

## Civil War Medicine at Home

### Great Lakes Military and Civilian Civil War Conference by Stormi Stuler 7th Michigan Volunteer Infantry, Company B, Inc

I have been reenacting with the 7th MI Co. B Infantry since 1993. Reenacting combined several of my life long interests. I have always loved rustic camping, and you don't get much more rustic than reenacting, and cooking over a fire. Well I kind of became our Company's cook. I also have always had a love for plants and herb and how they are used. I started growing herb in the mid 1970s. I studied books and periodicals. My favorite was "Mother Earth New". Every month they had a centerfold that highlighted a plant and told all the things it could be used for. I've never tried any of these cures and remedies but have always found them interesting.

When I talked to my grandmother, who use to live in the hills of Pennsylvania without running water or a phone, she could tell me the same kind of things about home remedies. In yesteryears, all housewives and mothers knew what plants or herbs to use when someone got sick. A lot of everyday thing from that time period were passed from mother to daughter and never written down. It's sometime hard to find out what they did or used because of that. Mothers stopped passing that information along because today we have dozens of Doctors in every town and medicine at our fingertips. That generation of people is mostly gone now and the information is slowly being lost.

If you are doing a civilian or family type impression, it is information like this that lends a note of authenticity and reality to your impression. I have gathered some of the old home remedies and list of plants and their uses for you today.

There is a lot of folklore and witchcraft involved in many of these cures. Which is why I don't recommend actually trying these. They didn't have scientific research or guinea pigs to try these cures out on. They used themselves and family members. If they lived though it they figured it worked. Sometimes they actually came close to or did poison themselves. But this information will make your family impression more believable.

#### Herbs and Plants

**Attachment 1** presents a list of close to 60 different herbs and plants alphabetical order and their medical uses.

**Attachment 2** presents a list of ailments and the cures on a *Herbs and Plant Quick Reference/Remedy Sheet*.

#### The Good, the Bad, and the Funny

There are a few really **Good** plants to have around. For example, Feverfew – for fevers and colds, Slippery Elm – for burns and skin problems, and Yarrow – for wounds, colds, earaches, and tooth aches.

There are some **Bad** plants like May apple, which was used for constipation but is poisonous - that is why it gave you diarrhea.

There are some **Funny** plants ones like Slippery Elm, which is suppose to cure constipation and diarrhea; Mullen leaves worn in the shoes insured conception or protected against it, and Water Lillie's is supposed to be an aphrodisiac because of the suggestive way the flower looks. Another one is carrying Buckeye, which if you carry it in your pocket you would keep from getting hemorrhoids and rheumatism.

### **Superstitions/Wives Tails**

The following are superstitions and "wives tails:"

Eating rhubarb in the spring did the same for people as bears eating berries in the spring after coming out of hibernation.

At Easter time a packet of sulfur from the general store mixed with molasses would thin your blood in preparation for the up coming hot summer weather.

If you were restless, cross and mean, you must have worms.

Planting with the moon phases.

Dill over the door protects against witches

Potatoes get rid of warts (Grandma's cure).

Holly planted near the house would ward off lightening and witchcraft.

Flax's blue flowers were used as protection against witches.

Lavender was sewn into hats to comfort the brain and made into pillow to have good dreams.

Sedum was planted on rooftops to ward off lightening. If it suddenly withered, it meant someone in the house would soon die.

Mullein leave worn in the shoes would insure conception or protect against it. Torches made for the flower stalk repelled witches.

Red Clover was carried by travelers to protect them from witchcraft and evil spirits. That is where the 4-leaf clover for good luck came from.

Rosemary sprigs were worn to improve memory and help baldness.

St. Johns Wort sprigs were worn to protect against witchcraft.

Wear a copper bracelet would help rheumatism.

Caster Oil as a physic would fix anything.

## Other Uses/Miscellaneous

Peeling a dogwood twig can do tooth cleaning and chewing the end to make a brush or rub sage leaves over your teeth and gums to make them feel polished and clean.

Borage has a cooling effect in beverages

Chicory root roasted was a coffee additive or substitute.

Dandelion root roasted was also a coffee substitute.

Bedstraw was used for stuffing beds. It does not get brittle when it dries and it repels insects.

Corn Flower along with wine and alum produced blue ink.

Cow Parsnip ashes were used as a salt substitute.

Dogwood was used during the Civil War as a Quinine substitute when the blockage of southern ports stopped the shipments of cinchona bark, which was the source of Quinine to treat malaria. Flax fibers are spun into linen like material. The oil from the seeds is what makes linseed oil, which is a drying agent in paint and varnish and for oilcloth.

Goldenrod flowers are used for yellow dye.

Burdock leaves were pounded with wine to treat leprosy.

Lavender sachets were added to linens and carried in ladies handkerchiefs.

Mints have been used to freshen breath since the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD.

Motherwort was used for heart palpitations by making a conserve of the young tops and sugar. It also helped with the pain in childbirth.

Mullein leaves were placed in thinly shod shoes in winter to help against cold feet. Yellow hair dye was made from the flower.

Queen Anne's Lace, the little red flower in the middle was eaten for seizures. The seeds were eaten for worms and gas.

Red Clover tea is good for colds and sore throats.

St. Johns Wort tea made of the flowers was used to treat melancholia and madness.

Slippery Elm sap was used as a lubricant in childbirth.

Violet leaf poultices were used to treat skin cancers.

Worms were cured with a spoonful of castor oil and 1 drop of turpentine.

Buttercup salve made of the flower cooked in pork grease or sheep tallow and sugar was put on sores.

Head lice, lard and sulfur were applied over and over again until they were gone.

Seven-year itch was cured with the same recipe as head lice.

Pine tree sap was used for glue or boiled to make turpentine.

Horsetail plants stems when dried were used for scouring pads to clean dishes and pot and pans. For a metal polish make a strong infusion of fresh plant and 2 ½ cups or less of water. Soak at least 2 hours then simmer for 15 minutes and strain. Pour it over the metal or dip it for 5 minutes, allow it to dry and polish with a soft cloth.

Sweet Woodruff has a vanilla smell when dried.

Boils will come to a head faster if you apply ½ a baked onion with the center removed to fit over the boil. Secure in place. Poultice of catnip leaves, plantain leaves or pulverized fenugreek seed will improve healing.

### **Colds**

Rose hips added to tea would make a cold go away faster (Vitamin C).

Elderberry was made into hot toddies by mixing with mulled wine. Syrup from the berries was used for cough and colds. The flower was used as an astringent for skin lotion. The bark and roots were used to make black dye, the leave for green dye and the berries for purple coloring.

Mullein leaves were made into tea and used for chest colds.

Salt water works as a sore throat gargle; the hotter the better.

Cough Syrup was made of a spoonful of granulated honey on a spoon; given to a child to suck on.

Eating raw garlic cloves 3 times a day to protect against colds. My theory on this one is that no one with a cold will come near you.

### **Pesticides/Pets**

Lavender flowers were used as moth repellent.

Bedstraw was scattered thru the house as an insect repellent.

Pennyroyal mint was made into collars for pet to repel ticks and fleas.

Bergamot or Bee Balm is also a pest chaser.

Silver Wormwood keeps moths away from woolens.

Pyrethrum powder tea in a deadly insecticide but is safe for pets and people.

Marigolds repel insects and are good to plant around our garden and doors.

Peppermint- bugs do not like its smell.

A mixture of garlic, bran and molasses will worm your animals.

Goats love garlic! This is just a piece of odd information.

Sprigs of pennyroyal, rue or tansy placed on shelves deter ants. Disturb the leaves occasionally to release more scent.

Flies are deterred by elder, lavender, mint, mugwort, peppermint, pennyroyal, rue and southernwood. Hanging bundle of these on doors and windowsills will keep them from coming in.

Burn leaves of fleabane, mugwort, or wormwood on low embers of an open fire inside the house to destroy fleas and lice. Avoid breathing the fumes.

Mice do not like mint and tansy. Store these in your cupboards.

Wrap dried nettle leaves around stored apples, pears, root vegetables and cheese to keep pest away.

Wrap figs in mullein leaves to preserve them longer.

Bundles for the following herbs strewn on the floor or placed in bundles under doormats carpet or on porches will repel fleas, lice moths and other pests. They also mask unsavory odors.

Balm, basil, chamomile, costmary, cowslip, daisies, fennel, germander, hop, marjoram, meadowsweet, mint, pennyroyal, pine, rose, rosemary, sage, southernwood, sweet flag, sweet woodruff, tansy, thyme, sweet violet or winter savory.

Weevils will not invade flour and rice if you place a couple of bay leaves in the bin.

## **Recipes**

Mustard Plaster (used for pulmonary ailments) - mustard seed, flour and water. Make into a paste and apply to chest and cover with cloth. If it burns the skin, put it between two pieces of cloth and then apply.

Hairspray use distilled extract from bark, twigs and leaves of the Witch Hazel tree and mix it with alcohol and water. Comb through hair and it will hold its style when it dries.

Spring Tonic 1 – 2 teaspoons of dried dandelion leaves and 1 cup of boiling water. It is said to clean the blood that has grown sluggish over the winter. A cup or ½ cup taken ½ hour before eating stimulates the gastric secretions, increasing the desire to eat and helping digestion.

Hyssop Cough Syrup 1 cup of honey, ¼ cup water, 2 tablespoons dried flowering hyssop tops, and 1-teaspoon aniseed. Boil honey and water to the consistency of pancake syrup and add crushed hyssop tops and aniseeds and simmer 30 minutes. Pour into jar and screw on lid.

Horehound Cough Drops 1 cup boiling water,  $\frac{3}{4}$  cup dried horehound, 2 cups sugar. Boil to the brittle threat stage and pour onto a greased surface. Score with knife into small squares. When it is cooled, break it on scored lines.

Raspberry Leaf Sore Throat Gargle 1 tablespoon dried raspberry leaves, 2 cups boiling water and 1 to 3 teaspoons of honey. Steep leaves in water for 10 minutes and strain. Sweeten with honey and cold before use. Throw out after 3 days.

Cold relief drink was made of hot lemonade and baking soda

Witch Hazel Lotion (for itching and insect bites)  $\frac{1}{4}$  cup of chopped witch hazel leaves or 2 tablespoons of chopped twigs and bark, 2 cups water and  $\frac{1}{2}$  cup rubbing alcohol. Simmer the leaves in water for 15 minutes or the twigs and bark for 30 minutes then add rubbing alcohol. Apply to itchy skin when cool. Throw out after 3 or 4 days.

Oatmeal Paste (for itchy skin) 2 teaspoons crushed or powdered oatmeal and 1-2 tablespoons of warm water.

Sore Muscle Liniment 1 cup of vinegar and  $\frac{1}{2}$  teaspoon of any of the following: wintergreen mint oil, peppermint oil, mustard or cayenne pepper essence. Rub on sore muscle sparingly.

Black Ink 8 Oz of bruised oak galls, 2  $\frac{1}{2}$  quart of boiling water, 1  $\frac{1}{2}$  oz. Gum Arabic and 3 oz. Sulfate of iron (ferrous sulfate) Steep galls for 24 hours and strain. Add gum and sulfate. Bottle and label. This is taken from an eleventh-century recipe.

Red Ink take 1 cup of field poppy petals and pour a small amount of boiling water on them, just enough to cover the petals. Steep over night. Add 15 percent isopropyl alcohol to preserve then strain and bottle.

Breastfeeding (to stimulate milk flow) make an infusion of leave and seeds of borage, dill seed, aniseed, and fennel seed. Take 3 times a day.

Bronchitis use equal parts coltsfoot, horehound and aniseed (it doesn't say how to use it)

Cold Fighting Elixir at the first sign of a cold take a mixture of  $\frac{1}{2}$  teaspoon elderflower, peppermint and yarrow infused in 1 cup of boiling waster for 20 minutes. Stain and add honey and  $\frac{1}{4}$  teaspoon of cayenne pepper.

Or

Take 9 horehound leaves and chop finely and mix with 1 tablespoon of honey. Repeat as necessary.

Eye Refreshers use equal parts chamomile, calendula and cornflower and mallow leaves and make a strong decoction. Heat the decoction and add 6 tablespoons of witch hazel. Soak cloth in it and place on closed eyes.

Toothpaste 1 teaspoon of bicarbonate of soda, charcoal or powdered strawberry root and 2 drops of peppermint oil. Add enough water to make a paste.

## **Reference Books**

“The Complete Book of Herbs: A practical guide to growing & use herbs.” By Lesley Bremness, Viking Studio Books 1988

“Magic and Medicine of Plants” Readers Digest 1986

“The World of Herb & Spices” Ortho Books 1978