

What is your Garden Hiding?

You'll be amazed at what some of the plants in your yard could be doing for you

By Glen Herbert

In Robert Louis Stevenson's novel *Kidnapped*, David Balfour takes almost nothing with him on his ill-fated trip through the highlands. He doesn't have a change of pants, a map, or admittedly all that much sense. One thing he does take, however, is a recipe for lily of the valley water, an herbal remedy.

While teens these days don't typically take recipes with them when they travel, you perhaps can't fault David for wanting to have this one along. It's useful for pretty much everything:

"It restores speech to those that have the dumb palsey. It is good against the Gout; it comforts the heart and strengthens the memory; and the flowers, put into a Glasse, close stopt, and set into ane hill of ants for a month, then take it out, and you will find a liquor which comes from the flowers, which keep in a vial; it is good, ill or well, and whether man or woman. ... Likewise for sprains, rub it in; and for the cholic, a great spooneful in the hour."

My garden, most years, is overrun with lily of the valley. Still, I had no idea. I'm not sure that I do now. The recipe is opaque, and perhaps not as focused as a medical therapy should be, but it's not alone in that regard. Traditional remedies, be they young or olde, typically have a whiff of fiction about them, and promise far more than reason could support. The instructions can also be (the ant hill fermentation is a case in point) fiendishly hard to understand or to follow.

Nevertheless, with equal part faith, basic knowledge, and a willing suspension of disbelief, there might be something to some of these remedies. Certainly anyone from David Balfour's time would think so. Were they to look out our gardens, what they would see might look quite a bit more like a pharmacy than it does to us. These are, perhaps, some of the things that would attract their attention:

Dandelion

Whether you like it or not, you probably have dandelion in your garden. Chances are good you could spot one out your window right now. It may not look like much, but some believe it is nothing short of the holy grail of herbal remedies. One enthusiast writes "Dandelion tea is said to help prevent and expel kidney stones ... [and] to stimulate liver and gallbladder activity. The root is believed to affect all forms of secretion and excretion from the body, removing poisons, and it acts as a tonic and a stimulant as well. Dandelion tea is believed to alleviate rheumatism."¹ All that from what we generally consider a weed. Still, if I had any of those things I might be more inclined to head for the walk-in clinic than of the backyard.

¹ Marietta Marshall Marcin, *Herbal Tea Gardens: 22 plants for your enjoyment and well-being*. Storey Books: Vermont, 1999. p.45.

Chamomile

It grows everywhere, and you'd be forgiven for thinking it's daisies, though the flowers are smaller and more abundant. Dried or made into a tea, it is said to prevent aging, aid indigestion, and cure restlessness in children. It's also used for the tea that Pooh drinks in the A. A. Milne stories. The flowers are the serviceable part of the plant. Pick them fresh mixing 1 tablespoon to one cup boiling water and steep for 5 to 8 minutes.

Basil

Have a headache? If you do, you probably aren't all that interested in picking herbs, letting them dry, grinding or chopping them, and making tea. But, let's say you were, or even better let's say that you had some forethought and prepared the leaves in advance, basil would be one of the plants you might look to. Mixed with chamomile and mint and served as hot tea, given a bit of luck you'll be feeling better in no time. The plant won't overwinter in your garden, so if you plan on having a headache this summer, be sure to pick some up at the garden centre and plant it after you've had the last frost of the spring.

Echinacea

While its popularity may be waning a bit these days, a few years ago echinacea was the talk of the town, remedy-wise. My parents were gulping it down and handing it out as gifts. First Nations people chewed the root to aid with toothaches and sore throats, and to cure snakebite. Today it is more typically used to fight bacterial and viral infections, in particular colds and flu. The plant is native to many parts of Canada, and can be very hearty. The flower looks like a pinky/purple daisy, but it's the root were all the good stuff is. It can be boiled to make tea or dried and ground into a powder.

Goldenrod

Left to its own devices, goldenrod would grow everywhere, perhaps even the moon. You've likely weeded it from your garden, and I'll bet you don't know what you're missing. Tea made from dried goldenrod was used by First Nations people and early settlers to help with sore throats, fever, and urinary complaints. The downside is that, for many of us, goldenrod falls into the "what doesn't kill you makes you stronger" category. The pollen is highly allergenic, so harvesting the stuff can be not at all like leisure.

Mint

Cramps, tummy aches, headaches, digestion, nerve trouble ... there's seemingly no end to the medicinal claims of mint. For those lacking a green thumb, it's also virtually impossible to kill. The leaves are the active agent. They are nice in tea, good on lamb, even better crushed in a mojito, and all can be medicinal if you really want them to be.

Parsley

It's everywhere, is great on salads, meat, is essential in tabouleh, and looks nice as a garnish. My mother says that it cures bad breath, and that's why I always eat it whenever a sprig comes my way in a restaurant. That said, I've tested it for bad breath, and my wife says it comes in at a distant second to the mints that come with the bill. It's also believed to help with dropsy (whatever that is), menstrual difficulties (sadly, just for women), and urinary disorders (so far, so good).

Ginkgo

I have a friend who eats leaves of the ginkgo raw, plucked directly from the tree in his front yard. He seems none the worse for it, and perhaps he has even benefited. Some believe it useful in treating age-related disorders including memory loss, senility, and Alzheimer's. The leaves are

most often used after being dried and ground. It isn't a native tree where we live, but these days is a fairly common sight.