

Medicinal plants



Photo taken at the Herb Demonstration Garden located at the Lifelong Learning Center.



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Using plants for medicinal purposes is probably as old as humanity. Long before pharmacies, humans prepared tinctures, teas, and poultices from plants to maintain health and help people recover

from injury and illness. Some plants might have several medicinal properties.

A number have been studied in depth by researchers who occasionally find them as efficacious as herbalists claim. The flavors and aromas that make plants desirable to taste might be important for health.

None of this information is meant to be prescriptive, just descriptive.

Peppermint, an easy-to-grow perennial herb, is used for a wide range of ailments. Many gardeners avoid it, except in pots, because it becomes invasive. University of Maryland's website has a synopsis of peppermint's properties - from breaking down gallstones, to treating tension headaches and menstrual cramps. Its menthol might help with bronchitis. A common flavoring in antacid compounds, it might be effective by itself! Most research has studied peppermint oil, although traditionally peppermint tea was used. It was helpful against irritable bowel syndrome in several controlled studies, and some researchers suggested that it might be the best choice for mild cases. By relaxing stomach muscles and increasing the flow of bile, it improves digestion.

Unfortunately, that makes it the **wrong** choice for acid reflux disease.

Many people recognize sage as an important flavoring for turkey stuffing. Recent research indicates that some of its aromatic compounds might be antioxidants associated with cancer prevention. Preliminary results from Iranian researchers indicated it could be beneficial for non-insulin dependent diabetes. In European folk medicine, sage was used to improve memory. Associated with certain metabolic processes, it seems to be helpful for reducing anxiety. Related to that research, there is even interest as an Alzheimer's treatment!

Although in the southwest rosemary is a deep green hedge with small purple flowers, this aromatic shrub has been a food preservative, and treatment for alopecia, kidney problems, and menstrual cramps. Its aromatic compounds have been studied as a possible diabetes treatment. Some research indicates that rosemary could control some liver damage. Its antioxidants may be useful against cancer.

Unlike peppermint, where both oil and tea are useful, rosemary oil should **never** be taken internally.

Around the world, echinacea has been used as an anti-inflammatory agent, since it appears to boost the immune system. Native Americans considered it a treatment for wounds and a general tonic. For a while, this was marketed as a miracle cure for the common cold. Research

produced contradictory results on echinacea's curative potential for upper respiratory infections, but it might be somewhat effective against colds.

Neither aromatic nor culinary, aloe vera is a common medicinal plant. The useful part is the gel, the thick clear substance that appears when its leaves are broken. When applied to the skin, it promotes healing of cuts and burns. It will grow outdoors where winters are mild.

Garlic, peppers, even fennel can be medicinal. Information is available on the internet about these helpful plants, but none of them should be used without professional advice.

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