

HERBS by Gillian Boyd

Herbs have been cultivated for over 2000 years with records dating back before the times of the Ancient Greeks. Most plants were thought to have useful properties which were first described in English by John Gerard, an Elizabethan physician, in 1597. He called his book *The Herball or Generall Historie of Plantes* and in it he described the characteristics and properties of nearly 200 herbs. This and many other herbals published in the following century are the forerunners of the botanical textbooks used today.

In the Middle Ages, herbs were the answer to everything in the way of culinary, medicinal or practical household use. They were used to help preserve food and to add or disguise flavour. They were used medicinally for every problem and condition.



1 Dill - photo by Mary Ann Van Berlo

Modern hygiene was unknown in the Middle Ages. Bathing was regarded as dangerous and living conditions were crowded and dirty. Strewing herbs such as lavender, marjoram, hyssop and sage were spread on floors and in closets and outhouses to prevent diseases. Pennyroyal mint was particularly effective against fleas. In homes where it was used, there were fewer outbreaks of the Black Death, the plague carried by rodents and spread by fleas. Potpourri mixtures of dried herbs and spices were also used to mask odours and sweeten the air.

Long ago, there were few resources for the sick or the poor who had to rely on local remedies or charity. All housewives were expected to know how to treat minor injuries and illnesses and herbal lore was passed down from mother to daughter.

Although apothecaries in towns or villages were skilled in diagnosis and grew the herbs from which they mixed and dispensed their remedies, they were not always close by. People would go instead to the lady of the manor who maintained a 'simples cupboard' of lotions and creams. She would dispense these for common problems from bites, stings and rashes to boils, burns and bruises.

For more serious conditions, the nearest monastery acted as a hospital and dispensary and people might come a long way to be treated. Monastic communities were largely self-sufficient and grew and raised all they needed for their daily life – food, seasonings, medications and plants for practical use. Among their several gardens, the most important were the kitchen and physic gardens.

The kitchen garden contained vegetables and culinary herbs such as chives, lovage and sorrel for flavouring, together with such spice herbs as caraway, poppy and juniper for their seeds and berries.

The physic garden was always close to the infirmary for easy access. Single varieties of medicinal plants were grown in raised beds surrounded by paths. They included many that we consider more ornamental today. Besides the familiar comfrey, hyssop and tansy, you might find cowslip, iris and meadowsweet together with Madonna lilies and apothecary roses. A pleasant feature was often a herb seat, a framework of brick or stone filled with soil and planted with thyme or chamomile to make a padded bench. When convalescing patients sat there to rest after strolling along the paths, they enjoyed a form of aromatherapy from the surrounding herbal fragrance.



2 Modern Herb bench photo by MAVB

While we can now obtain herbs and spices from all over the world, our ancestors had much less choice. The main spice trade became established in the 17th and 18th centuries but only richer families could afford them. Pepper for example was priced almost as high as silver or gold.

The diet of the poor was bland and monotonous, especially in winter. They grew what herbs and vegetables they could in any tiny space available. They also foraged along roadsides and ditches for edible weeds. Pennycrest, lamb's quarters, purslane and vetch were all desirable additions to the pot and provided useful nutrients and vitamins. These greens were known collectively as potherbs, meaning those that were cooked in a pot rather than grown in a pot and they were used in large quantities to provide more variety.

While the poor survived on humble fare, the wealthy had a much wider choice. They might dine on rabbit stew with barley, sage and bay leaves or pigeon pie with ginger, pepper and cloves. Their breads, salads and soft cheeses were often flavoured with assorted herbs and spices.

Other flavourings commonly used included almond milk, olive oil, honey and verjus as well as all the onion family. In the days before refrigeration, fresh milk didn't keep well. The almond milk alternative was made by soaking ground almonds in boiling water and then straining the milky mixture. Verjus was pressed from unripe grapes and used instead of vinegar to add zest to sauces or salad dressings.

Herbs are a wonderful asset in our gardens today with their fragrant leaves and flowers and their attractiveness to so many beneficial insects. Whether perennial, biennial or annual, ornamental herbs add diversity, be it blue borage flowers, purple flowering sage or angelica's white umbels. If I were forced to choose a favourite it might be southernwood (*Artemisia abrotanum*) with its feathery grey-green scented leaves. Running one's fingers through the foliage is wonderfully reviving at the end of a tiring day.

Herbs have played an important part in our history and contributed greatly to our survival and well-being. Why not grow more of them to enjoy in your garden as well as to ease the stresses of modern life today?

Sidebar (132 words)

Herbs: plants whose flowers, leaves, roots or seeds are used for culinary, medicinal or household purposes. Many herbs are used in the perfume industry or for aromatherapy.

Spices: aromatic or pungent substances obtained from any part of a plant used to flavour food. Cinnamon comes from tree bark, ginger from a root, cloves from dried flower buds, caraway, mustard or sesame from seeds.

Cooking: in winter grow parsley, chives and mint on well-lit indoor windowsills for fresh flavour. Dried herbs have a more concentrated flavour.

Herbal Teas: enjoy by steeping fresh or dried leaves of mint or lemon balm in hot water for a few minutes.

Crafts: southernwood and sweet Annie stems make excellent scented frames for wreaths. Lavender, lemon balm and rosemary can be dried and used in sachets or potpourris.