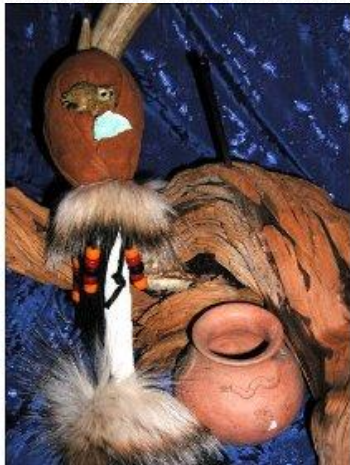


Medicinal Plants of the American Indians

Partnership for Environmental Education and Rural Health
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American Indian Medicine Practice

- The meaning of the term medicine to an American Indian is quite different from that which is ordinarily held by modern societies.
- To most American Indians, medicine signifies an array of ideas and concepts rather than remedies and treatment alone.



American Indian Medicine Practice

- There are variations in healing procedure from tribe to tribe and in different cultural areas. However, there are some methods which are nearly universal.
- Common methods of treatment include prayer, chanting, music, herbalism, counseling, and ceremony.



Herbs as Medicine

- The herbs employed by the medicine men are believed to derive their strength from the ceremonies performed to make them powerful.
- “Like cures like” was the essence of their herbal belief. Yellow plants are good for jaundice; red ones are good for the blood.



American Indian medicine bags

Herbs as Medicine

- Some part of the plant might resemble the organ of the body it is designed to cure.
- The use of wormroot for worms, snakeroot for fits, elm bark is used for bleeding lungs because of its slippery quality and bloodroot is used to prevent bleeding.



Wormroot



Snakeroot



Elm Bark



Bloodroot

Herbs as Medicine

- The Indians also commonly believed that certain roots or plants were beneficial to the system because they are distasteful and injurious to the demons causing disease in the host body.
- Foul-tasting medicines, emetics, and purges are often used.

Herbs as Medicine

- There are hundreds of plants that were used by Native Americans as medicines.
- Discussion of all of them is beyond the scope of this lecture. The most common and widely used plants are discussed.

Barberry



- *Barberis* genus
- Anthropologists believe in a ritual practice or sacred object, especially by Native Americans that it works as a supernatural power or as preventive or remedy of illness.
- It is the most widely used drug in Homeopathic system of medicine for kidney pain and for removal of kidney stones

Candle Bush



- *Cassia alata*
- Leaves or sap are used to treat fungal infections such as ringworm. They contain a fungicide, chrysophanic acid.
- Besides skin diseases, it is also used to treat a wide range of ailments from stomach problems, fever, asthma to snake bite and venereal diseases (syphilis, gonorrhoea).

Horsemint



- *Monarda* genus
- Long history of use as a medicinal plants by many Native Americans including the Blackfeet, Menominee, Ojibwa, Winnebago and others.
- Used for skin infections and minor wounds infections caused by dental caries and gingivitis excessive flatulence

Cascara Buckthorn

- *Rhamnus purshiana*
- The dried, aged bark of this tree has been used continually for at least 1,000 years by both native and European settlers as a laxative natural medicine.



Cinchona

- *Cinchona sp.*
- The bark of trees in this genus is the source of a variety of alkaloids, the most familiar of which is quinine, an anti-fever agent especially useful in treating malaria.
- Native Americans used it for fever and chill, that may be associated with malaria.



Juniper



- *Juniperus sp.*
- Juniper berries were used by American Indians as a herbal remedy for urinary tract infections as well as a female contraceptives.
- Western tribes combined the berries of *Juniperus communis* with *Barberis* root bark in a herbal tea to treat diabetes.

Willow



- Salix sp.
- Native Americans across the American continent relied on it as a staple of their medical treatments.
- The leaves and bark of the willow tree contain salicylic acid, the precursor to aspirin.

Dogwood



- *Cornus florida*
- Native Americans used dogwood bark for variety of illnesses.
- A drink can be made from the bark, flowers and fruit to reduce fever and relieve chills.
- It can also be used as a remedy for colic.

Geranium



- Geranium sp.
- Geranium roots has astringent effects.
- It was used to treat thrush, a contagious disease caused by a fungus, affects mostly infants and children.

Ginseng

- *Panax quinquefolium*
- Ginseng root was used by native Americans for cramps, menstrual problems, headaches, and stroke.
- It was taken as a tonic to increase mental powers, prevent shock, and a treatment for asthma and emphysema.



Wormseed



- *Chenopodium ambrosioides*
- For centuries, the Maya of Central America used Wormseed to expel worms, and hence its name. Aztecs used the plant to treat asthma and dysentery.
- The Catawaba peoples of the US used the plant for poultices to detoxify snake bites and other poisonings.

White Hellebore

- *Veratrum viride*
- It is a highly toxic plant that was widely employed medicinally by several native North American Indian tribes who used it mainly externally in the treatment of wounds and pain.



Greek Valerian



- *Polemonium reptans*
- RANGE: Northeastern United States, south to Georgia and west to Minnesota and Oklahoma
- Native Americans used the root for piles or hemorrhoids, to induce sweating and vomiting, to treat eczema (inflammation of the epidermis).

Elderberry



- *Sambucus canadensis*
- Native North American tribes used it to treat a wide range of complaints like cold, consumption, headache, indigestion etc.
- All parts of the elderberry plant are considered to be a valuable healing plant in many folk medicine traditions.

Angelica

- *Angelica atropurpurea*
- Native to eastern North America.
- Angelica was held in high esteem by Indians in Arkansas, who always carried it in their medicine bags and mixed it with tobacco for smoking.
- Relieves menstrual discomfort, minimizes symptoms of menopause, treats colds and other respiratory problems, prevents arthritis and combats certain cancers.



Witch Hazel



- *Hamamelis virginiana*
- Although eastern American Indians have used witch hazel to treat a variety of conditions, the Chippewa used it specifically to treat sore, inflamed, or infected eyes.
- After colonists learned its importance from the Indians, its use for healing spread to Europe

Pipsissewa



- *Chimaphila umbellata*
- Close to a dozen native tribes are documented to have used Pipsissewa as medicine.
- The use ranges from treating backache, sore eyes, gonorrhoea, blisters, sore muscles, leg and foot swelling etc.
- It is regarded as blood purifier and to aid internal healing.

Balsam Fir

- *Abies balsamea*
- North American Indian tribes used it as an antiseptic healing agent applied externally to wounds, sores, bites etc.
- It was used as an inhalant to treat headaches and was also taken internally to treat colds, sore throats and various other complaints.
- Excellent for Christmas tree.



Arrow wood



- *Viburnum dentatum*
- The Ojibwa and Menominee Indians use the inner bark in a decoction for cramps.
- Ojibwa also mix arrow wood and the bark of the alder (*Alnus incana*) in preparing a tea to drink to induce vomiting.

Bloodroot



- *Sanguinaria canadensis*
- The red juice from the root was a very popular remedy among Plains Indians for sore throats, respiratory problems, and growths on the skin.
- American Indians used the root for rheumatism, asthma, bronchitis, lung ailments, laryngitis and fevers.