

## Looking Back in Time

In reading the flower and plant stories from long, long ago, we are struck by our ancestors' determination to understand the nature of the world they inhabited. Then, as now, it was probably only a small portion of the population who were searching for information that would explain natural phenomena. There were others in those days as there are now, who had little time for speculation.

Today we find the lore attached to certain plants both curious and absurd. Such superstitions! However many of these plants are being re-examined and found to be anti-inflammatory, antiseptic, antiviral or even hallucinogenic. Even more curious, plants considered merely time-honored placebos are found to have qualities that induce healthy results psychologically.

We've read about the pupil of Aristotle, a Greek named Theophrastus who wrote "Enquiry into Plants" in the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC and Pliny the Elder who wrote an encyclopedia of natural history in 1<sup>st</sup> century AD. These studies based on close observation were done without the tools or techniques that came later, but one work., "De Materia Medico" by Dioscorides, written in the 1st century AD was based on the author's experience as a doctor in the Roman army. This work had wide circulation as it was written in accessible Latin and translated into several languages including Arabic and Anglo-Saxon, with the expected result of additions and errors in translation.

In the 4th century recipes were added from a source know as Apuleius Platonicus. Before the printing press was invented, copies were done by hand with the likelihood of a copier being in a climate where the original plant was unknown. Stories and legends and whimsical illustrations also tended to dilute accuracy over time. Around 1275 physician Platearius compiled a book based on Dioscorides but included additional plants as well as learning from Arabic botany and medicine. By the 14<sup>th</sup> century artists began to infuse more realism into these ancient herbals and as more medical schools were opened in Italy stricter scientific observation became more established.

Not merely plants for medical uses were important but vegetables were worthy of description for their culinary value and flowers for their beauty. Gardeners were advised to remove suckers from garden roses to prevent them reverting to their wild forms and directions were given for growing a smooth lawn.

Among the information passed along, the Greeks learned the oriental technique of grafting apples and passed it along to the Romans who scattered the information as they built their empire. The Romans left, but the apple trees flourished.

Our fruits and vegetables have a long history. Dioscorides thought beans caused bad dreams and as beans were important to poor people, they had little status and were fed to livestock. With rice added, beans form a complete protein with the result that they have been essential in many cultures. Today they have become fashionable as cooks realize they are not only healthy but they taste good! More elite is the raspberry, an ancient treat and today reposing in the produce section like a small jewel. Perhaps they have always been costly. Considered to have curative qualities and called hindberry, it was re-named honoring raspis, a sweet red wine.

Foxgloves had magical properties in Celtic folklore and Medieval physicians used it to treat the skin ailment, scrofula. However the foxglove's importance in treating heart failure (digitalis) was not recognized until late in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

**Update:** Perhaps by the time you read this the Congressional temper tantrum will be over and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service back in active mode. One of the most important things they do

is manage the National Wildlife Refuge System. This system began when President Teddy Roosevelt designated Florida's Pelican Island the first national wildlife refuge in 1903.

As well as serving as habitat for hundreds of animal and plant species, these refuges serve as rest stops for the millions of migrating birds. The human species, too, (when the gates are open) flock to these refuges in great numbers, as many as 47 million a year. Be one of the millions and visit some of the nine refuges in Virginia, located as near as Virginia Beach, Suffolk, Charles City, and Warsaw. Events at the refuges are planned for October 13 – 19, National Wildlife Refuge Week, a time when the numbers of wildlife to be seen explode!

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