



Herbs: It's About Health, and It's About Time

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Slowly. Ever so slowly. Like the building of the Pyramids, tax refunds and syrup stored in the refrigerator, the role of herbs in therapeutic and healing applications is finding its way into our everyday health. And why not? It's only been 5,000 years.

Yet as this monolithic pendulum picks up momentum, scientific studies are finally exploring the use, safety and effectiveness of herbs. And the results indicate mild to significant benefits of herbs along with incredible safety profiles that leave drug the manufacturers envious.

It is always amusing to see the review of an herb in a traditional, allopathic health publication, with a focus on some rare side effect that uncommonly occurs even at high doses. Then, in the same issue, a double standard is applied as a manufacturer's new miracle drug is discussed, and the side effects and occasional death caused by the new drug are given little more than honorary mention. Indeed, it has been estimated that as many as 100,000 deaths occur per year in U.S. hospitals with the PROPER use of prescription medication, compared to no deaths related to the use of herbs.

And of course, since you have some predilection for plants, you will be glad to know that many of these herbs are easy to grow and can add a beautiful touch to your landscape.

However, the herbs should be grown more for their inherent beauty than their therapeutic value. Herbs are preferably purchased from a quality supplier that can ensure proper and consistent dosing from the most therapeutic parts of the plant and, as a pleasant perk, deadly hemlock will not likely be mistaken for wild parsley or parsnip. The better manufacturers "standardize" their herbs to guarantee a level of therapeutic agents. Thus, the variance you might see from plant to plant is eliminated.

Some of the more common herbs used today include St. John's Wort, ginkgo biloba, saw palmetto, garlic and echinacea. Although many other herbs can be discussed and books written about each one, the focus here will be on some of the most popular, best-studied plants. And remember, the term natural is not necessarily synonymous with innocuous. All herbs have the potential for allergic and adverse reactions, including interactions with prescription medications. It is therefore prudent to check with a knowledgeable healthcare professional before adding herbs to your health program.

Of recent media popularity is the herbal antidepressant, St. John's Wort. Featuring documented safety and effectiveness, it is used in Germany eight to one over prescription anti-depressants and is rapidly gaining the attention it deserves in America. It routinely demonstrates the ability to attenuate symptoms of depression including anxiety, sleeplessness and "the blues." It is safe with most, but not all medications, and has rarely been known to cause a rash when the patient is exposed to prolonged sunlight. A typical dose is 300mg three times per day.

Another herb known for its mental enhancement is ginkgo biloba, although it can improve other health conditions. From the planet's oldest-living tree species, ginkgo's

effect is thought to arise from increased circulation to the brain and other parts of the body. Better circulation generally means better cell performance and, in the case of the brain, memory enhancement. However, ginkgo also helps other body conditions related to poor circulation, including diabetic vascular insufficiency and impotence, and is an excellent anti-oxidant. The usual dose is 120mg to 240mg per day of the standardized extract, in divided doses. Side effects are extremely rare, and it is safe with other medications.

Saw palmetto, from the fruit of a palm tree, is another incredible herb. Used to treat an extremely common male condition, it helps to reduce the urinary problems associated with an enlarged prostate. These problems include difficulty voiding, incomplete emptying of the bladder, nocturnal urinary frequency and low and slow flow. In fact, saw palmetto has been shown to be superior to prescription medication. Since these problems could be related to cancer of the prostate, it is important for your physician to eliminate this possibility before self-treatment. The typical dose is 160mg of the standardized extract twice daily. No significant side effects have been reported, and it is safe with other medications.

Garlic has maintained a role in natural medicine for centuries. Although it has been proclaimed to cure many diseases and ward off vampires, modern studies have confirmed garlic's ability to lower blood pressure and improve cholesterol profiles. This makes it an ideal herbal supplement for millions of people at risk for cardiovascular disease. Additional benefits of garlic include boosting the immune system and reducing the risks of stroke and cancer. The active component is considered to be allicin, although like almost all herbs, there are several biologically-active elements in garlic. The usual dose is 4,000 micrograms of allicin per day, preferably in an enteric-coated tablet.

The purple coneflower is the preferred plant used by the American Indian to treat illness and injury. More commonly known as echinacea, it has shown significant effects in treating viral and bacterial infections by decreasing the duration and reoccurrence of infections and shortening the severity of symptoms. It stimulates the immune system by several different mechanisms and also has mild antiviral and antibacterial properties. Although safe and non-toxic, it is usually recommended to take echinacea at the immediate onset and for a few days past the infection and then stop. The common dose is 300mg three times daily.

With the perfect pairing of herbal safety and effectiveness, many healthcare practitioners predict another 5,000 years of flowering popularity.