



## Health

# "Awaiting A Rebirth"

by Alissa Hall

Before "organic" became a marketing buzzword, before holistic medicine was in vogue, herbs were used by necessity as a natural form of medicine in the Old West. Indigenous plants to the southwestern region were cultivated in culinary and medicinal gardens by those skilled in the art of healing.

The practice of herbal medicine begins with the careful cultivation and preparation of various parts of a plant – be that the leaf, flower, root, stem or stalk – which are harvested at their ideal time for efficacy. This was usually during

patients, such as the elderly or expectant mothers. A salve made from beargrass, a plant commonly found along the Rio Grande, can be helpful with treating rheumatoid arthritis and spider veins, but dangerously toxic for an expectant mother's unborn baby. Other herbs, such as an infusion of desert lavender known for its mildly sedative effects, can conversely stimulate untimely uterine contractions for a pregnant woman. Practicing herbalists would have had years of education and practice in order to memorize many of these contraindications.

*Not all herbal remedies were prescribed for physical symptoms alone, they also assisted in enhancing one's emotional and spiritual wellness with botanical remedies.*

The current New Age trend for treating the "mind, body and spirit" of a patient was established centuries ago when they were quite familiar with the notion that illnesses came from more than physical symptoms alone. Depression and fatigue that resulted in the patient's inability to perform even normal daily duties could be remedied with the following

### *Southwestern recipe for a "pick me up" tea:*

*1 teaspoon ginkgo biloba leaves, 1 teaspoon dried mirabilis root, 1 teaspoon ginseng root, 1 teaspoon pulsatilla herb, 1 teaspoon gotu kola leaves and 1 teaspoon of St. John's wort leaves steeped in 4 cups of boiling water for 30 minutes and taken as needed.*

Modern medicine is just beginning to recognize and tout the benefits of plants ginkgo biloba and St. John's wort, although this was something our abuelas ("grandmothers") had known all along. Other Old West remedies prescribed were meant for prolonging good health and avoiding illness.

### *A common tea recommended for boosting the immune system :*

*1 teaspoon of echinacea root and 1 teaspoon of goldenseal root steeped in 1 cup of boiling water and taken once a day, for no more than 7 days.*

Once again, that which is old has become new again; although this modest recipe is hundreds of

years old, in today's time echinacea and goldenseal essential oils are bottled and sold in chic, upscale herb shops for the same immune-strengthening purposes.

In many ways, modern sensibilities have only scratched the surface of the wisdom our elders already knew, and yet the ways of the Old West herbalist healers is becoming a dying art. In today's fast-paced society based on immediate gratification, the years of personal mentorship needed to become a competent herbalist are too often sacrificed for the quick fixes bottled and sold on supermarket shelves.

Despite societal hardships the practices have not died out completely. Perhaps, like a plant in winter, the practices of the Old West herbalists healers will lie dormant while awaiting a rebirth of interest which has only yet begun to blossom in our modern age.

*The Old West Herbalist Healer's garden was filled with plants that prospered in the Southwest's unique and challenging environment.*

Modern amateur herbalists can create their own xeriscape-friendly, drought-hardy garden with plants of the Old West that were known for their unique medicinal benefits. Herbal remedy should always be mentioned to one's current physician in order to avoid complication with current prescriptions.

### *A short list of common xeriscape plants that promote botanical wellness include:*

**Aloe** (Aloe vera) – Juice from aloe leaves is renowned for its healing benefits when used topically for skin irritations and burns. Preparation method: Leaf pulp and juice can be scraped and squeezed from clippings and applied to affected area for immediate cooling relief.

### **Desert Barberry**

(Mahonia fremontii) – Salves and oils made from the plant's roots are antibacterial and fungicidal. As a bitter tonic, a tea or tincture can be used for indigestion. Preparation method: Cut roots into 1/4 inch sections for drying.

### **Prickly Pear Cactus**

(Opuntia engelmannii) – Internal uses include a reduction in blood sugar concentration for non-insulin dependant diabetics. Externally, slices of the cactus pad can be applied to acute injuries such as sprains to reduce







topical inflammation and swelling. Preparation method: Scrape thorns from pad (gloves are recommended) before scraping inner pulp. Cautions: Plant should not be used for insulin dependant diabetics. Eating excessive amounts of the pad or fruit can cause a fever and chills.

### **Common Juniper**

(*Juniperus communis*) – Juniper is often used for urinary tract infections when taken internally as a tea or tincture. External uses include juniper oil or salve to resolve eczema and psoriasis symptoms. Preparation methods: Dry leaves and fruit before infusion in oil or tea. Cautions: Should not be used during pregnancy, or for acute kidney inflammation.

### **Big Leaf Periwinkle**

(*Vinca major*) – Known to constrict blood vessels, the plant can be used to treat migraines as well as lessen minor hemorrhaging, such as nosebleeds, profuse menstruation, or hemorrhoids. Preparation methods: Vine can be gathered with or without flowers to prepare as a tincture when fresh or dried. Cautions: Not to be used during pregnancy; can cause blood pressure reduction and therefore is not recommended for those taking cardiovascular medications.

### **Jojoba**

(*Simmondsia chinensis*) – When applied as a topical astringent, jojoba diminishes inflammation caused by scrapes, rashes or burns, as well as reducing discharge from weepy rashes. Jojoba is slightly antimicrobial, thus assisting tissues to heal quickly. When used as a mouth wash, it can resolve mouth sores and lessen bleeding gums, while jojoba tea reduces diarrhea. Mature Jojoba seeds, when roasted, may promote the feeling of satiation, and therefore assist in dieting, however only a few seeds should be ingested as larger amounts can be painful to digest. Preparation methods: New leaves that are light green and hydrated should be collected from the upper branches of the plant. Cautions: Recommended for short term use only (5-7 days), and jojoba should not be used during pregnancy due to vasoconstricting effects on the uterine lining.

### **Desert Oregano**

(*Aloysia wrightii*) – When taken as a tincture or tea before meals, desert oregano can act as an aromatic bitter, and assists in preventing indigestion and bloating. Preparation methods: Collect leaves and flowers from upper branches when they are at their most aromatic. Cautions: Should not be used during pregnancy.



### **Horehound**

(*Marrubium vulgare*) – In tea, tincture or syrup form, horehound is an effective expectorant which thins mucus and assists in a variety of bronchial conditions. When taken as a hot tea before meals, it is known to stimulate appetite; cold horehound tea is a mild diuretic and can assist in diminishing fluid retention. Preparation methods: Collect leaves and flower clusters from the upper half of the plant during spring. Cautions: Can elevate blood pressure and cause short term hypoglycemic episodes.

### **Desert Sage**

(*Salvia dorrii*) – Externally, sage oil is anti-inflammatory and antioxidant, and useful for reducing fevers and inflammation caused by burns. Sage can also be steamed for inhalation to help with sore throats. Preparation methods: Collect strongly aromatic leaves and flowering parts only; aroma indicates the sage is at its most efficacious. Cautions: Not for use during pregnancy or while nursing.

### **New Mexican Verbena**

(*Verbena macdougalii*) – As a tincture or infusion, verbenas are a mild sedative useful for reducing nervousness, anxiety and tension as well as treating stress headaches. The plant's chemical properties are thought to have a modulating effect on dopamine levels within the brain, and verbenas also been prescribed as helpful for mothers who are not producing sufficient breast milk. Preparation methods: Leaves and stems can be cultivated for drying. Cautions: Although considered helpful for assistance in nursing, verbenas should not be used during pregnancy.

### **Yucca**

(*Yucca elata*) – Because of its inability to be digested in the intestinal tract, oils and capsules of dried yucca root are known to assist in waste removal from the colon. Yucca also binds and assists in the removal of cholesterol and is even believed to help chronic pain and rheumatoid arthritis. Powdered yucca root can be added to water for making a shampoo as well. Preparation methods: Chop roots into 1/4 inch pieces for drying. Cautions: Yucca is recommended for short periods of use (3-4 weeks) as excessive quantities and/or long-term usage can cause intestinal distress. Yucca should not be used during pregnancy.



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