, the dear old nurse,
Who sang to him night and day
The rhymes of the universe.*

*And whenever the way seemed long, Or his heart began to fail,
She would sing a more wonderful song, Or tell a more wonderful tale."*

-Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807-1882)

A Brief History

No other group of plants has a more legendary and exciting history than herbs. Herbs seem almost to merge with their history into an entity. Surely, no group of plants has a longer history than herbs-- In Genesis: "And God said, Let the earth bring forth grass, the herb yield seed, and the fruit tree yielding fruit after his kind, whose seed is in itself, upon the earth: and it was so." Herbs have always been an integral part of man's diverse cultures. The public's current interest in herbs seems stronger now than in recent years. Fresh herbs, transported across the country, are now available in the produce section of local supermarkets. Businesses that retail only processed herbs have opened in most average-sized cities. Some of these even publish their own newsletter! The presence of herbs in today's home is no longer simply a few cans of dried leaves on the kitchen shelf. Potted herbs are pampered in kitchen windows, cultivated in outside gardens, and even displayed at front door entrances. Until this Century, plants have been the basic reservoir for therapeutic products of professionals as well as for folk medicine. There are about 2,000 herbs at the U.S. National Arboretum's "The National Herb Garden," located in Washington, D.C., in the transition zone where northern and southern limits of many plants overlap. It has been estimated that over 1,000 herbs are cultivated today in the U.S., and over 100 of these are suitable for most U.S. locations. Botanists define herbs as nonwoody annuals, biennials, or perennials whose aerial (i.e., above ground) portion is short-lived (in the temperate zone, only a single growing season). Horticulturists would include the use of herbs for medicinal, aromatic, and/or culinary purposes in the definition. Practically speaking, however, woody plants (e.g., birch, hawthorn, oak, rose, willow, witch hazel, etc.) often are included because of their "herbal use," which

leads one to conclude that some consider any plant utilized in any way for medicinal, aromatic, or culinary purposes as a herb.

Records indicate that about 5,000 years ago the Sumerians employed laurel, caraway, and thyme for medicinal purposes; and, a Chinese manuscript from about that time lists over 350 plants (about 51 of them herbal) that promote good health, among them ephedra, from which ephedrine, the nasal decongestant, is derived. About 2,000 BC, the Egyptians recorded their use of anise, cassia, cinnamon, and cumin during their embalming procedure and garlic, opium, castor oil, mint, indigo, etc. for medicine, food, and dyes. Their need for these stimulated trade.

Later (500-200 BC), the Greeks and Romans contributed much to herbal use. Hippocrates and Galen pioneered the paths that Western medicine would follow: Hippocrates advocated herbal drugs and fresh air, rest, diet restrictions, etc. Galen recommended severe intervention-- large, complicated mixtures of herbal drugs, often mixed with animal and mineral ingredients, and set into action via magical stimulations. It was during this time that Aristotle and Plato's student Theophrastus, "the father of botany," wrote History of Plants, in which 450 plants were classified as trees, shrubs, and herbs.

Of more significance, during the first century (AD), the Greek physician Dioscorides, who administered to the Roman legions, wrote the first herbal, De Materia Medica, in which he documents the morphologies and medicinal applications of 500 Mediterranean herbs including cinquefoil, cress, and garlic. With its 400 excellent paintings, it remained the pinnacle of herbal graphics for 1,000 years, until Leonhard Fuchs' woodcuts appeared in 1542 in his De Historia Stirpium.

During the Middle Ages, the monasteries harbored herb gardens. Monks copied manuscripts of herbal remedies employed by them to treat the sick, in spite of the fact that Christians favored faith healing over the practice of medicine. Secret herb recipes were sold in villages. During the 8th Century, Baghdad businessmen, schooled by Arab physicians that had been educated in medicinal herbs in Italy, became the first pharmacists. Around 880, Charlemagne (France) listed the herbs to be cultivated by his subjects for their health. The herb rosemary dominated the scene during this period. It was an ingredient of just about everything, including food, liqueurs, perfumes (eau de cologne), wound salves, love potions, and embalming fluids!

The so-called "golden age" or "Great Age of Herbs" occurred with the invention of the printing press. In 1526, the first herbal in English, Grete Herball, was published anonymously. In addition to Fuchs' above-mentioned work, Otto Brunfels, another German botanist, published the herbals Herbarum Vivae Eicones Ad Naturae Imitatis and Neotericorum Aliquot Medicorum (1532-3) containing superb illustrations (some, less-than-perfect specimens) that some believe are still the best ever.

During the latter half of the Renaissance, with the marriages of Catherine and Marie de Medici to Henry II and IV, respectively, the secrets of making perfumed liquids, soaps, powders, etc. from herbs and other plants (e.g., rose, orange, jasmine, etc.) were secured from the Florentines by the French, who since then have dominated the cosmetic market.

The herb "knot" gardens first became popular during the 16th Century Elizabethan era, but the idea probably originated in the Dark Ages, when monks planted herbs in squares and narrow strips, pruning them severely so that they would not grow together and confound species identification. In 1640, Charles I's official Herbalist, physician-gardener John Parkinson, published Theatrum Botanicum in which about

3,800 plants are illustrated with their suggested medicinal uses, some highly questionable.

Prominent barber-surgeon and herbalist John Gerard semi-authored (i.e., copied much from others) the famous work *The Herbal* (General Historie of Plantes in 1597 in which he dispelled various old wives' tales and contributed very sound information on flowering dates, etc. Yet, he inconceivably testified to observing insane (but popularly believed) notions, (e.g., geese hatching from barnacles), self-destructing his credibility. In 1617, William Lawson published the popular *The Country House-wife's Garden*, a title that one today could imagine to be a recent bookstore release.

The most popular, yet controversial and bizarre, publication was Nicholas Culpeper's 1649 translation of the College of Physicians' London Pharmacopoeia from its Latin into English as *Physicall Directory*. His mystical beliefs in his *Doctrine of Signatures*, in which he attributed a plant's appearance astrological botany (i.e., that a planet's influence on a plant can be determined by their shared colors, etc.) led to his subsequent publication of *The English Physician* (a.k.a. *The Complete Herbal*), in which he describes where to find 369 herbs, how to identify them, what astrological bodies influenced them, and their medicinal values.

Belief in myths, superstitions, and magic subsided with nonrealized results. Sir Thomas Browne's *Vulgar Errors* (1646) attacked many of the superstitions associated with herbs, signaling the beginning of the scientific age.

The English settlers in America brought with them their knowledge of herbs. Philip Miller's *The Gardener's Dictionary*, published in England (1722) was their prime reference, and some think it is the most successful gardening book ever written.

The Colonists discovered that many native Americans had their own herbal knowledge of New World herbs. Nevertheless, many relied

heavily on Old World remedies, provoking, in some cases, the establishment of herb farms and patent medicines; hence, "herbal healing" resulted and, with it, scepticism of the credibility of the testimonial claims of herbal benefits.

The commercial demand for herbs and their products is still very intense. Many of the drugs prescribed today are derived from herbs: digitalis from foxglove, the tranquilizer reserpine from rauwolfia, morphine from the opium poppy, burn salves from aloe, etc. Herbs also are a standard ingredient in cosmetics, medicinal lotions, drinks (e.g., anisette, creme de menthe, vermouth, etc.), and, of course, foods (e.g., meats, cookies, breads and rolls, condiments, etc.).

Recent interest in herbs has expanded to include not only the uses for herbs mentioned above but also an appreciation of them for their aesthetic appeal (e.g., eye-catching variegated types, topiary training, hanging baskets, etc.). Presently there is keen interest in the benefits of herbs and plants for their health benefits. Almost daily there is a report on TV regarding America's obsession with vitamins and various concoctions made with them. Except for Vitamins D and B12, all the essential vitamins can be derived from plants. In addition, we are constantly bombarded via periodicals and TV with health recommendations that have transformed our daily meals into prescriptions that (we believe) if not followed will result in dire consequences for us: that at least five servings of vegetables be eaten daily to ward off cancer; that tomato-based foods eaten twice weekly will reduce the incidence of prostate cancer; that vitamin E helps prevent the occurrence of prostate as well as colon cancers; that half an aspirin (meadowsweet and black willow) are in the immense popularity today of Hoffmann's book prompts one to wonder whether we are returning to the Middle Ages (*deja vu*) or whether we ever really left that era. Regardless, Nurse Nature still seems to be singing another encore-- and, we are listening-- still marching to her tune!

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