



## MEDICINAL PLANTS ~ A Very Brief History

*Plants are all chemists,  
Tirelessly assembling the molecules of the world*  
-Gary Synder, "Introduction", Pharmako/poeia

Over 5,000 years ago people used flowers, seeds, leaves, fruits, roots and bark in their medicines. Among the plants they used were thyme, myrrh and pine, which are still used today in the form of essential oils -- and willow, the source of *aspirin* -- the pain-killing over-the-counter drug commonly used for headaches and toothaches.

Allopathic medicine (orthodox/traditional) has its roots in the use of herbs. Until about fifty years ago, nearly all the entries in pharmacopoeias describing the manufacture of drugs indicated a herbal origin.

After World War II with the development of chemical technology the use of herbs diminished and synthetic drugs (antibiotics) and cosmetics became the popular choice for quick fixes.

It is estimated that 40% of prescribed drugs still contain at least one plant-derived ingredient.

### **A few examples of plant use in pharmaceutical drugs**

~Aspirin~ (Paracetamol)

Acetylsalicylic acid, a synthetic derived from *salicin* the active ingredient named after *salix* -- a family of willow trees. The resins and juices from the bark and leaves of the willow have been used to treat rheumatism, neuralgia and other ailments.

~Quinine~

The first drug treatment used against Malaria.

*Cinchona*, the bark of a flowering evergreen which grows on the Andean slopes of South America.

~Ginseng~

Derived from the aromatic roots of *Panax schinseng* or *Panax quinquefolius* has been used medicinally in China and is now widely used in the west.

~Valerian *Valeriana officinalis*~

This active chemical constituent is recognized by orthodox medicine and is now included in many pharmacopoeias as a sedative.

As our lives take us further away from nature, mountains and the sea with which human beings have evolved, and away from regular encounters with the wild intelligence of animals and of wild, untamed plants growing as they have for million of years, something, in humans beings fails to awaken. How then do we reconnect with nature?

Aromatherapy is a branch of herbal medicine. Essential oils are distilled from, one botanical plant sources, their chemistry is complex consisting of hundreds of components such as alcohols, aldehydes and ketones. The unique combination of chemical constituents is what determines the therapeutic properties of an individual essential oil.

There are many simple reasons for using aromatherapy in your everyday life, depending on whether you need to calm down, wake up or ease muscular tension. Connect with nature using botanical plant essences and you will learn the lost language of plants.

*Reprinted from Earth Girl Creations Newsletter issue 9 November 2006*