

CHEROKEE MEDICINE WAY

Herbs of the Medicine Wheel



By Spirit Seeker

The West

The color black and the direction of death and the "darkening land" represent medicine of the West. The key principle is balance and water and cleansing are very important. The bear is the animal most often associated with the West and represents strength and endurance.

West on the medicine wheel is associated with the internal aspects of the physical body – the digestive system, the endocrine system, urinary functions and internal infections of disease.

Medicine of the West included many plants for building strength and endurance. Cherokee legend has it that plants and trees used for treating internal ailments were originally created from watching animal behavior and how the animals used certain plants.

Some ailments were considered as coming from negative influence, likely because of a way someone has used that was outside the way of right relationship; such as taking an animal life without giving thanks and prayers.

Sometimes it was only a matter of intestinal worms from food not well cooked. In earlier times, when living was more closely connected to nature, health perils were related more to snake bite or cuts from a tool or weapon. Sometimes contaminated meats were consumed and also food containing parasites and spores. So worms were more of a problem then than now. However, the Cherokee also consumed more raw foods – berries, nuts, leafy foods, fruits and vegetables. So they were healthier in their way than we are in our modern ways.

Washing food was as much for ceremony as to have clean food. Food was considered sacred, as much medicine as it was sustenance

Knowledge of body systems and the plants needed for rebalancing was part of a strict Medicine Society of codes. The golden rule

in this code was to harm no one or anything in the Universal Circle and to be a protector and helper to everything on Earth.

Aloe – the sticky substance in the thick leaves is used as a skin softener in lotions and crèmes. This substance is used as a laxative for acute constipation. Do not take during pregnancy.

Alder – A tea of tag alder is used for pain and fever. Originally used as a tonic for strength and was combined with balsam fir bark and pine bark for intestinal problems.

Bean – Beans, *du ya*, such as kidney, navy, pinto, string and wax are used as diuretics. They are also good for diabetes and controlling blood sugar.

Bilberry – huckleberry, *ka wa ya*, contains elements that stimulate mucus and protects the lining of the stomach from digestive acids. It prevents blood clots and breaks down plaque deposits in the arteries.

Cabbage – for gastrointestinal problems and ulcers, a natural antacid and good for yeast infections. It is mentioned in the formulas as a gift from the Great One to maintain "cleansed insides."

Celery – stalks and seeds are a remedy for ridding the body of uric acid in the joints to relieve the pain of gout. Also used in arthritis formulas and to lower blood pressure.

Echinacea – purple coneflower. Used in formulas for treating infections and inflammation, best known as an immune system booster it stimulates the body's defenses to fight bacterial infections. Widely used for symptoms of colds.

Evening primrose – *hu tsi lah ha* . for gastrointestinal problems and diabetes. Reduces blood pressure and used in many formulas for protection and prevention.

Flax - entire plant used as an antiseptic and anti-inflammatory; also a mild cleanser for the system.

Ginger – a digestive aid used in several formulas that were referred to as "heal-all" and used in place of capsicum for system cleansing in sweats and other ceremonies. Today it is used for treating bacterial infections and digestive problems. Not to be confused with wild ginger.

Goldenseal – another "heal-all" plant. Aids circulation, reduces internal bleeding, aids digestion, considered nature's antimicrobial. Also used to improve the appetite.

Joe-pye weed – gravel root. Favored for urinary tract maladies, and used as a stimulant, astringent and a tonic.

Oats – an antispasmodic and calms the nerves, especially nervous stomach. Used today as a sedative, to treat gout and to reduce blood sugar and insulin levels. Also good for reducing cholesterol.

Poke – a blood purifier. The leaves and roots are a natural antibiotic especially for the kidneys. Also used for cancer, nervousness, fever, swelling and sores. Be sure to use the young plant, as the plant gets toxic when it matures

Pumpkin – seeds were used as an antiparasitic to dispel intestinal worms and parasites from the body and the seeds were also used for intestinal and bladder complaints.

Ramps – ramp gathering was a spring ritual and the plant was thought to cleanse the system and clear the sinuses for "an awakening of the spirit in the spring and summer; and keep those away that you don't want to be around."

Rosemary – used as an antispasmodic, astringent and an antiseptic. It became part of the "Love Medicine" the Cherokee used to encourage romance.

West Medicine Formulas

Unfortunately many formulas and plant usages in the Cherokee Medicine Way have been lost. Some of the early plants used were: obedient plant, rose pink, nodding pogonia, trumpet honeysuckle, Indian paintbrush, mountain myrtle, flame azalea, bristly locust, bleeding heart, and little brown jug.

Adapted from "The Cherokee Herbal"
J.T. Garrett (Bear & Company: 2003)

