

# **Introduction to Herbalism**

**By Tom O'Brien**

Most herbs are classified botanically according to plant genus and species. Herbs can also be classified by chemical activity or plant attributes. Herbs are frequently classified according to their medicinal or remedy properties. In this paper I am going to look at nervines, hepatics and nutritives.

## **Nervines**

Nervines are herbs that act to soothe, calm and nourish the nervous system. They are also described as tonics as they have overall healing effects on the different systems of the body. At the clinic in the Irish school of Natural Healing, at least 30% of clients present with stress associated symptoms. Anxiety and stress have been directly linked to a number of diseases and disorders. Every day in my own work in the area of addiction, I see direct connections between economic and social poverty, stress, anxiety and depression and the incidents of addiction. These conditions are exacerbated by low levels of health literacy and high dependence on professionals from within the biomedical model of health. People are becoming more and more dependent on medical solutions for social problems.

## **St. John's Wort**

The nervine I have chosen to look at in this context is St. John's Wort (*Hypericum Perforatum*). St. John's Wort has a sedative, antidepressant and pain reducing effect, which gives it a place in the treatment of anxiety, tension and depression. It has also been used in AIDS treatments and is a valuable external remedy for minor burns and grazes<sup>i</sup>.

The literature as a whole suggests that *Hypericum* has greater efficacy than placebo and equal efficacy to standard antidepressants<sup>ii</sup>. There have been some reports

suggesting that St. John's Wort may interact adversely with some prescribed drugs. It should not be taken during pregnancy and lactation. Extreme caution should be exercised with patients who take multiple medications.

In Ireland St. John's Wort was banned from sale as an over the counter medicine in 1999 by the then Minister for Health, Brian Cowen on advice from the Irish Medicines Board.

### **Hepatic**

Hepatics are herbal remedies that aid the work of the liver in a range of ways. These herbs help to strengthen, tone, and increase bile flow to promote normal liver function. Some herbs with hepatic properties are barberry bark, cascara Sagrada, dandelion root, gentian, goldenseal, horseradish, milk thistle olive oil, Oregon grape, parsley and rhubarb.

There is no single or simple answer as to how hepatics work. Bitters and cholagogues all act as hepatics. Drug addicts have higher incidents of liver toxicity. Hepatitis C is a common liver disease among injecting drug users.

### **Barberry**

Barberry (*Berberis vulgaris*) is one of the best remedies for correcting liver function and promoting the flow of bile (Hoffmann, 1990: 178). It also regulates the digestive system helping to remove waist matter from the stomach and bowels. It also helps to reduce the size of the spleen and removes obstructions from the intestinal tract<sup>iii</sup>.

### **Nutritive**

Nutritive herbs are herbs classified according to their nutritive value. They are not considered true foods, however they provide fibre, mucilage, and cause diuretic

actions. There are an important source of protein, carbohydrates, fats, and vitamins and minerals necessary for proper nutrition.

Nutritive herbs are rosehips, acerola, apple, asparagus, banana, barley grass, bee pollen, bilberry, broccoli, cabbage, carrot, cauliflower, grapefruit, hibiscus, lemon, oatstraw, oniono, orange, papaya, pineapple, red clover, spirulina, stevia, and wheat germ.

### **Irish Moss**

Irish Moss is a seaweed and species of red alga that can be collected off rocky coastlines all year around especially at low tide<sup>iv</sup>. Irish Moss became associated with the Irish Famine in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, as it was consumed as a food by thousands of Irish people to ward off starvation.

The principle constituent of Irish Moss is carrageenan, extracted from the seaweed and used by the pharmaceutical and foods industry as an emulsifying, suspending and gelling agent. It is also rich in protein, iodine, iron, sulfur and vitamins A and B. Traditionally the main use of Irish Moss is in respiratory illness e.g., irritating coughs and other lung problems. It may be freely used in digestive conditions where a demulcent is called for, such as gastritis and ulceration of the stomach and duodenum.

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<sup>i</sup> Penelope Oly, Simple Healing with Herbs (2006) Bounty Books, London.

<sup>ii</sup> David Mischoulon, Jerrold F. Rosenbaum, Natural Medications for Psychiatric disorders, (2008) Lippincott Williams and Wilkins, Philadelphia.

<sup>iii</sup> John Christopher, School of Natural Healing (1976) Christopher publications, Utah.

<sup>iv</sup> David Hoffman, Holistic Herbal (1983) Thorsons London.