Herbal Tips

An MD’s Guide to Medicinal Plants

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The information provided in this book is intended for educational purposes only and is not intended to diagnose, treat, cure, or prevent any disease or health condition. While the use of herbal remedies has a long history, the effectiveness and safety of these practices may vary, and individual results can differ.

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Your health and well-being are important, and decisions about your care should always be made in collaboration with a qualified health provider.

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Introduction

Grenada. Post-hurricane Ivan. Over $20 billion in damages, and it was painfully obvious everywhere I looked. I'd traveled to Grenada to give an herbal medicine talk at St. George's University by invitation of a colleague and medical student there. Yes, the forests were flattened, the hills denuded—but plants in that tropical environment were making a comeback thanks to the ideal growing conditions: heat + humidity + rainfall + equatorial sunshine. And, as I would learn, what had never faltered in that hurricane-prone place was the traditional herbal knowledge about how to use all those plants.

As I prepared for the trip and walked around this island in recovery, I naively thought about how I was to be the herbal expert. Thanks to the few publications under my belt, my training with famous ethnobotanist Dr. Andrew Weil, and enough grit (and luck) over the years, I had regularly found myself on stage speaking about herbal medicine at U.S. conferences. I pictured myself delivering a riveting presentation filled with discussions about clinical trials of herbal medicines, doses, contraindications, plant–pharmaceutical interactions, and adverse effects. There would be a Q&A, and I would know all of the answers.

Well, this was not at all what happened. Although there were a few slides, some fun discussion, and even some herbal tea tasting, what I most remember was a St. George's medical student who approached me afterwards. He had grown up in Grenada. He was so happy that the topic of herbal medicine was being discussed at his medical school, and he was all smiles as he asked me some follow-up questions.

Then, he said, "Doctor, have you noticed the food stands along the roads all over the area?"

I said that I had. Small thatched huts, sometimes by themselves and sometimes clustered near intersections or busy bus stops, were a common sight. They usually had a small wood countertop separating the customers from the boiling soups, rice, and smoking grills with meat and vegetables awaiting purchase.

"Good! Well, that is where the real medicine is found! If you have time, I'll take you there for the special extracts, kept under the counter in a bottle. You have to know what to ask for."

I had a local tip. The best, most direct way to make a true connection to the healing power of plants, the practical application of all of those slide presentations and clinical trials. I couldn't wait to go! But, alas, there was never time to follow up with him, and, before I knew it, I was on a plane back north, speeding away from the herbal elixir that awaited me in the Caribbean "food court."

This was in 2005, and I still think about tracking down that cool plant mixture. Though it still hasn't happened, I vowed then to always look around me, listen to the herbal experts, and sample the local recipes no matter where I was or what else seemed important at the time. I wasn't going to miss that chance again. This book is my invitation to you to follow a similar approach to your new or developing herbal life—to interact with the plants, find the ones you need, and always learn about their healing potential. To take the time to explore the local herbal tip, whatever and wherever that may be.

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