

# The Herb in History, Mysteries and Crafts



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By

Zenia Sacks DaSilva

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**For Gary, Russell, Peggy and the “GGs”  
with all my love**



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# INTRODUCTION

## What is a herb?

It's hard to say. In times much older than our own, it included any plant in nature's quiver, even full-blown trees and grasses. Today's dictionaries offer two prevailing definitions, one functional, the other purely botanical.

1. any plant with leaves, seeds, or flowers used for flavoring, food, medicine, or perfume.
2. any seed-bearing plant that does not have a woody stem and dies down to the ground after flowering.

I have chosen the first and more inclusive definition so that we may speak unabashedly of a rose for its aroma, not for its structure, of the yew for its medicinal treasure, of the mistletoe, the laurel and of so many others. That is the lens through which we shall view those magnanimous botanicals and explore the dimensions of their gifts. And if we wander from their strict parameters, so be it. I promise you many surprises.

As for pronunciation, the "h" in *herb* is voiced in contemporary British English: *a herb*. It is not sounded in the USA: *an herb*. For purposes of this volume, we favor the British pronunciation. If you are an American like me, you're free to hear it without the "h" as you read.

### **Why another book on herbs?**

Why? Because their story is so encompassing that there is always room for one more – as long as it is different, as long as it is told in a way that is easy to absorb and to enjoy in the reading.

*The Herb in History, Mysteries and Crafts* is not the usual herbal, not a homeopathic handbook, a cookbook or a gardener's consort; not a compendium of history or lore, though those are its favorite pursuits. At heart, it is a tale of humanity's poignant relationship with nature. Told in short vignettes, profusely illustrated and sprinkled with personal asides, it touches broadly on the role of plants in legend, in religion, in medicine, commerce, crafts and tradition, in literature, language, politics, beauty, in the rise and fall of empires, in food and manners, in love, in murder and in crushing social passions. It selects from the trove of history and science moments that amaze, or shock, or move us to disbelief, and asks us to explore the uncanny bond between us and our non-speaking partners in creation. Just one more herbal? The difference is in the point of view.

### **Why me as the author?**

It all began eons ago when I was still relatively young and botanically virgin. Yes, I did know something about plants. A herb was a nice-looking green that better cooks than I threw into soups and salads; and it was the name of a very nice-looking fellow I remembered from way back in college. My innocence was slow to subside. Then came the epiphany.

Her name was Marjorie Kern. She was a lecturer at the New York Botanical Gardens and a horticulturist on the grounds of her sprawling Long Island estate. I was a professor of Spanish language and literature, with a small back yard, some

climbing roses, kitten-faced pansies and phlox. Not much in common for starters. But we began taking long walks together, and when we finished talking about our sons and their doings, I would tell Marjorie about my classes and the texts I was writing, and she would regale me with her botanical world. I was entranced. I went to the library, read everything I could find, and herbs became my second passion.

In time I could really share in our walking conversations, and one day we decided to write a book together. Marjorie would supply most of the materials and I would be their author, adding whatever I had learned from my readings, plus my own literary and historical perspectives. It was a good plan, but unfortunately it never came to pass. For reasons of health, Marjorie had to step back and I was left on my own, deeply involved with my teaching and publications in Spanish, but not ready to give up.

In the course of the next twenty years I read more than a hundred books and articles on herbs, taking notes, writing my drafts... and laying them to rest in a closet. By the time I retired from the university, the herb book was nearly complete, but lacking illustrations and sorely in need of polish. Besides, there was new information I wanted to examine, this time on the internet, not at the library. I took the sheaf from the closet, checked every line, added, subtracted, rephrased, corrected, and at last I can offer *The Herb in History, Mysteries and Crafts*, my first venture outside of academia, my love letter to the universe of nature.

Marjorie B. Kern is no longer with us, but I remain forever indebted for the second world that she opened before my eyes. Please remember her name as I dedicate to her memory this heartfelt introduction.

I would like to thank Dr. Roberta Koepfer for her help and encouragement in preparing this volume, and to the assiduous

editorial staff of Cambridge Scholars for placing it in your hands. Once again, I am deeply grateful.

Zenia Sacks DaSilva  
January, 2017

## CHAPTER ONE

### WAY BACK WHEN . . .

*It started long ago, in times without measure, when green first covered the earth and life grew in wondrous dimensions. The herb, nature's primal offering. The ancients took it for food and for medicine. They drew from it many of the pharmaceuticals we know today, in awesome array. Wrapped with their magic rituals, they found in it solace for the body, refuge for the mind. And so the romance began.*

#### **Treasures of “The Good Earth”**

Some 5000 years past, there lived in myth an emperor called Shen Nung (Shennong), who lives on in a mist of history and fable. The ancients tell us that Shen Nung, the “father of Chinese medicine,” struck the plants and trees with a red whip and began to taste all the herbs. They say that he found as many as seventy poisons in a single day; but undaunted, he continued his search until there were hundreds of herbal remedies in his cache. Scratched on dried animal bones and tortoise shells were his formulas for medicines to be administered in every imaginable way – pills, plasters, mixtures, powders, syrups, ointments, even suppositories. And from there, they say, came the *Pen Tsao*, the original “textbook” of Chinese pharmacy.

The *Pen Tsao* was actually written in the third century CE. The work of untold, unknown herbalists, it was culled from oral traditions embedded in the millennia. Yet remarkably, many of its prescriptions have come down to modern days, especially in the hands of alternative practitioners.

Ephedrine, which stems from the Chinese *ma huang*, the ephedra plant, is still used in the treatment of low blood pressure and breathing irregularities. Gingko, which has had certain success with memory loss and dementia, is now being studied for a variety of further applications. But by far the most intriguing is ginseng, hailed by Shen Nung as an elixir for potency and longevity. And who could bear better witness? Didn't he "live" 123 years?

So prized was ginseng that during certain periods of Chinese history it cost many times its weight in gold. Its fame grew by bounds and soon it was shrouded in legend. They called it "the wonder of the world, the root of life," such were its powers to enrich and to save. Emperors would present an ounce or two to visiting dignitaries or send it to their ailing friends. Wars were fought over it; murder was well within its realm; and the export of a single root was once a capital offense!

A special breed of hunters arose, strong, tireless men who wandered the forests, aided only by the miraculous "ginseng bird," which led them to secret troves of the treasure. Word spread that the precious herb would disappear forever into the bowels of the earth, were it to be pulled up by an immoral man. Apparently, there was no shortage of the righteous, for the ginseng was ravished nearly into extinction. Nor would it do any good to plant it at will, since only the wild roots had any magical powers.



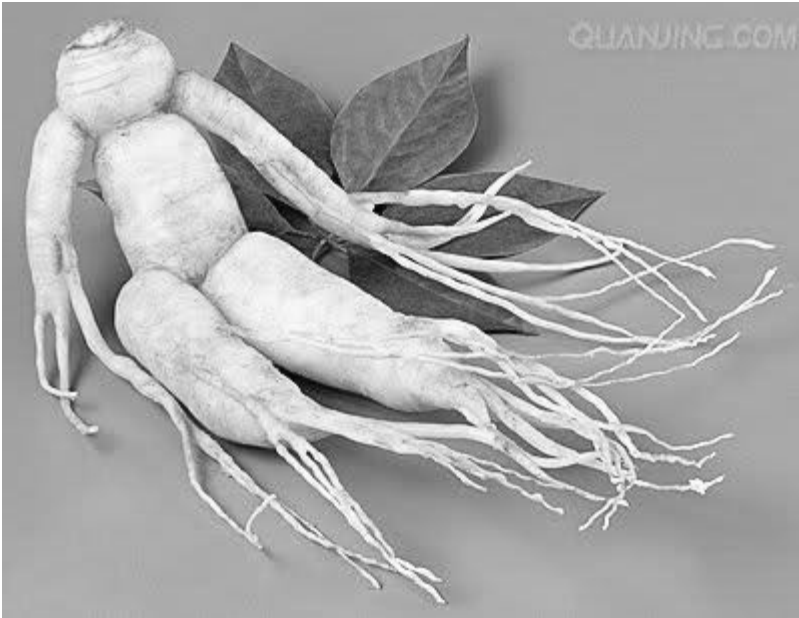


Figure I-1. A “female” ginseng root of exceptional quality... The more it resembles the human figure, the more valuable the ginseng root becomes, its price soaring into thousands of dollars. With the scarcity of natural wild ginseng in Asia, American ginseng, mainly from Wisconsin and the Appalachian region of Pennsylvania, has been widely accepted even in China. Exported back to the USA, it is known as Korean ginseng... Sometimes the mystique is worth more than the fact. (quanjing.com.)

In time, the reputation of ginseng passed far beyond the Orient, reaching even the shores of early America. Thomas Jefferson listed it as a national resource plant. Nineteenth century adventurers spawned many a “Gold Rush” in its pursuit, and farmers struggled vainly to grow it for profit. To this day, its strangely man-shaped root is valued beyond imagination. In China it still serves as a lavish wedding gift, a kind of insurance against infertility. Although its virtues are not fully proven, it is used in many parts of Europe for a variety of afflictions ranging from impotence to aging and cancer. It was regularly given to Soviet cosmonauts on their

space missions. And in the United States, where research has been less kind to its merits, the demand for ginseng in teas, soups and “energy” drinks is rapidly making it an endangered species.

As the centuries went by, Chinese pharmacologists expanded their store, until a collection from ancient sources published in 1597 CE counted more than a thousand plants and nearly 11,000 herbal recipes.

Certain species of blackberries, like the ginseng, were found to “strengthen the virile powers.” The dandelion, that “Yellow-Flowered-Earth Nail,” removed abscesses, swellings and snakebite. Black soybean was an antidote for vegetable poisons, as was ginger for seafood that was spoiled. (Have you noticed? The Japanese still serve shaved ginger with every dish of sushi.) And cinnamon, camphor, garlic, chives, sesame, ginger and cardamom countered a variety of indispositions. In fact, the spicy hot and sour soup we know today was originally a doctor’s prescription.

To be sure, some of the plants were embellished with supernatural virtues. Ginger, that cleansed the body and the soul, was consumed in special rites to communicate with the gods, and at the birth of a child it was placed over the doorway to fend off unwelcome visitations. Not to be outdone, mugwort hung on the doorpost also kept evil spirits away.

Yarrow fed the intelligence, along with the skin, the muscles and the lungs. Heart’s Ease kept the hair black and the cheeks rosy. With a bit of luck and persistence, it could even hold death at bay! Other medicines were elaborated with such non-botanicals as tiger hairs, toad slime, rhinoceros horn, snake meat, human organs and body waste – not the most savory items, but then, no avenue could be ignored. Nature required a balance and matter was not exclusively vegetarian.



Figure I-2. A page from *Shen Nung Pen Tsao Ching* (*Shennong Bencao Jing*), an undated pharmacopeia based in part on the ancient Chinese *Pen Tsao*. Over the years there have been numerous variations and additions to the original third century CE text. Many of their prescriptions are still applicable today. (En Wikipedia. Licensed by GNU)

Actually, Chinese herbal science was part of an all-encompassing philosophy of life – the masculine *yang*, hot, strong, light and active, and the feminine *yin*, cold, weak, dark and passive. Entwined in an exquisite balance, *yin* and *yang* ruled the universe with a constant ebb and flow. Every aspect of creation – man, mineral and plant – was under their command, and all shared the same five elements – wood, fire, earth, metal and water. These in turn were tied to the stars and planets, to weather, colors and endless other phenomena.

In proper alignment, they were all powerful and good. Did the earth not provide wood and metal? Did water and flaming sun not nurture the earth? But when their order was disrupted, they could do terrible harm. Fire destroyed wood, water destroyed fire, earth destroyed water, metal destroyed earth.

And so it was with mortal beings. When the elements within them flowed in harmony, theirs was a perfect health. When one oppressed the other, they would suffer and die, unless a similar force replaced the one that was lost. That is why the fire of red plants fought their fevers, the juice of yellow plants cured their kidneys, and heart-shaped leaves or bulbs restored the quick of their pulse. In those ancient measures and prescriptions lies the source of Chinese medicine today.

## Recipes in clay

*At about the same time that the mythical Shen Nung was devising his herbal remedies, the actual Sumerians of southern Mesopotamia (now Iraq) were harvesting their own trove of medicinal plants and recording them on tablets of clay. In fact, no less than 800 of the tablets discovered to date deal with medicine, and the very first “doctor’s prescription” appears on one of them. The Mesopotamians had a great fear of sickness and death, and they sought in the magical herb the key to life without end.*



Figure I-3. A Mesopotamian tablet from the third millennium BCE. Cuneiform, with its wedge-shaped markings pressed into clay, is among the earliest forms of written language. Evolving from pictographs, by 3000 BCE it was already being correlated with the sounds of speech. Its prodigious cache of tablets gives insight into the social structure, religion and medicinal herbs of the ancients. (The Los Angeles County Museum of Art; Public domain)

Inscribed in these Mesopotamian tablets of clay is the legend of Gilgamesh, an early ruler of the city of Uruk, who went to seek the herb of life that would free men forever from illness. Weighted down with stones, he plunged to the bottom of the “primal sea,” where he plucked the wonderful herb and started back toward his land. But the gods were jealous. So, as Gilgamesh hurried on his way, they sent a terrible heat wave and tempted him to bathe in a cool lake. Carefully, he laid the herb on the shore and plunged into the waters. While he bathed, a snake came and ate the herb. Instantly it shed its skin. Instantly it was rejuvenated. The serpent had gained the power of eternal youth, the secret of perpetual life, while Gilgamesh and his people were condemned to mortality. It is little wonder that the snake, which knew all the secrets of the earth, became the symbol of various gods of healing for ages to come.



Figure I-4. The Aesclepiian staff    The rod of Caduceus

The snake was often partnered with the herb in the process of healing. For many centuries, the staff of Aesclepius, a Greek physician turned deity, became the symbol of the medical profession. Entwined with only one snake, it is often confused with the two-snaked Caduceus, the rod with which the fleet-footed god Mercury opened the doors between the Heavens and mankind. In Europe, the Caduceus is the symbol of commerce; in the United States, it still represents the healing arts.

Actually, medical practice in the third millennium BCE was not quite like what we know today. Filled with sacrifices and conjuration, it was more a ritual of exorcism than a science. If the priest could get the demons out of one's body – beat them out, bleed them out, plead them out – no medicine need clear the way. Illness was a divine punishment administered by any of 6000 evil spirits, and first the culprit had to be uncovered. So the patient breathed into the mouth of a sheep, the animal was sacrificed, and its liver, where the soul resided, gave the signs.

From there came the cures – a composite of mystical rites, mysterious herbs and physical therapy. The prognosis was derived from the stars or from watching birds in flight. If the birds turned to the right, the patient would recover. If they turned to the left, disaster was on the way. (That is how the word “sinister,” based on the Latin word for “left,” acquired its ominous meaning, and why left-handedness was regarded until recently as an affliction – except for American baseball players.)

In spite of such distractions, the Sumerians seemed to have a clear knowledge of herbs and of their medical applications. Using slaves and subjugated peoples for their experimentation, they learned that licorice was good for inflammations; that belladonna, extract of the deadly nightshade, cured bladder spasms and asthma; that toothaches could be relieved with a filling of powdered henbane seeds and gum mastic; and that white mustard was not only a tasty condiment but also a powerful healer. They arrived at relatively safe dosages of opium, henbane, and the mandrake (also known as mandragora) for anesthesia, and they derived drugs from many other herbs, such as saffron, thyme, caraway, myrrh and the ever-present garlic and onion. They knew now that life was not eternal, but herbal cures became part of its pursuit.



Figure I-5. Beer drinkers in ancient Mesopotamia, c.2600 BCE. The upper half of this ancient Sumerian cylinder seal shows revelers sucking the liquid through long reeds placed into communal pots. Beer making harks back at least six thousand years. A sludgy beverage made of fermented sugar and various grains (the Sumerians seemed to have preferred barley), its residue is found in pottery from ancient Persia, China, Egypt, India, and from there, on to the Western world. (Cuneiform Digital Library Initiative. University of California at Los Angeles)

On another score, while life was still for the having, the Sumerians learned to enhance their basic diet of cereals, beans and fish with liquors made from various herbs and grains. The gods were said to have fortified themselves for the creation of the world by drinking a potent sesame wine. (Could that explain why ...?) But for common mortals, beer was a necessity of life. They drank it in such quantities that it consumed a large part of their production of grain, and women, for the most part, were its earliest brewers.

Beer was more than a staple. It appeared in the epic of Gilgamesh. It had its own goddess, to whom it sang its fervent hymn: "... you are the one who pours out the filtered beer ... (like) the onrush of the Tigris and the Euphrates." Its recipes were carved in tablets of clay, and its pictographs are among the most common found in Sumerian ruins to date.



Temple records tell us that ordinary workmen received a daily ration of more than two American pints, while senior officers drew more than ten as part of their pay. In fact, Greek legend claims that Dionysus, the very god of revelry, fled in disgust because the Mesopotamians were so addicted to the brew! (Strictly speaking, it was ale that they drank, because hops were not used until the end of the Middle Ages.)

Dionysus might best have contained his outrage, for beer had its plenty of consumers in Persia, China, Egypt and India as well. The ancients had early mastered the art of spirits, along with the craft of medicinal herbs. In time, Greece and Rome, despite their preference for strong wine, would not be exempt from the humbler, more copious brew.

## The sages of India

*The tawny colored, and the pale, the variegated and the red,  
the dusky tinted, and the black – all Plants we  
summon hitherward.*

*I speak to Healing Herbs spreading and bushy, to creepers,  
and to those whose sheath is single,*

*I call for thee the fibrous, and the reed like, and branching  
plants, dear to Vishwa Devas, powerful, giving life to  
men.*

*The conquering strength, the power and might, which ye,  
victorious plants possess,*

*Therewith deliver this man here from this consumption, O ye  
Plants: so I prepare the remedy.*

*~ From a hymn of the Atharva Veda 8.7, first millennium  
BCE. Translated from the original Sanscrit, Shaunakiya  
Edition. (Wikipedia Commons)*

The early Chinese and Sumerian herbalists were not alone. In India too, thousands of years before the Common Era, wise men were probing the source of existence both in the physical world around them and in the inner world of the soul. They tell the story of a poor young servant who begged the physician-sage to teach him the secrets of his trade. “Very well,” he was told, “but first you must go out into the world and bring me a herb that has no healing power.” So the young man wandered the paths of the earth, only to return aged and empty-handed. “I have failed to find such a plant,” he cried. “I am unworthy to be your student.” “Not at all,” came the response. “With the knowledge you have garnered, you now possess our greatest truth.”

Indeed, the sages of India resolved to uncover both the gifts of nature and the nature of humanity, binding their elements together with the cosmos seen and unseen. They created hundreds of herbal remedies and elaborated them with salves

for the spirit. And from this they drew the premise of Indian medicine, not a single science but an amalgam of multiple components. The physical cure was not an end in itself.

According to Hindu philosophy, life was a cycle of creation, eternally repeated and boundless, and matter renewed itself in infinite ways. Alone and fragile, how could man fathom its mysteries? How could his arc be prolonged? Perhaps by harnessing the forces of nature with agents of its own. So herbs of various kinds were turned into gods, and the pious approached them reverently, begging them to heal their wounds.

One plant was Soma, the deity of drink and of pleasure, whose sacred liquid, imbibed by the gods, had helped them place the earth and the stars. Now, on the lips of men, it was Soma, giver of health and prosperity, who freed them from pain and revitalized their being.

Another herb, later called *Rauwolfia serpentina*, was a god who soothed the mind and cured madness, and holy men chewed its snake-like root to glean its hidden messages. And basil, really the wife of the god Vishnu in disguise, was placed on a dead man's chest to transport him into Heaven, while the perfume of its crushed leaves rose from the temple floors, lifting the prayers of the faithful on high.

These are but a few of the herbs whose magic formulas have been preserved in priestly collections. Of course, given their supernatural qualities, the plants, of specific sizes and shapes, had to be collected only in the most inaccessible locations and by a respected dweller of the jungle, one who was pious and clean and who had duly fasted in anticipation. Nature did provide for the afflicted, but the cures were not to be readily at hand.



Figure I-6. The faithful make their way through clouds of incense at a temple in Lhasa, India. The ingredients of incense must be of five categories – earth, air, wood, water and fire – and include such herbs as star anise, myrrh, turmeric, ginger, clove and patchouli. Photo by Nathan Freitas. (Wikipedia Commons)

As herbal practices flourished and oral traditions morphed into writing, wise men and holy men of the second millennium BCE expanded them into a comprehensive system of medication and meditation that culminated in a text called Ayurveda (“Life-Knowledge”). Rooted in the Rig Veda, the most sacred distillation of Hindu teachings, Ayurveda, with its extraordinary botanical and spiritual resources, became and remains the bedrock of traditional Indian medicine.

The underlying theory of Ayurveda is relatively simple: Everything in the universe is made up of five elements: earth, air, fire, water and ether (“ether” is space or emptiness). Joined in various combinations, they form the three life forces that govern our physical makeup and our individual persona. These forces (or “energies”) must be kept carefully in balance, lest our health and total wellbeing become severely

deranged. The prospect is disconcerting, but fortunately there are plants that can reunite us with "the vital roots of existence" and restore our equilibrium. This is where a complex herbal science of taste, substance and psyche comes into play. The practitioner's role is not a single thrust.



Figure I-7. A recent image of Dhavantari, the Ayurvedan god of medicine, by the artist LaLa stands among the ancient temples and luxury hotels of Udaipur, one of India's major cities. (Creative Commons Share-Alike3)

Take the instance of one who suffers from a fiery constitution. The plants that will cool the mind and body are sweet, bitter and astringent, herbs like ginkgo leaf, chamomile, and passion

flower. Accompanied by relaxant activities and ritual, they will treat the deranged subconscious along with its physical manifestation.

A patient who is listless and lacking in stamina will display symptoms of excessive air and ether. This patient must be reconnected with the earth through the sweet, sour or salty tastes of herbs like cinnamon, nutmeg and the root of licorice, along with a fire-building diet of calamus or burdock root, or fenugreek seeds. Each prescription must be individually devised, since the energies that determine our essence have created no two alike.

Through the ancient herbals we learn that ginger and its close relations, turmeric and cardamom, filled many a medical order to maintain the body's "ideal balance" between heat and cold. Nor did they lack mystical properties, for as an old saying relates, "In the currency of the spirit world, ginger is gold." Other tonics made from barley seeds, sesame oil or garlic, cleansed the body and stimulated the flow of secretions. Cinnamon cured fevers and diarrhea. Clove healed the stomach and the lungs. Narcotics such as hemp, opium and aconite served as powerful anesthetics.

We learn that the Indians traded their cinnamon and cinnamon bark, ginger, pomegranate, calamus, sandalwood and the foul-smelling asafoetida to both Mesopotamia and Egypt. We know too that the Mesopotamians used imported Indian hemp as a medicinal plant. Under its Indian name, "charas," which means "the laughter mover" or "the exciter of desire," it became a potent painkiller and an intoxicant of the soothsayers. Later, the Saracens of Arabia took it as a stimulant before their battles, and today it is known by its Arabic name, hashish. In a less concentrated form, it is called marijuana.