



MEDICINAL AND EDIBLE PLANTS

of The University of Mississippi Field Station

JEANNE M. KUHAJEK

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About the Author

Jeanne Kuhajek is the author of several scientific articles and presentations dealing with the biomedical potential of terrestrial plants. She was awarded a Sigma Xi grant in 1999 for her research into environmental factors that influence the production of biomedical compounds in wetland plants.

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Currently a graduate student at The University of Mississippi, Jeanne is finishing a Ph.D. in the Department of Pharmacognosy on chemical ecology and drug discovery in high altitude wetland plants from the Rocky Mountains. After graduation, she will pursue postdoctoral training on the chemical ecology of rain forest frogs; she then plans to teach.

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Introduction

Edible and medicinal plants have played an intimate role in human life since prehistoric times. Still today, plants remain crucial components of daily life. For example, more than 25 percent of prescription drugs in the United States contain at least one ingredient originally derived from a plant. Plants are also our most important food source. Ironically, many edible wild plants are richer in certain vitamins than supermarket produce.

However, wild-food foraging requires extensive knowledge and skill. One must be familiar with what plants to collect and when to collect them, as well as how to properly prepare each plant once it's been collected. Many edible plants are similar to and can easily be confused with poisonous—sometimes lethal—species. The same holds true for medicinals. Never eat or taste any part of a wild plant, or use it in a medicinal preparation, unless you are *absolutely certain* of its identity and safety, and that it has been properly prepared.

For medicinal use, dosage is critical as well. Any medicine—herbal, natural, or synthetic—can be toxic in overdose. Also, be aware of allergies! Allergic reactions are common and even foods considered safe for general consumption, such as peanuts or wheat, produce potentially fatal reactions in some individuals. For these reasons, caution is advised.

In the following pages, you will find a short description of a few of the many edible/medicinal plants found at The University of Mississippi Field Station. **This booklet is for informational purposes only!** Please refer to the suggested reading list on Page 26 for further guidance in identifying and preparing edible and medicinal plants. A few of the medical terms used in this booklet can be found on Page 26 as well.

Be sure to obtain permission before picking a plant—and always take care to ensure that the plant of interest is abundant in the surrounding area. That aside, don't forget to have fun.

HAPPY HUNTING!



Photograph by M.B. Huneycutt

Arrowroot

Sagittaria latifolia Willd.

Water Plantain Family (Alismaceae)

Arrowroot can be found in late summer to early autumn growing in wet swampy or shallow water areas. It is characterized by its arrow-shaped leaves and stalked clusters of white three-petaled flowers (July-September).

In late autumn, arrowroot produces small potatolike tubers. Native Americans used a tea of these tubers for indigestion or poulticed them for wounds and sores. The corm of this plant (the fleshy thickening at the base of the stem) exhibits diuretic properties; juices pressed from the corm were thus used to "cleanse" the body. The leaf tea was used for rheumatism and to bathe feverish babies, and the leaves were poulticed to stop milk production.

Native Americans also used arrowroot as food. They would harvest the plant by wading through the mud and dislodging tubers with their toes. The tubers are unpleasant when raw, but quite tasty after roasting or boiling. Tubers can be prepared in any method suitable for potatoes.

WARNING: Many members of the jack-in-the-pulpit family have similar arrow-like leaves; however, their tubers are dangerously toxic (see Page 11)!



Photograph by M.B. Huneycutt

Bee-balm

Monarda fistulosa L.

Mint Family (Lamiaceae)

Bee-balm has a minty, orange-spice odor and taste. It can be found in moist woods, especially along streams, and, like all mints, has a square stem. Leaves are paired, toothed, and dark. The nectar-rich, tubular flowers (May-August) attract hummingbirds, butterflies, and, of course, bees.

Early settlers steeped the dried leaves of this plant as a substitute for tea. Native Americans used the leaf tea medicinally for colic, flatulence, colds, fevers, stomachaches, nosebleeds, insomnia, heart trouble, and to induce sweating for treatment of measles. Early physicians used the leaf tea to expel gas and worms, and poulticed leaves were used to relieve headaches.

Due to its distinctive and exotic fragrance, bee-balm oil is used as an ingredient in perfumery.



Photograph by M.B. Huneycutt

Butterfly-weed

Asclepias tuberosa L.

Milkweed Family (Asclepiadaceae)

Asclepias tuberosa is a large herb with brilliant orange/yellow flowers (June-September). It can be found in open areas with dry soil. Like most milkweeds, this plant produces pods. In autumn, the pods open to reveal rows of silky seeds.

The tea or tincture of the large, tuberous root was once widely used for lung inflammations characteristic of pleurisy. Because of this use, *A. tuberosa* is often called pleurisy-root. Southern Native Americans used the root to treat other lung ailments such as asthma and bronchitis. The root tea was further employed as a laxative, diuretic, emetic, and expectorant. The root poultice was used for bruises, swelling, and rheumatism.

In the West, Native Americans used the boiled tubers and seed pods as food and obtained crude sugar from the flowers. The young shoots are also edible and can be prepared like asparagus.

Take care, however. Butterfly-weed is rare and protected in some states. **WARNING:** Although the toxicity of this plant is considered low to moderate, gastrointestinal, cardiac, and respiratory problems can result when butterfly-weed is consumed in large quantities.



Photograph by M.B. Huneycutt

Cardinal Flower

Lobelia cardinalis L.

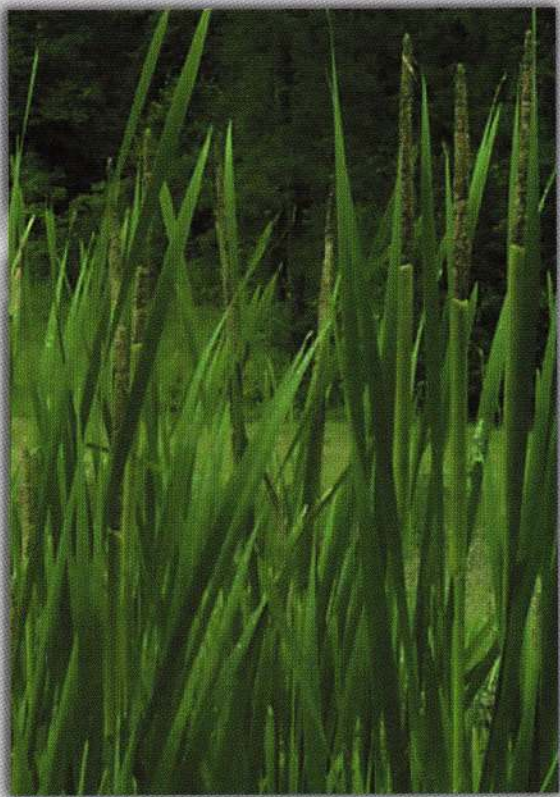
Bellflower Family (Campanulaceae)

This brilliant flower (July-September) is named for the bright red robes once worn by Roman Catholic cardinals. It grows in wet meadows, muddy streams, and marshy riverbanks.

Native Americans used a tea made from the root of cardinal flower for stomachaches, syphilis, and typhoid, and as an ingredient in "love potions."

The leaf tea was used to treat colds, nosebleeds, and rheumatism and was once thought to help relieve muscle cramps, expel worms, and act as a "nerve" tonic. Historically, this plant was considered a weak substitute for Indian tobacco (*Lobelia inflata*).

WARNING: Cardinal Flower is potentially toxic. Symptoms include nausea, vomiting, and dizziness. *L. inflata* exhibits similar toxic properties as well.



Cattail

Typha latifolia

Cattail Family (Typhaceae)

Cattails are characteristic aquatic or marsh perennials often recognized by their clublike flowerheads. This "club" is actually the female flower—the male flower is the greenish thickening above the club. In the fall, the characteristic cigar-shaped fruits give way to soft downy seeds.

Numerous Native American tribes used this down to prevent infants from developing chafed skin. The roots of *Typha* were once used to treat kidney stones or poulticed for various skin problems.

When young, the central core of the root is an excellent source of starch and is a favorite food among muskrats! Both the root and the pollen can be used to make flour. Many other cattail plant parts are also edible, including shoots, stem bases, flowering ends, and seeds.

Cattails are sometimes called "wild corn" because both the male and female flower spikes can be boiled and eaten like corn on the cob. Use discretion, however, as these are best eaten before the pollen has developed.



Photograph by M.B. Huneycutt

Chickweed

Stellaria media (L.) Cyrillo

Pink Family (Caryophyllaceae)

This low-growing annual is a favorite food of chickens and wild birds. It has opposite, somewhat egg-shaped leaves and small white five-petaled flowers (February-December). The flowers, which open only when the sun is shining, appear to have 10 petals—but upon closer inspection, one sees that each petal is deeply notched, creating the illusion. A single line of hairs running along the stem makes chickweed easily distinguishable from similar plants.

Chickweed was introduced into North America from Eurasia. Today it can be found year-round in diverse habitats throughout the world. Like the dandelion (Page 8), folkloric uses for chickweed are innumerable. In fact, there is not much it wasn't used for!

Traditionally, chickweed has been employed for its cooling/soothing effects on mucous membranes. The leaves are very tender and make an excellent salad green, the flavor being somewhat spinachlike. Chickweed greens are an excellent source of Vitamin C and thus were often used to treat or prevent scurvy.



Common Dandelion

Taraxacum officinale Wiggers/Weber

Aster Family (Asteraceae)

The dandelion is known to most as a noxious lawn weed. The basal rosette of long jagged leaves and aggregated flowers of bright yellow are found almost everywhere.

Early Native Americans seem to have capitalized on this abundance as folkloric uses for the common dandelion are countless. Still today, dandelion's use in herbal medicine is widespread. The leaves act as a diuretic and are commonly prescribed for water retention and bloating. The dried leaf tea is mildly laxative and is used to help stimulate digestion. Bitter compounds, especially in the root, act to stimulate the flow of bile, accounting for dandelion's traditional use for treatment of liver and gall bladder ailments.

All plant parts have served as food throughout the world, and consumption is still common. The tender young leaves, collected in early spring, can be used as a salad green. The roots are sometimes pickled, or roasted and used as a coffee substitute. From the flowers, dandelion wine is made. Both the leaves and the flowers are excellent sources of Vitamins A and C, and the flowers are reportedly very high in lecithin.

Dandelion leaves possess a characteristic bitterness and are thus best harvested in early spring before flowering, when bitterness is low. The heart, the nongreen inner portion of the rosette, is tasty stir fried or batter fried any time of year. Take precautions, however. Contact dermatitis has been reported from handling this plant, probably caused by latex in the stems and leaves.



Photograph by E.M. Croom, Jr.

False Solomon's-seal

Smilacina racemosa (L.) Desf.

Lily Family (Liliaceae)

This perennial closely resembles Solomon's seal (Page 18). However, the starlike flowers are borne in clusters at the ends of the stems rather than at the axils.

Native Americans used the root tea from this plant for constipation, rheumatism, and as a stomach tonic. The root smoke was inhaled for insanity and to quiet a crying child. The leaf tea was consumed as a contraceptive and for coughs and used externally for bleeding and itchy skin. Herbalists used the tea as a "blood purifier" to induce sweating and urination.

The young shoots can be eaten like asparagus, and the starchy rootstocks are often pickled. The juicy red berries, although somewhat palatable, possess strong laxative properties and are thus potentially toxic.



Flowering Dogwood

Cornus florida L.

Dogwood Family (Cornaceae)

This small tree is readily recognized by its spectacular springtime display of large white and sometimes pink petallike bracts (modified leaves).

Teas and tinctures prepared from flowering dogwood's astringent root bark were widely used in the South, especially during the Civil War, for malarial fevers as a substitute for Cinchona bark (the source of quinine) and also for chronic diarrhea. The root bark itself was poulticed onto external ulcers. For treatment of indigestion and heartburn, the scarlet berries were soaked in brandy to yield a bitter tonic.

The twigs of this beautiful tree were once used as "chewing sticks"—forerunners of modern toothbrushes. Once chewed for a few minutes, the tough fibers at the end of the twigs split into a fine soft brush. Take care, however. Dogwood chewing sticks are somewhat stiff and, as with hard toothbrushes, can irritate the gums.



Photograph by M.B. Huneycutt

Jack-in-the-pulpit

Arisaema triphyllum (L.) Schott
Arum Family (Araceae)

Jack-in-the-pulpit flowers in spring to early summer and can be found in rich, low woods, often near streams.

Although it is sometimes called the Indian turnip, this plant is not edible! *A. triphyllum*, as well as all other members of the Arum family, contain minute crystals of calcium oxalate scattered throughout the fresh tissue. Calcium oxalate is intensely irritating and imparts a strong burning sensation when the plant is ingested. With proper preparation, however, Native Americans were able to remove this toxicity and use the root as a source of flour.

The dried, aged roots were also used medicinally for treatment of colds and dry coughs, and to "build blood." Externally, the root was poulticed for rheumatism, ringworm, abscesses, boils and sores, and swelling from snakebites. The dried root tea was traditionally considered an expectorant, diaphoretic, and purgative. Additional historical uses include treatment of asthma, bronchitis, laryngitis, and headaches.

WARNING: Calcium oxalate crystals in the fresh or uncooked plant cause an intense burning and sometimes swelling in the mouth and throat, and severe gastrointestinal pain.



Japanese Honeysuckle

Lonicera japonica Thunb.

Honeysuckle Family (Caprifoliaceae)

Japanese honeysuckle is a trailing evergreen vine or shrub native to Asia. It exists as a noxious weed in much of the South, growing up to 30 feet per year!

In Japan, leaves and flowers are used as a beverage tea. The flower tea has traditionally been used in east Asia for bacterial dysentery, enteritis, laryngitis, fevers, and flu. Externally, the tea was once used as a wash for rheumatism, sores, tumors, and swelling. Japanese honeysuckle is thought to exhibit diuretic and antibacterial properties.

The flower nectar is edible, but vines and berries can be toxic and should be avoided.



May-apple

Podophyllum peltatum L.

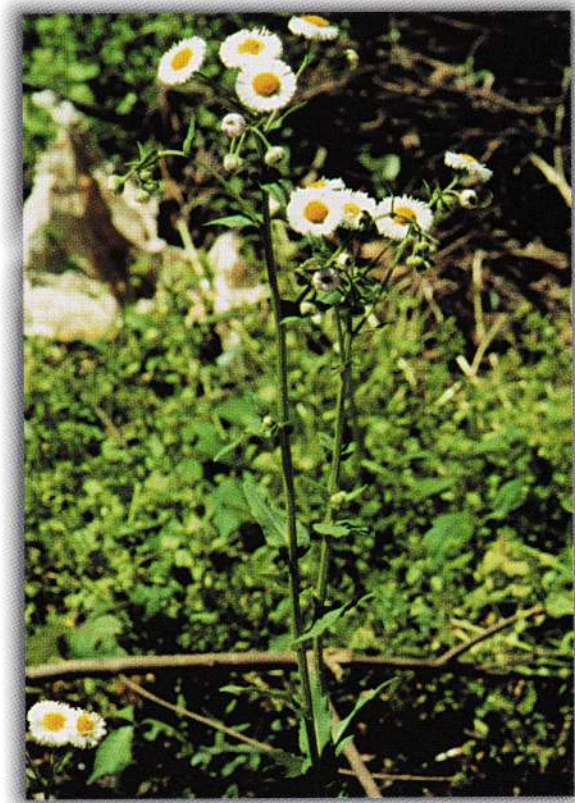
Barberry Family (Berberidaceae)

The May-apple prefers rich moist woods and can often be found in great clusters. The name derives from the typically May blooming of the apple-blossom-like flower.

Don't be fooled by the name—the May-apple is poisonous! However, when fully ripe, the yellow egg-shaped fruit is edible and makes delicious marmalades and jellies. Remove the seeds, however, as these are poisonous. Generally, ripening occurs between July and September when the leaves begin to wither.

Native Americans and early settlers used the roots as a strong purgative, emetic, worm expellent, and to treat jaundice, hepatitis, fevers, and syphilis. Although it is highly allergenic, resin from the root, podophyllin, was used to treat venereal warts. Etoposide, a semisynthetic derivative of podophyllin, is FDA approved for treatment of testicular and small-cell lung cancers.

WARNING: Even tiny amounts of the roots or leaves of *Podophyllum* are poisonous. Powdered root and resin can cause severe skin and eye problems.



Philadelphia Fleabane

Erigeron philadelphicus L.
Aster Family (Asteraceae)

This daisy fleabane is among the earliest of spring flowers and can be found almost everywhere.

The whole-plant tea was used as a diuretic and an astringent. Folk uses include treatment of diarrhea, "gravel" (kidney stones), diabetes, and painful urination. It was also used to stop hemorrhages of the stomach, bowels, bladder, kidney, and nose. Additional historic uses include treatment of fevers, bronchitis, tumors, hemorrhoids, and coughs.

Contact dermatitis may result from handling this plant. Caution is advised.



Photograph by M.B. Huneycutt

Redbud

Cercis canadensis L.

Legume Family (Fabaceae)

In late winter and early spring, this small tree/shrub displays striking deep rose to pale pink flowers.

The highly astringent tea from the inner bark of redbud is an obscure medicinal agent once used for diarrhea and dysentery, and as a folk remedy for leukemia. The roots and inner bark were also used to relieve congestion and fevers, and to ease vomiting.

The brilliant pink flowers have a sharp acrid flavor and are often pickled. They can be fried in butter or used fresh to add color and a tart flavor to salads.



Sassafras

Sassafras albidum (Nutt.) Nees
Laurel Family (Lauraceae)

Sassafras is an aromatic tree with rough gray bark. The bright green alternate leaves are oval with one to three lobes. Spicy-smelling greenish-gold flowers appear in spring, and the fruits are dark purplish on thick red stems.

Uses for sassafras are centuries-old. When the roots and young shoots are steeped, the resulting deep red tea was once employed as a stimulatory tonic for digestive problems. In the South, dried leaves and young tender stems found use as thickeners for soups.

Until the 1960s, the root bark was prescribed for sore throats, mucous membrane irritations, fevers, and stomachaches, and the oil was used as an antiseptic in dentistry and as a flavoring in toothpastes, chewing gums, and soft drinks, including "root beer." However, saffrole, a component of sassafras oil, was found to be a potential carcinogen in laboratory animals. The FDA has designated the root bark of sassafras unsafe, and it is no longer sold (unless the saffrole has been removed). Fortunately sassafras leaves contain only small amounts of saffrole and remain a major ingredient in many gumbo seasonings.



Sensitive Fern

Onoclea sensibilis L.

Fern Family (Polypodiaceae)

The sensitive fern is a native of swamps and woods of eastern North America. The name is derived from its tendency to go dormant in the first bit of cold weather or drought.

The plant was used by Iroquois Indians to treat arthritis and infection, and the leaves were sometimes poulticed for deep cuts. A decoction prepared by boiling the roots in water was given for "blood disorders."

Although the use of sensitive fern as a food has been reported, toxicity is suspected and consumption is best avoided.



Photograph by M.B. Huneycutt

Solomon's Seal

Polygonatum biflorum (Walter) Ell.

Lily Family (Liliaceae)

Solomon's seal is often a common sight in moist, deciduous woods. It displays upright arching stems, and, in spring, paired, straw-colored bell-shaped flowers dangle from the leaf axils (where the leaves and stem meet). It is often confused with false Solomon's seal (Page 9), which bears flowers in clusters at the ends of the stems rather than at the axils.

Native Americans used the root tea of Solomon's seal for indigestion, profuse menstruation, lung ailments, constipation, and "general debility," and to promote sound sleep. This tea was also used as a folk remedy for rheumatism and served as an external wash for pain and sores. The fresh roots were poulticed for sharp pains, cuts, and bruises.

The young new shoots are edible and can be prepared similar to asparagus.



Spring Beauty

Claytonia virginica L.

Family Portulacaceae (Purslane)

Spring beauty has grasslike leaves with five-petaled white to pale rose flowers, each with five tiny stamens (March-May). The flowers are open only in daylight and often overweight the stems, causing the plant to lie on the ground. This native perennial thrives in damp to dry soil and prefers full sun.

Spring beauty is sometimes called fairy spuds because of its small potatolike roots. These starchy chestnut-flavored tubers are edible, providing an excellent supply of Vitamins A and C, and can be prepared in any way suitable for potatoes.



Photograph by M.B. Huneycutt

Sweet Bay

Magnolia virginiana L.

Magnolia Family (Magnoliaceae)

Sweet bay is a small tree—although it can grow quite large in the South—with large white spiraling flowers (June-September) and waxy, bright green, oblong leaves. It can be found growing in wet deciduous woods and swampy areas.

Native Americans used the leaf tea to “warm blood” and treat colds. Traditionally, the astringent bark tea was used in place of Cinchona (the source of quinine) for malarial and typhoid fevers and also for rheumatism and epilepsy. The bark was sometimes chewed to break tobacco habits.



Sweet Gum

Liquidambar styraciflua L.

Witch Hazel Family (Hamamelidacece)

Sweet gum can be found growing in moist woodlands, bottomlands, and swamps. The gray bark is deeply furrowed, and the star-shaped leaves have four to seven finely toothed, pointed lobes. Tiny yellow-green flowers (April-May) give way in summer to mace-shaped fruits.

This common tree was named for the fragrant amber-colored "gum," or balsam, that exudes from cracks and bruises in the bark. Native Americans used a preparation of the gum to treat fevers and wounds. Twigs were nibbled as teeth-cleaners, and the leaves were chewed to treat diarrhea.

The dried balsam was once used as a flavoring agent and, especially in Southern states, enjoyed as a chewing gum.



Tulip Tree

Liriodendron tulipifera L.

Magnolia Family (Magnoliaceae)

One of the tallest trees of the area, the tulip poplar can be found in moist or swampy areas. The large tuliplike flowers (June) are green to yellow with an orange spot at the base of each petal.

The bark tea was a folk remedy for malaria and toothaches, and Native Americans used it for indigestion, dysentery, rheumatism, pinworms, and fevers, and as an ingredient in cough syrups. Externally, the tea served as a wash for wounds, boils, and snakebites. The green bark was chewed as an aphrodisiac and stimulant. An ointment from the buds was used for burns and inflammation, and the crushed leaves were poulticed for headaches.



Common Violet

Viola spp.

Violet Family (Violaceae)

Viola is a large group of perennial herbs. Typically, leaves are heart-shaped—although variations are numerous. The blue-violet, white, or yellow five-petaled flowers (February-April) are bilaterally symmetrical with a spurred lower petal.

Many violets contain levels of salicylic acid (see Page 25), which is probably why Cherokee Indians used them to treat colds and relieve headache pain. A tea or syrup from the flowers was used for coughs, sore throat, and constipation.

The leaves of many violet species are impressively high in Vitamins A and C, as well as beta-carotene, and thus make nutritious salad greens. Alternatively, violet leaves are excellent cooked like spinach. The flowers are often candied in heavy syrup and tend to be a favorite among flower eaters.

WARNING: Since their leaves closely resemble certain toxic plants, violets are best collected when flowering to ensure correct identification. The roots contain powerful emetic principles and can be toxic.



Photograph by B.W. Grant

Wild Strawberry

Fragaria virginiana Duchesne

Rose Family (Rosaceae)

Wild strawberry is a low, creeping perennial herb. The saw-toothed leaves have pointed tips and a rounded base and occur in three leaflets alternating on the stem. Flowers are white with five petals, and the tiny bright red fruits are often tastier and sweeter than cultivated varieties.

The leaves of wild strawberry are exceptionally high in Vitamin C and make an excellent salad green.

Native Americans used the leaf tea for dysentery, as a calming agent, and for bladder, kidney, and abdominal ailments; the root tea has astringent qualities. More recently, strawberries—including strawberry greens—have been found to contain ellagic acid, a potential cancer-preventive agent.



Willow

Salix spp.

Willow Family (Saliaceae)

Approximately 100 kinds of willow inhabit North America. All are similar in appearance and generally difficult to distinguish, but all inhabit wet, swampy areas.

Willow bark is an extremely old drug and has been used for centuries to relieve pain and feverish conditions. In the 1800s, the active principle of willow bark was found to be salicin. Upon consumption, salicin is degraded to salicylic acid, an excellent anti-inflammatory, analgesic (relieves pain), and antipyretic (brings down fevers). Scientists eventually converted salicylic acid into what we now know as aspirin (acetylated salicylic acid).

The presence of salicin in willow imparts a strong bitter taste to the bark. However, early in the growing season, salicin content is low and Native Americans gathered the sweet young shoots and tender leaves for food— both are rich in Vitamin C.

Suggested Reading

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Internet Sites

www.umd.umich.edu/cgi-bin/herb/

Native American Ethnobotany Database—D. Moerman

www.ars-grin.gov/duke/

Phytochemical and Ethnobotanical Database of Native Americans—J.A. Duke

www.botanical.com/

A Modern Herbal—M. Grieve

Glossary

Diaphoretic: promotes perspiration

Diuretic: promotes excretion of urine

Emetic: stimulates vomiting

Expectorant: aids in clearing mucus from the lungs

Laxative: stimulates evacuation of the bowels (see purgative)

Poultice: a pulp or paste formed by mixing plant material with boiling water and applied to the skin using a warm, moist cloth

Purgative: stimulates evacuation of the bowels (see laxative)

May 2000

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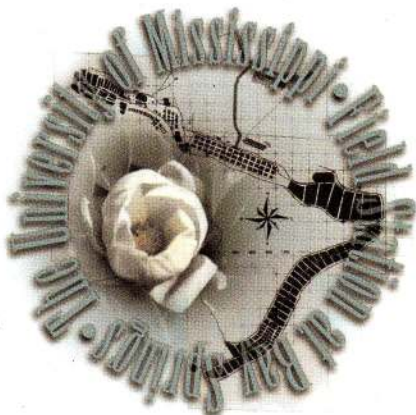
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