
Introduction and Importance of Medicinal Plants and Herbs

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ABSTRACT

Medicinal plants play vital roles in disease prevention and their promotion and use fit into all existing prevention strategies. The researches and utilization of herbal medicine in the treatment of diseases increases every day. Medicinal plants provide major source of molecules with medicinal properties due to presence of natural compounds.

INTRODUCTION

The term “**medicinal plant**” includes various types of plants used in herbalism (“herbology” or “herbal medicine”). It is the use of plants for medicinal purposes, and the study of such uses.

The word “**herb**” has been derived from the Latin word, “*herba*” and an old French word “*herbe*”. Now a days, herb refers to any part of the plant like fruit, seed, stem, bark, flower, leaf, stigma or a root, as well as a non-woody plant. Earlier, the term “herb” was only applied to non-woody plants, including those that come from trees and shrubs. These medicinal plants are also used as food, flavonoid, medicine or perfume and also in certain spiritual activities.

Plants have been used for medicinal purposes long before prehistoric period. Ancient Unani manuscripts Egyptian papyrus and Chinese writings described the use of herbs. Evidence exist that Unani Hakims, Indian Vaidis and European and Mediterranean cultures were using herbs for over 4000 years as medicine. Indigenous cultures such as Rome, Egypt, Iran, Africa and America used herbs in their healing rituals, while other developed traditional medical systems such as Unani, Ayurveda and Chinese Medicine in which herbal therapies were used systematically.

Traditional systems of medicine continue to be widely practised on many accounts. Population rise, inadequate supply of drugs, prohibitive cost of treatments, side effects of several synthetic drugs and development of resistance to currently used drugs for infectious diseases have led to increased emphasis on the use of plant materials as a source of medicines for a wide variety of human ailments.

Among ancient civilisations, India has been known to be rich repository of medicinal plants. The forest in India is the principal repository of large number of medicinal and aromatic plants, which are largely collected as raw materials for manufacture of drugs and perfumery products. About 8,000 herbal remedies have been codified in AYUSH systems in INDIA. Ayurveda, Unani, Siddha and Folk (tribal) medicines are the major systems of indigenous medicines. Among these systems, Ayurveda and Unani Medicine are most developed and widely practised in India.

Recently, WHO (World Health Organization) estimated that 80 percent of people worldwide rely on herbal medicines for some aspect of their primary health care needs. According to WHO, around 21,000 plant species have the potential for being used as medicinal plants.

As per data available over three-quarters of the world population relies mainly on plants and plant extracts for their health care needs. More than 30% of the entire plant species, at one time or other were used for medicinal purposes. It has been estimated, that in developed countries such as United States, plant drugs constitute as much as 25% of the total drugs, while in fast developing countries such as India and China, the contribution is as much as 80%. Thus, the economic importance of medicinal plants is much more to countries such as India than to rest of the world. These countries provide two third of the plants used in modern system of medicine and the health care system of rural population depend on indigenous systems of medicine.

Treatment with medicinal plants is considered very safe as there is no or minimal side effects. These remedies are in sync with nature, which is the biggest advantage. The golden fact is that, use of herbal treatments is independent of any age groups and the sexes.

The ancient scholars only believed that herbs are only solutions to cure a number of health related problems and diseases. They conducted thorough study about the same, experimented to arrive at accurate conclusions about the efficacy of different herbs that have medicinal value. Most of the drugs, thus formulated, are free of side effects or reactions. This is the reason why herbal treatment is growing in popularity across the globe. These herbs that have medicinal quality provide rational means for the treatment of many internal diseases, which are otherwise considered difficult to cure.

Medicinal plants such as *Aloe*, *Tulsi*, *Neem*, *Turmeric* and *Ginger* cure several common ailments. These are considered as home remedies in many parts of the country. It is known fact that lots of consumers are using Basil (*Tulsi*) for making medicines, black tea, in *pooja* and other activities in their day to day life.

In several parts of the world many herbs are used to honour their kings showing it as a symbol of luck. Now, after finding the role of herbs in medicine, lots of consumers started the plantation of tulsi and other medicinal plants in their home gardens.

Medicinal plants are considered as a rich resources of ingredients which can be used in drug development either pharmacopoeial, non- pharmacopoeial or synthetic drugs. A part from that, these plants play a critical role in the development of human cultures around the whole world. Moreover, some plants are considered as important source of nutrition and as a result of that they are recommended for their therapeutic values. Some of these plants include ginger, green tea, walnuts, aloe, pepper and turmeric etc. Some plants and their derivatives are considered as important source for active ingredients which are used in aspirin and toothpaste etc.

Apart from the medicinal uses, herbs are also used in natural dye, pest control, food, perfume, tea and so on. In many countries different kinds of medicinal plants/ herbs are used to keep ants, flies, mice and flee away from homes and offices. Now a days medicinal herbs are important sources for pharmaceutical manufacturing.

Recipes for the treatment of common ailments such as diarrhoea, constipation, hypertension, low sperm count, dysentery and weak penile erection, piles, coated tongue, menstrual

disorders, bronchial asthma, leucorrhoea and fevers are given by the traditional medicine practitioners very effectively.

Over the past two decades, there has been a tremendous increase in the use of herbal medicine; however, there is still a significant lack of research data in this field. Therefore since 1999, WHO has published three volumes of the WHO monographs on selected medicinal plants.

Importance of some herbs with their medicinal values

- 1) Herbs such as black pepper, cinnamon, myrrh, aloe, sandalwood, ginseng, red clover, burdock, bayberry, and safflower are used to heal wounds, sores and boils.
- 2) Basil, Fennel, Chives, Cilantro, Apple Mint, Thyme, Golden Oregano, Variegated Lemon Balm, Rosemary, Variegated Sage are some important medicinal herbs and can be planted in kitchen garden. These herbs are easy to grow, look good, taste and smell amazing and many of them are magnets for bees and butterflies.
- 3) Many herbs are used as blood purifiers to alter or change a long-standing condition by eliminating the metabolic toxins. These are also known as 'blood cleansers'. Certain herbs improve the immunity of the person, thereby reducing conditions such as fever.
- 4) Some herbs are also having antibiotic properties. Turmeric is useful in inhibiting the growth of germs, harmful microbes and bacteria. Turmeric is widely used as a home remedy to heal cut and wounds.
- 5) To reduce fever and the production of heat caused by the condition, certain antipyretic herbs such as *Chirayta*, black pepper, sandal wood and safflower are recommended by traditional Indian medicine practitioners.
- 6) Sandalwood and Cinnamon are great astringents apart from being aromatic. Sandalwood is especially used in arresting the discharge of blood, mucus etc.
- 7) Some herbs are used to neutralize the acid produced by the stomach. Herbs such as marshmallow root and leaf. They serve as antacids. The healthy gastric acid needed for proper digestion is retained by such herbs.
- 8) Indian sages were known to have remedies from plants which act against poisons from animals and snake bites.
- 9) Herbs like Cardamom and Coriander are renowned for their appetizing qualities. Other aromatic herbs such as peppermint, cloves and turmeric add a pleasant aroma to the food, thereby increasing the taste of the meal.
- 10) Some herbs like aloe, sandalwood, turmeric, sheetroj hindi and khare khasak are commonly used as antiseptic and are very high in their medicinal values.
- 11) Ginger and cloves are used in certain cough syrups. They are known for their expectorant property, which promotes the thinning and ejection of mucus from the lungs, trachea and bronchi. Eucalyptus, Cardamom, Wild cherry and cloves are also expectorants.
- 12) Herbs such as Chamomile, Calamus, Ajwain, Basil, Cardamom, Chrysanthemum, Coriander, Fennel, Peppermint and Spearmint, Cinnamon, Ginger and Turmeric are helpful in promoting good blood circulation. Therefore, they are used as cardiac stimulants.
- 13) Certain medicinal herbs have disinfectant property, which destroys disease causing germs. They also inhibit the growth of pathogenic microbes that cause communicable diseases.
- 14) Herbal medicine practitioners recommend calmativ herbs, which provide a soothing effect to the body. They are often used as sedatives.

- 15) Certain aromatic plants such as Aloe, Golden seal, Barberry and Chirayata are used as mild tonics. The bitter taste of such plants reduces toxins in blood. They are helpful in destroying infection as well.
- 16) Certain herbs are used as stimulants to increase the activity of a system or an organ, for example herbs like Cayenne (Lal Mirch, Myrrh, Camphor and Guggul.
- 17) A wide variety of herbs including Giloe, Golden seal, Aloe and Barberry are used as tonics. They can also be nutritive and rejuvenate a healthy as well as diseased individual.
- 18) Honey, turmeric, marshmallow and liquorice can effectively treat a fresh cut and wound. They are termed as vulnerary herbs.

CONCLUSION

As our lifestyle is now getting techno-savvy, we are moving away from nature. While we cannot escape from nature because we are part of nature. As herbs are natural products they are free from side effects, they are comparatively safe, eco-friendly and locally available. Traditionally there are lot of herbs used for the ailments related to different seasons. There is a need to promote them to save the human lives.

These herbal products are today are the symbol of safety in contrast to the synthetic drugs, that are regarded as unsafe to human being and environment. Although herbs had been priced for their medicinal, flavouring and aromatic qualities for centuries, the synthetic products of the modern age surpassed their importance, for a while. However, the blind dependence on synthetics is over and people are returning to the naturals with hope of safety and security. It's time to promote them globally.

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