ANNA’S HERBAL

An Education in the Healing Power of Herbs

Geraldine Brooks, YEAR OF WONDERS

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Anna Frith and Elinor Mompellion take a courageous step toward healing their stricken village when they decide to tap into the healing properties of common herbs:

“We saw our work as having two natures: the one, to ease the suffering of the afflicted, and the other, more important but far less certain in its outcome, to bolster up the defenses of the well” (YW 165).
Late 17\textsuperscript{th} century English herbal knowledge combined traditional, time-honored “wise-woman” lore with the ancient advice of such 10\textsuperscript{th} century physicians as Dioscorides and Avicenna.
This is a sample leaf from one of many manuscripts of the *Materia Medica* of Dioscorides. The herb depicted is the *Bramble*, or blackberry.

**Figure 1.** Dioscorides, *De Materia Medica*. Osborn, David K. “Dioscorides: Master Herbalist, Father of Pharmacy.” *Who’s Who in Greek Medicine*. 2010. Greek Medicine.net. 5 Oct. 2011

Well before 1666, a number of English herbals had appeared, among them John Gerard’s *Herball* (1597), John Parkinson’s *Paradisi in Sole* (1629), and Nicholas Culpeper’s *The English Physician* (1652). These herbals, although enjoying wide popularity, may not have been available in remote villages such as Eyam.
The first edition of Gerard’s *Herball* appeared in 1597.

**Figure 2.** “John Gerard – Herbalist and Scoundrel.” *Growing Hermione’s Garden.*
John Parkinson’s 1629 edition of *Paradisi in Sole* earned him the title of *Botanicus Regius Primarius* to King Charles I.

**Figure 3.** Rohde, Eleanor Sinclair. *The Old English Herbals.* 6 Sept. 2010. Project Gutenberg. 5 Oct. 2011. 
http://www.gutenberg.org/files/33654/33654-h/33654-h.htm#chap06.
The first printing of Culpeper’s *The English Physician* appeared in 1652.

Avicenna’s *Canon of Medicine* had been translated from Arabic into Latin as early as the 12th century. Numerous Latin translations of his five-volume treatise were available in Europe by the middle of the 17th century, primarily in the medical universities.

In Michael Mompellion’s library, Anna and Elinor are fortunate to find a volume containing the work of this 10th century Arab physician to help them determine how to use the various herbs left behind by village healers Mem and Anys Gowdie.

Later, Anna takes this Latin volume with her to Oran. She learns ultimately to read Avicenna’s (Ibn Sina’s) writings in the original Arabic.
This is the opening leaf to a 15th century Arabic manuscript of Avicenna’s *Canon of Medicine*.

**Figure 5.** “Catalogue: Medical Encyclopedias.” *Islamic Medical Manuscripts at the National Library of Medicine.* 12 June 2008. U.S. National Library of Medicine. 5 Oct. 2011

Guided by her recollection of some of the Gowdies’ remedies, along with her own intuition and common sense, Anna learns to apply herbs in a variety of ways, progressing from simple **infusions** and **decoctions** to more complex **salves**, **syrups**, and **ointments**.
“That morning I found [Mrs. Mompellion] on her knees, deadheading the daisies. ‘Good morning, Anna,’ she said as she saw me. ‘Did you know that the tea made of this unassuming little flower serves to cool a fever?’” (YW 36)
Infusion is by far the simplest method of using an herb. Typically the preparer has already dried the part of the herb to be used – leaves, bark, or root – and now places an amount of it in a drinking vessel. She then pours hot-to-boiling water over it and lets the herbal tea steep for a few minutes until it reaches sufficient strength.
DAISY (Day’s Eye, Lawn Daisy, English Daisy; Bellis perennis)

Gerard recommends the leaves and roots of Daisy for fevers; Mrs. Grieve’s A Modern Herbal (1931), notes that today’s applications have not changed.

“...the smoke was sweet-scented, for the Gowdies always burned rosemary, which they said purified the air of any sickness that ailing villagers might unwittingly carry when coming there for help.”
(YW 51)
METHOD USED: SMOKE

The herbal practitioner lights a small bundle of the dried twigs or stems of an herb and “smokes” or “smudges” an area that needs to be cleansed of evil, negativity, or illness. Herbs whose natural fragrance is particularly pungent, such as sage, cedar, juniper, or rosemary, would have the greatest protective power.
ROSEMARY (*Rosmarinus officinalis*)

*Rosemary* had been burned in sickrooms since ancient times, according to Mrs. Grieve.

“Anys knelt now amidst a clump of glossy green stems. Each tall stalk held a cluster of buds opening into blooms of midnight-blue. She was digging at the roots ... ‘It is a handsome plant,’ I said.

‘Handsome – and potent,’ she replied. ‘They call it wolf’s bane, but it is bane to more than those poor creatures. Eat a small piece of this root and you will be dead by nightfall.’

‘Why do you have it here, then?’ ...

“The wort, ground and mixed with oils, makes a very good rub for aching joints...’” (YW 51-52)
METHOD USED: OINTMENT

The herbalist makes an ointment by blending the dried root or leaves of an herb with an oil as a carrier. Alternatively, she may prepare the ointment using a decoction or infusion of a single herb or combination of herbs.

CAUTION: Wolf’s Bane (also known as Monkshood or Aconite) is highly toxic. Do not use this herb.
WOLF’S BANE (*Monkshood; Aconitum napellus*)

Although Gerard and Mrs. Grieve note that a liniment made from this herb eases rheumatism, all parts of *Monkshood* are poisonous. **DO NOT USE.**


“[Anys] handed me a glass of strong-smelling brew...It was an unappealing shade of pale green, with an even paler froth atop it. ‘Nettle beer. It will strengthen your blood,’ Anys said. ‘All women should drink it daily.’ The flavor, as I sipped, was mild and not unpleasant, while the effect on my tired body was refreshing.” (YW 52-53)
An herb, water, sugar, yeast, and a little bit of time...these ingredients produce a fermented drink that keeps longer than an herbal infusion. Less labor-intensive and exacting than wine-making, brewing beer is a fairly simple way not only to preserve an herb’s properties but to ensure that those in need of healing would look forward to taking their medicine.
Prized for its astringent properties, Nettle has been used since early times as a tonic, a stimulant, a blood-purifier, and a remedy against ague.

“...[Anys] said, ‘Sometimes a woman needs a draught of nettle beer to wake her up, and sometimes she needs a dish of valerian tea to calm her down.’”
(YW 54)
METHOD USED: INFUSION (again)

The herbalist continues to rely upon simple preparations to achieve a particular result.
VALERIAN (Garden Heliotrope; Valeriana officinalis)

Valerian is still used today as a relaxant and sleep aid.

“In the morning, Anys brought a cordial that she said was decocted from the tops of **feverfew** with a little **wormwood** in sugared sack.”  (YW 82)
METHOD USED: DECOCTION

The herbal practitioner who wants to make a stronger product than an herbal infusion will boil an amount of dried herb in water for a length of time. She will mix an amount of the resulting decoction with a sweet liquid such as wine or cordial to make the medicine more palatable.
FEVERFEW (Febrifuge Plant; Chrysanthemum parthenium)

Feverfew receives its name from the Latin *febrifuge*, which means literally to put a fever to flight.

WORMWOOD (Artemisia absinthium)

A very bitter herb, Wormwood historically has been used to stimulate the appetite and to combat fever and debilitation.

“[Anys] had also brought a cooling salve fragrant of mint, and she asked me if she might apply it to the child to lower his fever.” (YW 82-83)
METHOD USED: SALVE

Making a salve is similar to making an infusion, except that instead of using water as the “carrier,” the herbal practitioner will use a fat or a wax, such as beeswax. She will mix the leaves or roots of an herb with the carrier and heat or boil the mixture to ensure that the herb’s properties leach into it. The product is intended for external rather than internal use.
MINT (Peppermint; Mentha piperita)

Peppermint, used externally, has cooling and anesthetic properties.

“[Mem Gowdie] had asked, when she was still able to speak, for a comfrey salve on her wounded face.” (YW 95)
The herbal practitioner can use safely a wide variety of herbs in salves or ointments that could be potentially harmful if taken internally.
COMFREY (*Symphytum officinale*)

Also known as “Farmer’s Friend,” **Comfrey** is still used in soothing skin preparations. Ironically, it can be carcinogenic if taken internally, but has cancer-fighting qualities in external applications.

“I have here some poppy if her pain is great.’

“I shook my head at that. ‘Mrs. Mompellion, I do not think we should give her poppy, for labor is not called labor by chance. A woman must do much real work to get her baby born. We would be sore pressed if she were fallen into a poppy stupor.’” (YW 119)
METHOD USED (but rejected): TINCTURE

The herbalist makes a tincture by steeping the part of the herb to be used – in this case, resin from the seed-heads of the opium poppy – in potable alcohol for a few weeks. The product can be used on its own or may be added to another liquid.
Anna at this point resists the temptation to use poppy to relieve a villager’s labor pains. Later, however, she makes herself a tea from some poppy resin stolen from Elinor Mompellion. The resulting somnolence takes her away – temporarily – not only from the suffering all around her, but from her own deep grief.
POPPY (Opium Poppy; Papaver somniferum)

The latex extracted from unripe Poppy heads has been valued for its pain-relieving, sedating, and mind-altering qualities. Modern opiates include codeine and morphine.

“Something brushed my face and I gasped, but it was just a frond of meadowsweet that had loosed itself from a bunch hanging by the door.” (YW 144)
METHOD USED: STREWING

The herbalist hangs bunches of aromatic herbs such as lavender, rosemary, mint, or meadowsweet to dry. The sweet fragrance of their branches would freshen stale household air. Meadowsweet, commonly used in infusions to combat a number of ailments, was appreciated most for its scent, a combination of almond and wintergreen.
MEADOWSWEET (*Queen of the Meadow; Spiraea filipendula*)

One of three herbs prized by the Druids, *Meadowsweet* was used not only as an air-freshener, but to treat diarrhea and ague. Mrs. Grieve indicates that it is still used against fevers.


“[Mrs. Mompellion] stood up then, reached into a pipkin in the corner, and measured a quantity of crumbled chamomile into a pot. The kettle hanging in the hearth had begun to steam. From it, she poured just enough water to make a pungent tea.” (YW 147)
What method is Mrs. Mompellion using to make her chamomile tea?
CHAMOMILE (Ground Apple; Anthemis nobilis)

Chamomile is still valued as a mild sedative, tonic, and stomach-soother.

“Eventually we discovered that the best ... was a volume by one Avicenna, a Musalman doctor who, many years since, had set down all his learning in a vast canon... *Nettle* for the blood. *Starwort* and *violet* leaves for the lungs. *Silverweed* to cool a fever. *Cress* for the stomach. The worts of *blow-ball* for the liver, *bat-weed* for the glands, and *vervain* for the throat.” (YW 154-155)
These herbs would be known as “simples;” that is, the practitioner uses only one herb at a time, regardless of preparation method, for a single purpose.
STARWORT (Chickweed, Starweed; Stellaria media)

The humble Chickweed has been used in infusions to relieve coughs.

VIOLET (Sweet Violet; Viola odorata)

Culpeper notes that Violet is efficacious against diseases of the lungs; according to Mrs. Grieve, this herb is still used to relieve coughs.

SILVERWEED (Potentilla, Goosewort; Potentilla anserina)

Historically used as a treatment for ague, Silverweed remains a valuable febrifuge.

CRESS (Watercress; Sisymbrium nasturtium aquatica)

Watercress, another of the Druids’ most sacred herbs, earns credit from both ancient and modern herbalists as an appetite stimulant.

BLOWBALL (Dandelion; Taraxacum officinale)

The common Dandelion continues to be useful against disorders of the liver, according to Mrs. Grieve.

BAT-WEED (*Burdock*; *Arctium lappa*)

Early and modern herbalists note the value of *Burdock* as a tonic, diuretic, and blood-purifier.

VERVAIN  (*Verbena officinalis*)

The third of the Druids’ most sacred herbs, Vervain has been used since ancient times to fight ague, ulcers, and fevers.

“...we began to learn some of what [the Gowdies] had known: that a compound of **mullein** and **rue**, **sweet cicely** and **mustard** oil makes an excellent syrup for quieting a cough; that boiled **willow** bark eases aches and fevers; that **betony**, bruised for a green plaster, speeds mending of wounds and scrapes.”

(YW 165)
The herbalist produces a syrup through compounding an assortment of herbs with complementary properties and then sweetening the result with sugar or, as is more likely in Anna Frith’s case, with honey.

Once again, we see the practitioner making a decoction of a single herb.

Herbs such as comfrey or betony contain chemicals believed to heal external wounds. The herbal practitioner will bruise, chop, or shred the fresh leaves and place the resulting plaster on the affected part to facilitate healing.
MULLEIN (Aaron’s Rod; Verbascum thapus)

Mrs. Grieve concurs with Gerard that Mullein is useful for a variety of ills, including treating coughs and soothing sore throats.

RUE (*Ruta graveolens*)

The value of *Rue* as an emetic and antispasmodic led it to be used in cough remedies.


SWEET CICELY \((Myrrhis odorata)\)

An expectorant, Sweet Cicely has been used to treat coughs.

Figure 27. “Myrrha odorante. Myrrhis odorata. Sweet Cicely.” *Elixirs floraux de la Bourrache.* Illustrations. N.d. 25 May 2011

http://www.florelixir.net/htm illus/Myrrhis.html.
MUSTARD (White Mustard; Brassica spp.)

Whether used externally or internally, Mustard has been a traditional remedy for bronchitis and sore throat.

WILLOW (White Willow; Salix alba)

Our modern aspirin contains salicylic acid, a substance found in Willow bark.

BETONY (Wood Betony; Betonica officinalis)

Culpeper recommends Betony leaves as a plaster to heal various wounds.

“The bramble leaf itself has that in it to soothe its own thorns’ pricks, so I compounded some with silverweed and comfrey and a little cooling mint and bound the result with almond oil. It was a sweet-smelling ointment…”
(YW 212)
METHOD USED: **OINTMENT** (again)

When Anna’s herbal education began, she relied upon Elinor Mompellion and Anys Gowdie for help. Now she is able to blend an ointment on her own, using oil of the sweet almond as the carrier for the other herbs.
BRAMBLE (Blackberry; *Rubus fruticosus*)

Gerard notes the astringent properties of Bramble, which make it particularly useful for a number of skin conditions.

ALMOND (Sweet Almond; Amygdalus communis)

Gerard extols the emollient properties of Almond oil, well-known since ancient times and still prized today.


Anna Frith’s herbal journey through the Plague Year begins with Elinor Mompellion and Anya Gowdie telling her about the uses and properties of particular herbs.

After the deaths of Mem and Anya Gowdie, Anna must recall what these healers had done with the herbs they had grown and gathered.

Once Elinor teaches her to read, Anna can research for herself how other herbalists have applied their knowledge.

Ultimately, Anna exhibits enough confidence and sophistication to compound her own herbal remedies.

Anna builds upon her knowledge of healing herbs in her new life in Oran, Algeria:

“As I continue to study and learn, I hope to accomplish a worthy life’s work here. I am reading Avicenna now, or Ibn Sina, as I have correctly learned to call him. I am reading his writings not in Latin, as I had imagined, but in Arabic.” (YW 302)
RESOURCES


http://www.bodley.ox.ac.uk/dept/scwmss/wmss/medieval/mss/bodl/130.htm#catinfo.


