The Weeks Brick House & Gardens
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COLONIAL HERBS

The use of herbs for medicine, cooking, and household dates back thousands of years. Below is a list of herbs and plants that would have been found in every colonial housewife’s garden, as well as a bit of their history, their use, and modern facts.

Apothecary Rose - Culinary, Medicinal & Household. Apothecary rose dates back to the Middle Ages. Its oil was used to mask odors, particularly in medicine. The petals were sometimes added to wine and vinegar. Rosehips are high in vitamin C, and therefore were used in jams.

Caraway - Medicinal & Culinary. This plant was highly prized as it was able to reseed itself, with a new plant every spring. The seeds have been found in archaeological sites in Egypt and Greece. The seeds were used by colonists to make a tea to relieve nausea, while the leaves were used to flavor salads, soups and stews. The root was eaten as a vegetable.

Catnip/Catmint - Medicinal & Household. The leaves were boiled to create a tea which was then mixed with honey (now a known antibiotic) to relieve cough and reduce fevers. It was also used as a remedy for colic. In households, it was used to deter rats. Nowadays it provides hours of amusement for cats and their humans.

Chives - Culinary. Still used today as a flavoring, colonists believed that chives stimulated the appetite, and the flowers were used to make vinegar.

Dill - Culinary. The use of dill has not really changed to this day. It is mentioned in writings that date back over 5000 years, making dill one of the oldest recorded herbs.

Feverfew - Medicinal & Household. Although few people today have ever heard of this herb, it was probably one of the most important in a woman’s arsenal. Medicinally it was used to cure coughs, toothaches, headaches, promote menstruation, and after the birth of a child it was administered to aid in the delivery of the afterbirth. When the leaves were mixed with water, it was used to keep away mosquitoes and relieve insect bites. It also produces a yellow-green dye, which was used to color fabrics. It recently has been found to be an anti-inflammatory and relieves migraines.

Dyer’s Wood - Household. Wood was one of the earliest plants to be cultivated specifically as a dye. When the leaves are picked young, they produce a blue color. The more mature the leaves, the more blue-black the dye becomes. A weak solution produces a greenish dye. Julius Caesar noted in 55 BCE that “the Picts of Britain” dyed their bodies and faces with wood for ceremonial purposes and for battle. Wood was used well into the 1940s, when it was finally replaced with chemical dyes.

Flax - Medicinal & Household. One of the oldest herbs, linen made from flax was commonly used to wrap mummies in ancient Egypt, while the Greeks used the fibers to make sails. Early colonists would use a combination of wool and flax linen to make a fabric called linsey-woolsey. The fabric would get its strength from the linen threads and its warmth from the wool ones. Flax seed oil was used as a laxative, and a base ingredient in paint, furniture polish and linoleum. Scientists today are promoting the benefits of flax seed and flax seed oil as part of one’s diet.

Foxglove - Medicinal. Dating back to approximately 1000 CE, foxglove was used for epilepsy, dropsy, swollen glands and made into a cough medicine. In the 1700s, foxglove was found to contain digitoxin, which is the main ingredient in digitalis, used to treat congestive heart failure.

Lavender - Medicinal & Household. Lavender has been used for centuries as an addition to soaps, bathwater, and dried arrangements. Its use is similar to today. Medicinally, lavender was used to prevent fainting, relieve the pain of sprains and rheumatism and repel mosquitoes.

Monkshood (aka Wolfsbane) - Medicinal. A highly toxic herb, hunters used its poison to kill wolves. Early colonists used it in very small doses as a painkiller, and to reduce blood pressure and inflammation. Note that wolfsbane is mentioned in Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone and The Prisoner of Azkaban!

Oregano (a.k.a. Wild Marjoram) - Medicinal & Culinary. Dating back to ancient times, oregano was used to cure upset stomachs, consumption, scurvy, jaundice, and to relieve toothaches, swellings and headaches. It also had a ceremonial value, as Greeks and Romans crowned young couples with garlands of oregano to promote happiness and peace. In cooking, it was used similarly as it is today.

Parsley - Medicinal & Culinary. Along with dill, parsley is probably one of the oldest known herbs. In ancient times, the Greeks used it in funeral ceremonies and made it into garlands for the winners of athletic games. Romans ate the seeds to increase fertility and chewed the leaves to freshen their breath (which is why it is often used as a decoration at meals, although its original reason for appearing on a plate was lost). In the Middle Ages, it was used for liver and kidney problems, dropsy, jaundice and the plague. Parsley is still used in cooking today, and is an excellent source of vitamins A, C, several B vitamins, iron and calcium.

Peony - Medicinal. The roots of the peony was once fed to the mentally disturbed, as it was believed that this treatment would bring sanity. In addition, it was used to treat epilepsy, and seeds were strung together and hung around the necks of children who were prone to “fits”. The roots were often mixed with mint and chick peas to dissolve kidney and bladder stones. Today peonies are used in decorative gardens.

Rosemary - Medicinal, Culinary Household. Rosemary dates back to ancient times. The Greeks believed that it could reverse the aging process, prevented loose teeth, balding, loss of speech and drowsiness. Greek students wore garlands of rosemary as they believed it would improve their memory. In the Middle Ages, people put rosemary under their pillows to prevent nightmares and ward off demons. It was commonly used for headaches, digestive ailments, for nervous disorders, and as an astringent. During World War II, some French hospitals, lacking basic supplies, used a mixture of juniper berries and rosemary to kill germs as rosemary oil has known antibacterial properties. Rosemary is a popular cooking herb today.

Sage - Medicinal, Culinary Household. Sage is another herb that has a long history. In ancient times, sage was thought to improve mental disorders, digestion and lengthen one’s life. The Romans used it as an aid in conception, and later to treat snake bites. The Chinese traded green tea for sage. The tannins and oils in the plant were used as antispasmins. Today, sage is one of the most popular culinary herbs in the US.

St. John’s Wort - Medicinal & Household. During ancient times, St. John’s Wort was used by the Romans and Greeks to dress wounds, for gastric and urinary problems, uterine cramps, worms, anemia, and nervous complaints. It received its common name in the early Christian period. It was said that the flowers first bloomed on June 24, the birthday of St. John the Baptist, and bled red oil on the day in August when he was beheaded. (Interestingly enough, the oil turns blood red with age.) Early Christians believed that it could drive away the devil. Early colonists used St. John’s Wort as an astringent, for bladder ailments, and to fight tumors. Modern science has shown that if St. John’s Wort is used for too long, it can cause sensitivity to the sun, and more toxic reactions which could result in death.

For more information on colonial gardens, herbs, and their uses, read Gardening With New England Colonial Plants: Their History, Uses, & Culture, by Katharine C. Weeks, available for purchase at the Weeks Brick House.