

The Role of Plants in Health and Healing By Isla Burgess Medical Herbalist

Herbal medicine has been with us for millennia, was the earliest form of medicine and for 25 years now has been experiencing a renaissance in the western world. I say 'west' because it is estimated that 70% of the world's population still use their traditional medicine (mostly herbal) as their primary form of health care.

This Renaissance is due to an increase in interest and demand which leads to business opportunities leading to a focus on education leading to greater evaluation of safety and efficacy which leads to research. All of these are currently being acted on and evaluated by Governments, Health departments and in New Zealand, The New Zealand Association of Medical Herbalists (NZAMH).

In a series of articles it is planned to provide you, the reader, with a realistic approach to a range of health issues and practical guidelines as to how this can be achieved. This first one is about something that affects all our lives, the role of antioxidants in health and well-being.

About Anti-oxidants

Anti-oxidants are more than a tablet containing Selenium or Vitamin C, they include a whole range of plant chemicals that provide the cells of the body with all that they require.

Antioxidants and their effects on 'free radical' production have an important role in both the treatment and prevention of chronic disease.

Free radicals are produced in the body during the breakdown of food to release energy in the presence of oxygen and during any inflammatory process or during mineral (especially iron) supplementation. They are implicated in either the cause or development of a wide range of chronic diseases with recent studies including inflammatory bowel disease, cardio-vascular disease, diabetes, autism, ageing, male infertility, and cancer.

Herbal medicine and a diet high in vegetables and fruits can provide the whole range of antioxidants and each of the following plays a role in this orchestra. They include;

- Vitamins A from carrots, green leafy vegetables and pumpkin, C from citrus and berries, and E from almonds, egg yolks and other nuts.
- Selenium from brazil nuts and organic garlic and seaweeds, Zinc from wholegrains, ginger and meat and Manganese from almonds, sunflower seeds and walnuts.
- Phytochemicals, carotenoids, flavonoids from herbs fruits and vegetables

It is the Phytochemicals or plant chemicals that are the focus of much current research and it is not surprising that the most common valuable antioxidant plants are also a part of the 'Mediterranean' diet. It is garlic, rosemary, sage, thyme, marjoram and parsley that appear in the top ten list.

Anti-oxidant powder

You can make your own anti-oxidant powder by grinding up equal amounts of dried rosemary, sage, thyme and marjoram, add a little ground seaweed and use it instead of salt, in garlic butters, oils, casseroles, mashed potatoes, on fish or other grilled or barbecued vegetables and meats.

Black currants and other Black berries are also valuable anti-oxidants as are green teas and cooked tomatoes.

How food can be your medicine?

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Some finely chopped ginger root, pinched seed pod of cayenne pepper, finely chopped garlic, pared rind of lemon, 1Tbs of its juice, finely chopped leaves of rosemary and 1 Tbsp of the finest organic Shoyu (soy sauce). Add this to some deep sea fillets of fish, marinate for at least 20 minutes then lightly sauté in a little of the latest press of Central Otago's finest olive oil, together with a Tbsp of NZ's best butter, served with a salad of fresh greens (including some mustard greens) and a glass of the best local extract of grape.

It is definitely food, and anyone who has studied herbal medicine will know that it is also medicine. It is a meal rich in all the groups of anti-oxidants not to mention one to improve digestion, circulation, provide essential fatty acids and digestive enzymes.