

Medicinal Herbs

BY JOHN MASON AND STAFF OF ACS DISTANCE EDUCATION



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CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION THE NATURE AND SCOPE OF MEDICINAL HERBS

Herbs have been used by humans for many thousands of years. Over the course of this time our understanding of their effects on our bodies has been learnt - initially through trial and error, and observations, then later through clinical trials. Today our knowledge of plants has given rise to a growing industry in botanical medicine.

WHAT ARE THEY?

Medicinal herbs are plants which contain chemicals that have an effect upon the body. Of course whilst many have a favourable effect, some which are classed as poisons are regarded as medicinal because when given in appropriate doses they can be used to attack pathogens in the body. But

how useful are these herbs? Some people swear by them, yet others are highly suspicious. Is their suspicion well-founded? The answer would have to be possibly, but not unequivocally. Herbs have been used for such a long time that it is hard to deny their usefulness. Before the mass production of synthesised drugs they were all we had to rely on.

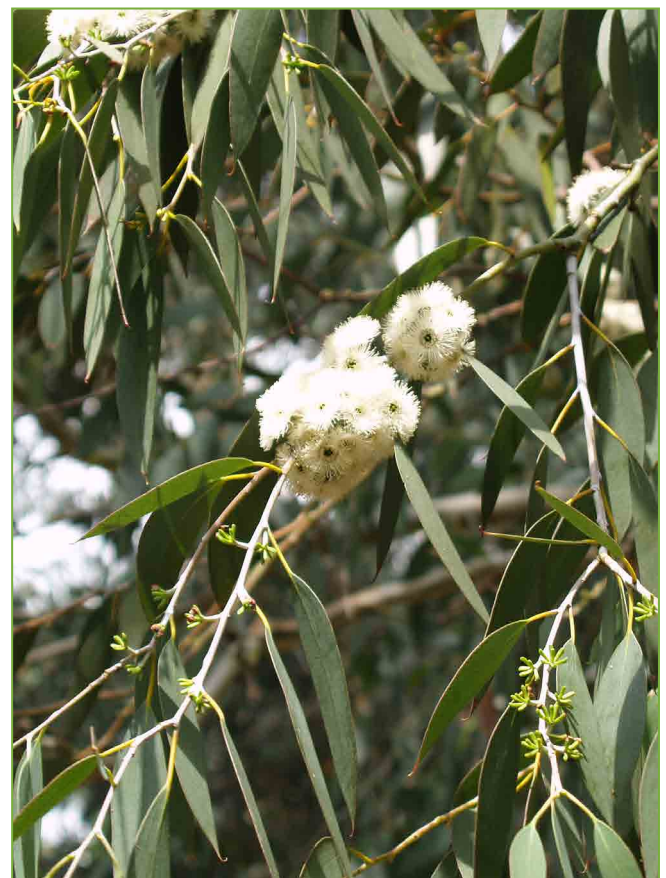


Chamomile

If you delve a little deeper, you'll soon discover that many of the medicines prescribed by doctors and sold by pharmacists today also originate from herbs. Many synthetic medicines have been created to mimic compounds found in plants. For instance, aspirin (acetylsalicylic acid) is very similar to salicin which is found in willow bark. Once metabolised in the body, salicin forms various salicylic derivatives. Although their presence is not found in sufficiently high concentrations to provide an analgesic effect, other chemicals in the bark including flavonoids and polyphenols contribute to combat pain.



The proper processing of herbs for medicinal purposes is complex and beyond the skills of the average home gardener, but there are many herbs which are relatively easy to grow and safe for most people to use; herbs such as rosemary, lavender, garlic and lemon balm. Many herbs also have the added benefit of attracting predatory insects to your garden which will keep unwanted pests in check.



Eucalyptus pauciflora

Whilst we mainly think of herbs as being useful for flavouring and garnishing food dishes, many of them can also be quite easily transformed into herbal teas or topical ointments which may provide medicinal benefits. Sometimes these benefits are preventative rather than curative - you can help your body to fend off infections and illnesses by boosting your immune system and natural defences.