

# OUTDOORS

AT COLLIER-SEMINOLE STATE PARK

## Plants might have the cure, but let scientists do the research

BY LEE BELANGER  
Special to Florida Weekly

OK. So you think medicinal plants are a bunch of hoey. Well, stay with me and see what you think at the end of this article.

Remember the famous folk remedy for wound infections? People placed wet, moldy bread on wound sites and the infections disappeared. Much later, scientists discovered the mold was penicillin.

Bacteria were discovered in the 1800s, but modern medicines to fight bacteria weren't available until World War II.

African folk medicine uses herbs containing cortisone to relieve inflammation, and Asians have been using the Rauwolfia plant as a tranquilizer for centuries. In fact, plants were the major source of medicines for thousands of years. Without pharmacies, there was little else.

Underdeveloped countries still rely on herbal plants for their health care. The warmed juice from fresh Spanish needles

(*Bidens pilosa*) is used to stop bleeding. Tea from the buttonwood tree (*Conocarpus erectus*) is applied to skin to soothe prickly heat. Latex from the poinsettia (*Euphorbia pulcherrima*) is treated and used to stop toothaches. (Don't try this yourself, as untreated latex is toxic.)

Today, modern medicine still uses herbs. Examples include digitalis for heart conditions, cascara to treat constipation and atropine to dilate eyes. Many modern medicines come from folk remedies and many are still prepared from wild or cultivated plants. You may use old remedies without realizing it. Have you used coconut milk or prune juice to treat constipation?

Many plants prevent illnesses. When you eat green, leafy vegetables containing calcium, you help prevent osteoporosis. Berries, especially blueberries, contain antioxidants that help fight cancer. And eating citrus and other fruits has virtually eliminated scurvy, an illness caused by lack of vitamin C.

Just as modern prescription drugs are not without side effects (just read the packaging the next time you pick up a prescription), nor are herbal medicines. Never assume that herbals are milder than prescribed pills.

A plant's medicinal strength depends on growing conditions: soil type, light, heat and moisture. Even in the same garden, herbs vary in strength. Because the Federal Drug Administration does not measure herbal strengths, you take certain risks when using herbals. The same strength herbal can react differently from person to person. Some people can handle Brazilian pepper (*Schinus terebinthifolius*) without suffering ill effects, while others react with sneezing, a rash, headaches, vomiting or diarrhea.

Even so, there is renewed interest in folk medicine. Some people believe herbals are purer or healthier than manufactured drugs. I've heard people say, "I take herbals to avoid all those chemicals." In reality, it is the chemical alkaloids in plants that



give them their medicinal power.

Scientists know extracts from the nicker bean (*Caesalpinia bonduc*) have antiviral and anti-cancer properties. The pretty periwinkles (*Catharanthus roseus*) many of you have in your gardens contain extracts used to treat cancer commercially. Drugs from these plants have been used to treat leukemia and Hodgkin's disease by slowing down cell division.

Research into plant medicine is still in its infancy. Only a small fraction of the world's plants have been examined for possible health benefits.

It's fun to learn about medicinal plants, but be sure you have good sources of information, and never experiment on your own. Let the botanists do the research and then, just as with penicillin, we can all reap the benefits. ■

*Lee Belanger is a seasonal volunteer trail and canoe guide at Collier-Seminole State Park. To contact her, e-mail Lungwort@aol.com.*

<p>This week's Trivia challenge: Q: Who won rock music's first Pulitzer Prize? See next week for the answer.</p> <p>Last week's Trivia Q&amp;A: Who set up the first American car manufacturing company? The Duryea brothers, Charles and Frank.</p>	 <p><b>Benjamin Franklin</b> THE PUNCTUAL PLUMBER.</p> <p><i>If there's any delay, it's you we pay!™</i></p> <p>239 775-2387 www.whistledixie.com</p>	<p>Call Us To Save Money On A New Air Conditioner and qualify for the \$1500 tax credit. <b>601-4687</b></p>  <p><b>ONE HOUR</b> AIR CONDITIONING &amp; HEATING Always On Time...Or You Don't Pay A Dime!™</p>
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