

TIPS FROM THE GARDEN CENTRE

by Johan Kikillus @ The Garden Centre, Kirstenbosch

MEDICINAL PLANTS IN THE GARDEN

Before I cover this topic, I wish to make it clear that I am not a medical doctor and I definitely am not a traditional healer. However, the plants that I am going to discuss have all been tried and tested and to the best of my knowledge, I am still alive and well. Please note that all of the plants mentioned are for external use, and some can be taken internally in the form of a mild infusion. Although none of the infusions are toxic, they may not agree with everyone. It is not advisable to use them for long periods of time.

One of the most widely used plants amongst southern Africa's indigenous people is *Acacia karroo* (sweet thorn or umgai). The gum or an infusion of the leaves is taken orally to cure, amongst other ailments, colds, conjunctivitis and oral thrush. This fine tree is a very under-used garden specimen, which is surprising considering that it attracts birds and is fairly hardy.

The most frequently asked for plant at The Garden Centre is *Agathosma betulina* (real buchu). For centuries, people have been sipping 'boegoe-brandewyn' to fix up stomach problems, kidney and urinary tract diseases. The leaves can also be left to draw in boiling water and then drunk, but this is an acquired taste. Another highly effective natural medicine for stomach problems is 'lewensessens' or Cape aloes. These products are derived from *Aloe ferox* (bitter aloe). An interesting fact about another aloe species, *Aloe arborescens*, is that the sap from the leaves of this plant was applied to burn victims of the Hiroshima blast.

In rural areas it is quite common to see field workers with leaves inserted up their nostrils. This plant is normally *Artemisia afra* (wildeals or wormwood) and is used to cure coughs, colds and flu. A more subtle way of making use of this plant is to add some leaves to boiling water and then to inhale the fumes. Out of all the medicinal plants, this one has to be the most effective. Wormwoods scented grey leaves make it an excellent garden plant. Another plant that often frequents people's nostrils is *Mentha longifolia* (wild mint). Wild mint helps common chest ailments such as asthma, respiratory problems and flu. It can be taken as an infusion or simply stuffed in a pillow casing at night. *Helichrysum cymosum* (everlasting) is taken as an infusion for colds, coughs and headaches and

it is said that inhaling the smoke of burning leaves is an excellent form of pain relief.

Other plants used to alleviate respiratory ailments are *Tarchonanthus camphoratus* (wild camphor bush), *Tetradenia riparia* (ginger bush) and *Tulbaghia violacea* (wild garlic). The wild camphor bush and the ginger



Johan Kikillus at the Garden Centre, with an *Acacia karroo*.

bush are taken as infusions. The fresh bulbs of the wild garlic are boiled in water and taken orally or the leaves are eaten in a salad. Wild garlic is also used as a cure for fever.

One of the most controversial plants at the moment is *Sutherlandia frutescens*, which has now been reclassified as *Lessertia frutescens*, (cancer bush). This miracle plant is said to slow down the process of AIDS and cancer. I choose not to comment on this, as I do not have the relevant qualifications. However, it can also help other diseases like colds, flu and stomachache, and looks quite striking in a garden too. An infusion is prepared by putting dry leaves in hot water and then drinking the concoction.

Many people are surprised when they find that skin problems can be alleviated with the use of just three

succulent plants: *Cotyledon orbiculata* (plakkies or pig's ears), *Bulbine frutescens* and *Carpobrotus edulis* (sourfig). *Cotyledon orbiculata* is said to get rid of warts, corns and boils by applying leaf sap to the offending area. **Take care not to take this internally as it is toxic.** The leaf sap of bulbine is used for a variety of skin problems, including wounds, burns, rashes and pimples. *Carpobrotus edulis* is best known for its delicious jam, but mouth and throat infections can be eased by gargling with the leaf juice. This is a bitter and sticky affair! Leaf sap can also be applied to eczema, burns, sunburn and bluebottle stings.

The last plant is not as well known as the others. It is *Chironia baccifera* (Christmas berry, bitterbossie), which is fried in butter and then applied to sores, boils and acne. **Please note that internal usage can be dangerous.**

Even if you are still skeptical about using the above plants for medicinal uses, they still make excellent garden species and many are fragrant and attract birds as well. ♡

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