

MEDICINAL HERBS.

BY THE LADY GEORGINA VERNON.



Do not let this prosaic title frighten you, for the work connected with herbs is altogether interesting and delightful, whether you cultivate the herbs in your garden, or go and seek for them, basket and knife in hand, up and down the green lanes, on the breezy uplands and down by the river's bank, and bringing them home concoct healing ointment and salves, strengthening decoctions and all the army of "sovereign remedies" spoken of by the ancient herbalists.

I do not wish to dwell upon the medicines of the chemist's shop, even if made of herbs, nor to describe senna tea, nor rhubarb root in all their nauseousness! But I will merely give a slight sketch first of the herbs which we may easily grow in our gardens—where, I hope, there is already a herbary for pot-herbs—and then we will roam out into the country and pick some of the many plants which flourish and prosper best when left in their own self-chosen habitat.

In our medicinal herbary we will plant the following:—Tree mallow, camomile, horehound, hyssop, marigold, horse-radish, rue, all the various "mentha" tribe, peppermint, spearmint, pennyroyal (*Mentha pulegio*), balm and poppies, and in them we shall find the principal garden herbs for daily requirements.

Mallow is most useful. You pick the large leaves and simmer slowly to make poultices or fomentations for swellings or inflamed surfaces. It is singularly healing, and each garden should possess a goodly plantation of this plant. It is easily killed by frost, but when once established young plants spring up year by year.

Camomile, so well known for soothing poultices in toothache, is also an excellent tonic when taken as a cold infusion, fasting in the morning. For feverish colds or chills, it should be taken as a hot decoction at bedtime, and produces abundant perspiration and lessens fever. Two or three flowers infused in water make a strengthening eye lotion.

The two next plants, horehound and hyssop, are used by our country people for colds and hoarseness; and in this way, take a handful of the leaves of each, with a few leaves of rue, make a strong infusion by pouring on boiling water, sweeten with honey, and drink at bedtime. Hyssop can be used with advantage as a gargle or as a green ointment for wounds, as it possesses very healing qualities.

Marigolds with their bright blossoms are well-known, and they are much valued to form a drink to be taken as a remedy in measles. The flowers should be dried in the shade, and can be kept for use at any time.

Horse-radish, which is generally only looked upon as an accompaniment to roast beef, is valuable as a cure for hoarseness. Scrape two drams of the root, cover with boiling water and infuse with an equal weight of brown sugar. Let it stand for a few hours, and then take an occasional teaspoonful, which will cure the most obstinate hoarseness. The root scraped and applied on linen to a rheumatic joint eases the pain.

Rue (*Ruta graveolens*) was a very favourite remedy with old herbalists for a host of diseases. It is a stimulant and anti-spasmodic, but the taste is strong and disagreeable. It is a most useful medicine for fowls, particularly for the roup, and can be given to them chopped small and mixed with butter.

Next on my list come the various plants of the "mentha" tribe—peppermint, spearmint, balm, and pennyroyal. All these are of an aromatic and carminative nature. They are most useful when distilled, but if we have not the means of preparing them thus they can be used as a decoction, in the way I have described before, namely, pouring boiling water on a handful of the leaves. These plants can all be picked green, carefully dried, and hung up in muslin bags for winter use. The various species of mint should all be cultivated; they prefer rather a moist soil, and can be propagated by dividing the roots in February or March. The old plants should be cut down at the approach of winter.

Poppies should be grown for the sake of their anodyne properties, as the heads of seeds—which should be picked when ripe—are useful for soothing pain, particularly used in hot fomentations.

I have mentioned some of the best herbs to cultivate in our gardens, and so we will go out into the fields and lanes to search for those wild plants which love best to grow in their natural homes.

The first plant which claims our notice is the common daisy, from which a most useful remedy for bruises and sprains can be made. Pick the blossoms in the early summer, some dry morning, pound them thoroughly in a clean mortar, then turn the mass into a coarse muslin or sieve, strain out the juice, and add to the quantity one-third of pure spirits of wine. Let it stand a few hours, and then if it appears thick, and the sediment has not all fallen to the bottom, add a little more spirits of wine. This preparation is called "bellis." It should be allowed to stand till winter, then strained and is fit for use. The lotion should now be of a clear, brown colour, and should be applied to the part affected by a linen rag steeped in the lotion. It is an excellent and a safe substitute for arnica.

We shall probably not go far without finding a bunch of nettles growing. Nettle tea is a specific for skin diseases or any impurities of the blood. And here let me remark, that young nettles picked in early May make the most delicious substitute for spinach, prepared in the same way, or can be made into a paysanne soup, such as would surprise a *chef de cuisine* by its velvety consistency and piquant flavour. A plant of which a decoction is esteemed serviceable in skin complaints and used much in the same way as nettles, is the common cleavers or *Gallium aparine*, which you will see clinging up the hedges with its long weak stems and many whorls of leaves; this plant is considered of great use by poultry fanciers, and is given chopped small to young turkeys with much advantage.

Now if we go on further along these tangled hedgerows we shall find much food for our collecting basket. First pick some bunches of the sweet wild violet leaves and flowers; from them you can make a delightful green salve for applying to inflamed surfaces, although I have sometimes found it more efficacious to simply simmer a handful in milk and then apply as a poultice. A little further on, by

this deep ditch, growing in the moist ground, you may notice some plants of comfrey, *Symphytum officinal*, with its rough leaves and purple hanging flowers. The virtues of this plant are manifold, but the root is the part which is usually gathered; this is good for wounds or cuts, when bruised and laid on them, and it is said to relieve the pain of gout either by making a plaster of the bruised leaves, or of the roots crushed, spread upon linen and bound on the affected part.

Another plant you may very likely find growing here on the shady moist side of a hedgerow is Solomon's seal or polygonatum; the roots of this are used very much in the same way as the roots of the comfrey, and are especially good in relieving bruises.

Amongst the tall grass and brambles of the hedge side you will see there are several sorts of St. John's wort or hypericum growing; but the one we now require is the sort named perforatum, and you can tell it by picking a leaf and holding it against the light, when it will appear as if full of pinholes; from the flowers of this plant a most useful red oil can be made. Pick a good handful of the golden flowers and put in a wide-mouthed bottle, cover with sweet olive oil and tie the top down with a bladder, then place the bottle where the sun will shine on it, and gradually you will see that the oil will change to a deep red colour, and then it is fit for use. The oil should be strained off and be used as a preventive of bed sores or for healing wounds. It should be applied with a feather. This same red oil also makes a healing ointment thus: Melt in a pipkin two drams of spermaceti, four drams of white wax, and three ounces and a half of the red oil. This will be found an invaluable ointment.

As we wander on along the lane in our search for plants, we pass a patch of once cultivated ground, and there we shall find an abundant supply of chickweed and groundsel, from which one of the best of the cooling green ointments can be made by simmering the whole plants (equal parts of each) in pure lard till the juice is extracted, then squeeze well through muslin into a basin and stir gently till it becomes cool.

All round in the tall hedges are growing wild roses in all their summer beauty, and in a short time, when the flowers are succeeded by scarlet hips, one of the most valuable cures for tightness on the chest or lungs can be made. The hips should be picked when dry, and the tiresome work of taking out all the little hairy seeds thoroughly done. Then place the hips in a saucepan with three-quarters of a pound of sugar to each pound of hips and a very little water. Let it boil gently for about an hour till the fruit is tender, and then pass it as a syrup through a hair sieve. The sweet fragrant jelly that results is of the greatest use in all cases of cold or hoarseness.

Now we must search on some old shed or wall for the common houseleek or *Sempervivum tectorum*. The thick fleshy leaves should be crushed with cream, and gives immediate relief in burns or scalds.

I fear I must now end this short paper, and I feel that I have only given a very slight glimpse into the world of herbs; but it may lead some of my readers to search for themselves amongst the treasures of our fields and lanes, and to decide with some of my country friends that such simple remedies as I have described are "better nor physic."