

A Woman's Herbal Guide

an unpublished book *by*
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(1942–2001)

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INTRODUCTION

“I am not yet so lost in lexicography, as to forget that words are the daughters of earth, and that things are the sons of heaven.”

From the preface to Dr. Samuel Johnson’s *Dictionary*

Somewhere in the dawn of human history, the first wise woman applied an herb to an injury and observed it stopped the bleeding and promoted faster healing. Six million years ago, the first humans left their remains in the Olduvai Gorge of Africa. The name “Olduvai” is an ancient African name for “*Sansevieria*,” a plant now growing in many American homes. The leaves of the *Sansevieria* are a popular African injury remedy, and the roots are chewed to cure hemorrhoids. Perhaps it was our first herb.

The first medical lore came from observations of sick animals. We don’t trust our own innate wisdom, but we feel that the animals must know. At the time the Psalms of the bible were being written, the hymns of the Atharvaveda were being sung in India. This hymn expresses that belief:

“Well doth the wild bear know a plant,
the mongoose knows the healing herb.
I call to aid this man, the plants
which serpents and Gandharvas know.
Plants of Angirases which hawks,
celestial plants which eagles know.
Plants known to swans and lesser fowl,
plants known to all the birds that fly.
Plants that are known to sylvan beasts,
I call them all to aid this man.”

The second source of early medicine came from the “doctrine of signatures.” A yellow plant was good for yellow diseases, and a red plant was needed to treat the blood. A bitter plant might overcome the bitterness of disease. As anatomy became known, heart-shaped plants treated the heart and liver-shaped plants treated the liver.

A third source came from trial and error. Women found plants that stopped menstrual pain, or reduced bleeding. Midwives found herbs to aid birth and comfort the sick. When the process of birth became the domain of hospitals and doctors, the old traditions were lost.

In 1976 a California woman asked me to write a short summary of the chemistry of medicinal plants. I lost her address, but these notes became the basis of a small book that I prepared for a class I was teaching. Over the years I expanded the notes, and the chapter on woman's herbs grew into the nucleus of this book.

My search for the old medical information turned into some 15 trips all over the United States and Canada. I visited about 40 major libraries ranging from the Library of Congress to Stanford. On a good day I could work my way through ten feet of old medical journals. I literally worked my way from A to Z in the large medical libraries. Much of the interesting herbal work was published in the nineteenth century, but I went through most of the important medical journals of the past three centuries.

My special thanks for help in correcting the botany and pointing out errors goes to Steve Antonow and Arthur Lee Jacobson. I thank Jean Redosevich for providing many good suggestions. Thanks goes to Doris Jones and Anne Winter for their encouragement.

I am not a practicing herbalist, but occasionally friends asked me for advice. It gave me encouragement when my suggestions of a few simple herbs brought relief for migraines, candida, clamidia, lumps in the breast and fertility problems.

Five years before this book came out, I ended up in the hospital with ulcers one night. I knew that I was to blame for the experience. I often worked an eight-hour day on my herb books, and I was working an eight-hour night shift job, while sleeping five hours. I often grabbed coffee and a hamburger before heading to my night job. Comfrey, horsetail, and cabbage juice cleared up the ulcers in two weeks, and they didn't return.

On one of my last visits to Stanford, I had an unusual dream. Time after time I wandered into a dark cave and dug into the debris on the floor. Each trip would result in wonderful arrowheads, stone

knives and pottery. Then a mysterious man met me, and I offered to show him the wonderful treasures. I began to dig in the floor of the cave, but I found it empty. I felt disappointed, so I looked up. Now glass windows had replaced the dark ceiling of the cave and beams of light were illuminating the cave. I knew that the dream was telling me that twenty years of work had ended, and now it was time to shed light on the treasures.

My readers should note that diagnosis is an art that should be done by professionals. All herbs should be used with proper caution by health professionals with experience in this area. This book is not intended to substitute for doctors or experts in health therapy.

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1. HISTORIC GYNECOLOGY

Vente quid levius? Fulgur. [What is lighter than the wind? A feather.]

Quid fulgure? Flamma. [What is lighter than a feather? Fire.]

Flamma quid? Mulier. [What is lighter than fire? A woman.]

Quid mulier? Nihil. [What is lighter than a woman? Nothing.]

An old Latin riddle

“Women were good housekeepers fifty years ago, but she was conspicuous among the best. To see her spotless cuffs and snowy kirtle, one would scarce credit how hard she labored. It was only the well-ordered house and the dustless rooms which proclaimed her constant industry. She made salves and eyewaters, powders and confects [herbal compounds], cordials [heart tonics] and persicoís [peach pit tonic] orange-flower water and a cherry-brandy each in its due season, and all the best. She was wise in herbs and simples. The villages and farm laborers would rather any day have her advice upon their ailments than that of Dr. Jackson of Purbrook, who never mixed a draught under a silver crown . . .”

Arthur Conan Doyle is famous for his Sherlock Holmes books, but this quote comes from his historic novel *Micah Clarke*.

In primitive tribes, men were the hunters and protectors of the family. Women cared for the children and did gathering and gardening. Often they were the healers of the family and sometimes the tribe. This is reflected in Greek mythology. Zeus was concerned the destiny of nations, but Hera, his wife, was the healer.

In the ancient Middle East, there were many monuments to Minerva, the Roman goddess of health. She was said to radiate light from her body and wisdom from her forehead. The Greek sculptor Phidias made an ivory statue of her, which stood in the *Temple of Fortune* in Rome. He made a much larger sculpture, which went to the *Temple of Delphi* in Greece.

Minerva was known under many names. These were Anemobs-goddess of the winds, Axipena- the deceiver, Celeutherea- the goddess of walking and Aphtalmita- the goddess of good eyesight. The Greeks called her Pallas-Athena and the Egyptians knew her as Neither or Isis. The Greek word “Isia” meant “knowledge.” Saint Augustine sought to eliminate her, because he felt that she was part of the old

moon-worshipping cult. Christianity didn't eradicate the healing goddess, they simply substituted the Virgin Mary. The healing which was once done in dream temples, shifted to the churches and monasteries.

Four thousand years ago a sick person might come to an Egyptian temple dedicated to Isis. He or she would bring a white gift and a priestess accompanied the patient to a statue of Isis in the temple. The patient might say: "Isis, wonderful goddess, please heal me. I have been attacked by demons, and now my back hurts." The priestess would speak for Isis, and perhaps recommend an herbal remedy.

On the walls of the tomb of Rameses III near Tutankhamen's tomb is a picture of a father taking his son to Isis to be healed. Isis turns her head away and raises her left hand, which is a sign that the child will die. On another wall is a picture of Isis giving a necklace to a girl having a hard time with teething. She holds the child's hand and looks into the child's sore mouth sympathetically.

The temple of Isis Medica was a training school for healers at Menouthis, Egypt, which is near present day Alexandria. The feast of Isis was celebrated from October 28 to November 1. There was an Iseum at Pompei and in many other major cities. The school was destroyed by the early Christians.

There were three herbs which are identified with Isis. Vervain *Verbena officinalis* was a holy herb used for cleansing temples and purification ceremonies. It was once used frequently in the ancient world, but it is virtually forgotten today. A statue of the Roman goddess Diana found at Nemi, Italy, is embroidered with vervain.

Chamomile *Anthemis pseudocotula* was also sacred to Isis. It was used in malarial fevers, while were common in the Nile delta. It was also used to provoke menstruation. The black coral of the Red Sea was known as the hair of Isis, but it was not used in Medicine.

Myrrh was a costly imported tree gum, but it was mentioned several times in a temple to Isis on the island of Philae in the Nile. A hymn reads: "Oh Isis, giver of life who dwells in the pure island, take to yourself the myrrh which comes from Punt, the lotus fragrance, which issues from your body, that your heart may be glad through it." Another inscription reads: "Princess, great of praise, lady of charm, whose face enjoys the trickling of fresh myrrh."

Why were these herbs considered sacred? My guess is that the sun-like chamomile flowers were compared to the Egyptian sun god Ra. The weedy vervain decreases the frequency and severity of headaches when drunk as a tea. Myrrh was the preferred incense of the ancient world, but it is also a strong immune stimulant.

Isis is usually pictured wearing the lotus, which was a symbol of resurrection in Egypt. Sometimes she wears wheat or barley in her headdress—a symbol of prosperity and fertility.

The *Kahun Papyrus* was buried around -1900, at Medinet el Fayyum, to the south of Cairo, Egypt. It is badly fragmented, but it gives us an idea of gynecology 4,000 years ago. It is written in a mix of red and black ink. One prescription goes like this: “Instruction for a woman suffering in her pubic region and vagina. [in red ink] You should tell her that it is swollen as a result of giving birth. [In black ink] You should prescribe new oil poured into her vagina.”

The Hebrews borrowed many of their medical terms from the Egyptian language. Their gynecology developed even less, probably due to religious prohibitions. A Jewish woman had to be examined by midwives who reported their observations to a doctor or Rabbi, who then made the diagnosis. The priests knew about the anatomy of sacrificial animals at the temples, but they knew almost nothing about human anatomy. They attributed great herbals to Noah and King Solomon, but they were long lost. Some Hebrew medical lore found its way into the Talmud.

The Hebrews divided the woman's period into three categories: menstruation, menstruation with pre-menstrual syndrome, and irregular menstruation. They had no particular interest in treating menstrual disorders; they wanted to know when women were ritually clean or unclean. This was due to a stringent religious sexual code. A woman was considered unclean until she took a ritual baptism seven days after the end of the menstrual period.

The first writing of the world was developed along the Euphrates and Tigris rivers. Gula meaning “great one,” was the healing goddess of ancient Babylon. She had temples in Sin, Emma, Babylon and Boris. She was also called Ninisina, Ninkarrak, Bau and Nintinugga. An Assyrian text reads: “She listens to the supplication of the people,

she provides health; she provides the soothing incantation, the incantation of health. She will untie the bond of trouble, the lingering sickness. She is wise the diviner, the exorcist, the one who finds out everything.” The great scholar Wallace Budge deciphered the names of some of the herbs used by the Babylonians.

The Ayurvedic system of gynecology developed 3,000 years ago in India. The doctors divided diseases into vata- wind disorders, pitta- bile disorders, and kapha- phlegm diseases. Wind diseases included dysmenorrhea (painful menstruation) and amenorrhea (lack of menstruation). Bile diseases included leucorrhea (vaginal infection), miscarriage and menorrhagia (excess or prolonged menstruation). Phlegm disease included itching, growths and cancer. Each medicinal herb was put into a category and used to neutralize the illness.

The historic tradition of Greece began with the Trojan War, which Homer made famous in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. The beautiful Helen of Troy studied medicine in Egypt under Polydamna, where she learned the art of poisoning. When the war ended, Helen added an herb to the wine which deadened pain, and brought forgetfulness to the survivors of the Trojan War. Homer mentions Agameme who: “Understood as many herbs as the wide earth nourishes.”

Queen Artemisia of Caria named the herbs cyclamen, gentian and lysimachia from the kings of Arcadia, Thrace and Ilium. When her husband Mausolus died in -355, his great tomb gave us the word “mausoleum.” The herb artemesia was named after the queen, and varieties were used to prevent abortion or cause it. It was used in dysmenorrhea, amenorrhea and menorrhagia.

Artemesia became the sacred herb of the goddess Diana. The sanctuary at the healing springs at Nemi was dedicated to Diana. Her festival was held there on August 13th. Saint Paul had an encounter with her at Ephesus, when his preaching stirred up an angry crowd, who depended on her pilgrims for business. For two hours they shouted: “Great is Diana of the Ephesians.”

Lymphias the Theban was a famous Greek doctor, who wrote a woman’s medical book, which was lost when fire burned the Library of Augustus. Her material was borrowed by Pliny, Galen and Soranus. There was another gynecologist of the second century before Christ.

This Cleopatra was not the Egyptian queen, but a well known gynecologist. She wrote on woman's medicines and cosmetics. Fragments of her lost books exist in other manuscripts.

Fifty years after the time of Christ, Dioscorides wrote the first complete herbal. Among the gynecological conditions mentioned are swellings, growths, catarrh or flow disorders, ulcerations of the uterus, inflammation of the genitals, ulcers of the vulva, prolapsed or dropped uterus, leucorrhea, sterility, frigidity and menorrhagia. He prescribed decoctions (herbs boiled in water) and infusions (herbs soaked in hot water). He described poultices, which were generally hot wet packs of herbs applied to painful areas. He mentions nearly 150 plants used as emmenagogues, which bring on menstruation. He lists five herbs used to influence the sex of the unborn child.

After the fall of the Roman Empire in +432, medicine became the domain of individual healers, who were often women. The two great epics of Germany were *Gudrun* and *Nibelungenlied*. In *Gudrun*, the wise woman teaches the mighty warrior Wate the art of healing with roots and herbs. In *Tristram and Isolde*, Isolde has a chest of poisons and medicines and knows how to use them. Chaucer describes women in the *Canterbury Tales* who raise herbs and care for the sick.

There are several stories of the divine woman healer. One of the stories of King Arthur's court tells how the king is dying of his wounds. He tells his knights that he will go to Avalon and have his wounds treated by Argante. Even as he speaks, a small boat with two richly adorned women arrives for him. In the Scandinavian countries, Frigga, wife of Odin, lives in the palace of Fensalir. She surrounds herself with a group of divine women. Eira is the one who deals in magic and healing herbs.

In the twelfth century the German spiritual leader Saint Hildegard wrote books on her visions and medicine. In visionary experiences, she received the light and heard the voice of God. People still use her medicines today.

Jacoba Felicie was another great healer of the pre-renaissance era. In +1322, she was tried before the Court of Justice in Paris for practicing medicine without a license. Witnesses spoke of her as a wise compassionate healer, who healed them after the regular doctors

failed. She was fined for the illegal practice of medicine.

During the dark ages, the art of healing shifted to men, and women who healed were suspected of being witches. In +1475 Jean Vincent wrote that those who used herbs for healing did so through a pact with the devil. Around 1590 Gilly Duncan was suspected of witchcraft because she was curing “all such as were troubled or grieved with any kind of sickness or infirmity.” The *Malleus Maleficarum* [Hammer of Witches] was published in +1486, and it meant difficult times for women who stood apart. The author believed that most witches were women, who had been tempted by Satan.

The chief treatment of the ancient gynecologists were wool tampons dipped in oils or honey for treating infections. They treated excess menstrual bleeding with astringents. They used treated tampons to cause menstruation or sterility. There is little knowledge of anatomy and poor descriptions of the symptoms. The doctors had a great deal of dietary theory and advice for every problem. But they didn't test their advice and the ideas were just speculation.

The first medical journals appearing in the eighteenth century marked a new beginning for knowledge. If a doctor's advice didn't work, he would expect somebody else to challenge the advice. The pages of these old journals contain the landmarks of modern gynecology. These are the hysterectomy in 1853, radium treatment in 1898, and the isolation of estrogens in 1924. Hidden in the millions of pages are observations on alternative medicine of great value. Operations and drug therapy received the attention of mainstream medicine, but thousands of observations were made on herbs and alternative healing.

2. ANOREXIA NERVOSA

“Those I put down here have been of great use to me, they have never been unavailable, and can be made everywhere. As I have already said, what is good in this treatise, is that the remedies can be made even when the sick do not have a drugstore nearby. I beg you to use them and you shall be cured with God’s favor, even if the ailments appear incurable.”

Agustin Farfan wrote the *Tractado Breve de Medicina* describing indigenous Mexican medicine in +1580.

Karen Carpenter had everything to live for. Known for her beautiful melodic songs, she was attractive, successful and popular. Weeks before her death, a picture disclosed a woman who was less than half her normal weight. She was hospitalized for anorexia nervosa, but her health was so bad that she didn’t survive. To those who loved her music, and followed her popular career, her death was an unexplained mystery.

Fasting is done in many societies to lose weight, for better health, or as a religious observance. It is often done to mourn the death of a loved one. The Egyptians fasted before going to the temples, and the American Indians fasted to bring about visions. Mohammed asked those who broke their vows to fast for three days.

There is a curious syndrome known as “holy anorexia,” occurring many times in religious literature. Saint Catherine of Siena, Saint Rose of Lima and Saint Collete are among those who existed on minute amounts of food. The faithful knew them as great saints, but doctors think they were really suffering from anorexia nervosa.

In 1689 the English doctor Richard Morton invented the term anorexia, meaning self-starvation. He described the gradual wasting away of the body in the book *Phthisiologia; Seu Exercitationes de Phthisis*. He attributed it to “the destruction of the tones of the nerves.” This was caused by the passions of the mind, unwise drinking and unwholesome air. His remedies were the Balm of Gilead and a powder made from the roots of the wake-robins *Arum maculatum*.

Morton described an 18-year-old girl whose appetite failed. Now she became a skeleton clad with skin. He treated her with vomiting,

iron, tincture of castor, ammonium salts, mineral waters and bitters. She began to get better, then she relapsed and died.

The second case was the son of a minister, who had no signs of illness. He attributed his anorexia to the passions of the mind and studying too hard. He had no benefit from Morton's treatment and he was advised to go to the country and drink fresh milk. He recovered his health by doing this.

In 1868 William Gull rediscovered anorexia nervosa. He found several people starving themselves to death for no apparent reason. He noted that the physical signs were lack of menstruation, a slow pulse and low body temperature. Although the patients were thin, they showed extraordinary energy. The disorder was divided into primary anorexia, in which children eat little and were exceptionally thin. Secondary anorexia or anorexia nervosa is the complete failure of desire for food.

In 1907 Joseph Dejerine provided a graphic description: "It sometimes happens that a physician has patients, and they are more apt to be women, whose appearance is truly shocking. Their eyes are brilliant. Their cheeks are hollow and their cheekbones seem to protrude through the skin. Their withered breasts hang from the walls of the chest. Every rib stands out. Their shoulder blades appear to be loosened from their frame. Every vertebra shows through the skin. The abdominal wall sinks in below the floating ribs and forms a hollow like a basin."

Anorexia nervosa is rare among men; it is almost completely a woman's disorder. It generally occurs between the age of fourteen to twenty-five years of age and seems to be confined to Western Europe and North America. In about a third of the cases, there is psychological trauma connected with it. These can involve conflict with parents, divorce, or the death of a loved one. It may start with being teased about being overweight. The victim begins to diet and never stops. Generally, the person is not mentally abnormal in any way.

Anorexia nervosa can be caused by a disordered digestion. Perhaps the person gets an upset stomach after eating and this creates a psychological condition; "If I eat I'll feel bad, so I'm not eating, so I can continue to feel normal." Something may be wrong with diet or

digestive system, for in about a quarter of the cases the condition was preceded by constipation or diarrhea.

The early nutritionists began to study yeast, for they found that yeast produced vitamins. In 1934 a study on the value of yeast was printed. Yeast often cured constipation, and women who felt tired and weary were said to greatly benefit from yeast. Of the 24 women with little appetite, 21 reported a major improvement in appetite.

Why do we get hungry and want food? Hunger is a product of a fall in blood sugar combined with an increase in saliva and muscular movements of the stomach walls. Pleasant smells and tastes and appetizing foods increase this desire. A well-known tool for increasing the appetite is the drinking of bitters. These are small portions of bitter herbs, such as quinine, gentian, wormwood or centaury, to stimulate the appetite.

Insulin increases the burning of sugars, and by consequence, it should reduce weight. When non-diabetic patients were given insulin, they gained weight. The additional insulin produced the hunger sensation. It lowered blood sugar, which triggered the gastric and biliary secretion, making people want to eat.

A test was done in Brazil on thirty healthy people, who complained about being underweight and had no appetite. Small amounts of insulin were injected once a day. Nearly all of the patients developed a healthy appetite. The test produced an average weight gain of nine pounds in a month. When the insulin was secretly switched to a salt solution, to test the effect, patients complained about their sudden lack of appetite.

The Russian physiologist Ivan Pavlov experimented with conditioned reflexes. By ringing a bell he could induce salivation in dogs, after the dogs had associated the bell with food.

Russian doctors asked themselves: how do we make anorexic children salivate? The herb jaborandi *Pilocarpus microphyllus* or *P. trachylophus* contain the alkaloid pilocarpine. The alkaloid is a strong stimulant of saliva and sweat. It became a popular tonic around 1880, but it was forgotten in 25 years.

The doctors treated 42 anorexic children with pilocarpine. Within a week 39 of them were eating heartily again. With another week of

treatment, all of the children were eating normally.

Alfalfa was a highly important crop associated with the breeding of superior horses. The earliest reference to alfalfa is found in the Greek play *The Knights* by Aristophanes in -424. The line read: "The horses ate the crabs of Corinth as a substitute for the medic [alfalfa]."

In 1915 Doctor Alexander Blackwood announced that alfalfa *Medicago sativa* had proved to be a useful remedy in kidney disease and a good diuretic. He noted that a tincture of alfalfa has a strong effect on the appetite. Ten drops of alfalfa tincture taken three times a day produced a great craving for food even between meals. This was true for both humans and guinea pigs. It also changed the stools from hard lumps to softer stools.

The tonic herbs which stimulate the pancreas may be of great help in anorexia nervosa. The active herbs are teas of water horehound *Lycopus virginicus*, the young leaves of *Phyllanthus sellowianus* and the leaves of *Bougainvillea spectabilis*. The herbs known to reduce blood sugar are kidney bean pods *Phaseolus vulgaris*, blueberry leaves *Vaccinium angustifolium* and the berries of the staghorn sumac *Rhus typhina* = *R. hirta*.

A group of children in an institution had anorexia and didn't care to eat. Many children had nausea, which indicates an internal disorder. When a mixture of garlic, cypress *Cupressus sempervirens* and eucalyptus was given to the children, it produced a marked increase in appetite and weight gain. Anorexia in children doesn't usually lead to anorexia nervosa.

The enzymes of the liver cleanse the blood by breaking down foreign materials, so the kidneys can excrete them. The capillaries in the intestinal walls absorb nutrients in the foods we eat. This blood passes directly to the liver before circulating through the body. When dogs were given the liver damaging chemical sulfapyridine, their food consumption was cut 58%. They had little desire to eat until raw liver was added to their diet. This restored their appetite to normal.

Do liver damage and the resulting inability to cleanse the blood cause anorexia nervosa? A liver stimulating herbal mixture from India was tested on anorexia patients. After taking the herbal compound 80% of the patients began to eat normally.

There are several liver stimulants which deserve attention. The bitter leaves of the artichoke *Cynara scolymus* have long been used in Italian folk medicine for liver conditions. The active principle has been synthesized and is widely used in Italy. The purple-flowered milk thistle *Silybum marianum* is another strong liver tonic. If you should accidentally eat toxic mushrooms in Europe, a preparation of this herb is used to protect the liver from damage, if it is given in time.

In 1937 the French doctor Henry Leclerc treated a woman who had simply stopped eating due to worry and nervousness. Everyone thought that she had TB because she was so thin and pale. Leclerc gave her sixty drops of the alcoholic extract of the milk thistle and tansy mixed together. In a short time she was eating normally.

The amino acids which stimulate the liver may also aid in anorexia. When laboratory rats were given only milk protein, they suffered from liver damage. When given methionine or cysteine the liver returned to normal. Both cysteine and methionine are used to treat enlarged liver resulting from alcoholism. These amino acids are vital to the enzyme function of the liver enzymes.

When there is a deficiency of either cysteine or methionine, rats lose their appetite. Cysteine supplements to deprived rats will not cure appetite loss, but will stop liver damage. When the diet is supplemented with methionine, the appetite returns to normal and rats soon became normal in appearance.

Essential mineral lack may be another cause of anorexia nervosa. A depressed girl was sent to a psychiatrist for several months, but her weight continued to fall until it was only 69 pounds. It was found that the girl could not taste a solution of zinc sulfate, which is unpleasant. The girl was given a supplement of 66 mgs. of zinc sulfate before meals. In two weeks her appetite and feeling improved and she no longer wept under stress. Four months later her weight rose to 98 pounds and the zinc supplement was discontinued. Ten months later she began to lose weight and become depressed. When zinc was taken again, her weight and cheerfulness returned.

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