

The Broken Tradition
A History of Herbal Medicine
By Alyessa Oaktree ((C) 1998 Christina Ittermann)

Herbs have been used for over 50,000 years by man. Remarkable research has been done through trial and observation throughout the history of mankind. For the majority of the time that herbs have been in use, it is presumed that the knowledge has been passed on verbally. This makes it difficult to determine which herbs were in use in prehistory, and the results which were expected from them. There is a similar problem in determining what was used by lay practitioners and folk herbalists in the Middle Ages.

In the Middle Ages, books were reserved for documentation and dissemination of important information, not for things which were common knowledge at the time. Most “common-knowledge” subjects were not written of, and the traditions were carried on verbally, from the elder to the younger generation. One can presume that lay healers may not have been able to read or write, and that all of the knowledge was passed on through memorization, and perhaps chants and songs. Some historians mention that the woman of the house, while tending the vegetable garden, also was in charge of planting, harvesting and administration of medicinal herbs. Many of the herbal remedies of the middle ages were to be stored and prepared in the kitchens.

In the Dark Ages, herbal healing became ostracized by the church, however by the attention paid to it, one can deduce that it was happening anyway. One does not bother to ban a practice which is not being practiced.

The persecutions of the inquisition show that a great amount of attention was paid to lay healers. With the advent of medical institutions, lay healers became undesirable to the wealthy classes. Only the wealthy could afford “real” medical training. The inquisition was pressed into service to eliminate the competition. Unfortunately, the people often fingered as witches were those who were illiterate, poor or lower class, who were generous, and who were most likely women, in charge of cooking and healing. The better you were at administering medicine, the more likely you would be pointed out as getting help from the devil.

Soon, lay healers were diminished or went fully underground, and their medical knowledge was lost. This left western Europe with only the institutionalized version of medicine.

Much of the Medieval and Modern herbal medicine textbooks stem from early medicinal works by ancient scientists. Some of the basic texts used in the Middle Ages were translations of works by Dioscorides, Hippocrates, Galen and other ancient Greek writers. There is also a significant contribution from Islamic "Ayuurvedic" botanical knowledge. Much of the same research is in use today, and is effective in treating contemporary illnesses.

Medication was the most common treatment used for illness in the Middle Ages, as opposed to diet or surgery (bloodletting included). Most of the medicines given were derived from plant sources. Medicinal herbs were available to all healers, in the wild, the garden, or the shoppe. Medicinal plants were often those used in cooking, noted for their pungent aroma, distinctive taste and their overt effects on the human body. Prescriptions were not always based upon medical knowledge, but also upon folklore and magical belief.