

HERB STOP

October 2011 Highlight



Doctrine Of Signature

In the Beginning, when the first people were looking at plants for food and medicines, they did not have any textbooks, schools or teachers to learn from. Then how did they learn which plants were edible, medicinal, or poisonous? At first it was through the intuition, imagination, and direct experience, simply by trial and error. As our ancestors emerged out of this way of learning they started to arrange their knowledge into organized systems. The first system that appeared is the doctrine of signatures, suggesting that a plant's appearance reflects a disease, organ, organ system, or even an animal or a person. Through observation, taste, smell, environment, as well as imagination and intuition, an herbalist even today, can interpret what the plant may be used for. A few months ago, an herbalist friend from Canada and I were hiking in the high desert of Arizona. Although he was unfamiliar with our dry desert, he was able to “read” the plants and give an extensive explanation of its possible uses. For example, as he looked at our spectacular flowering agave plant, he explained how this plant's medicine can strengthen a person back and solar plexus (stomach area), increase confidence, as well as giving a person energy and willpower. Later on I checked in my books and he was right on. In addition, my friend predicted an early and long, cold winter, by observing nature's behavior.

Doctrine of Signature Categories

The clues or signatures of plants, through the various characteristics and peculiarities, can easily be broken down into categories. Groups of plants sharing the same signature would probably be indicated for similar ailments or applications to the same general area of the body. Let's look at some of these categories:

Color

The color of the plant's flower, fruit, or decoction from root stem may be one of its signatures. Those plants with reddish flowers, such as red clover, burdock, echinacea, rose, raspberry, have long been established as blood purifiers or alternatives. The red color has a warming influence on the body and relates to the heart, blood, and circulatory system. Those plants with orange and yellow colors are indicated in disorders of the liver, gallbladder, and the digestive tract, for example chamomile, dandelion, gentian, lemon, barberry, and yellowdock. Brilliant blue is one of the most reliable of the color signatures. It almost always indicates nervines and antispasmodic. Some good examples are lobelia, blue cohosh, skullcap, blue vervein, and wood betony. The color white can represent the bones and the lungs, as in boneset (white flowers), comfrey (white roots). Plants that exude white sap, such as in wild lettuce and opium poppy, are known to diminish consciousness. The white marbled leaves of milk thistle were taken as a signature of galactagogue properties.

Habitat

A plant's habitat reflects stresses and conditions which it has had to adapt to, and often is related to conditions in the body. Plants that grow in wet areas often relate to organ systems which handle water and dampness in the body, such as the lymphatic and kidneys. Here we think of horsetail (kidneys), gravel root (kidney stones), white willow (rheumatic complaints – rheuma in greek means dampness). Desert plants know how to hold water for a long time, for example yucca (brings moisture/lubrication to joints and intestines), desert willow (the flower hydrates parched skin). If a plant has been transplanted from its natural habitat to a different location, the active medicinal properties will be vastly different. There is also a huge difference between the potency of plants growing in the wild and the same plants which have been artificially cultivated or transferred from their original locations to soils readied by the hands of man.

Texture

Different textures indicate different uses. Plants whose leaves are soft are good to ease pain, such as mullein (earache). Hairy plants are signatures for body hair or hairs of the mucosa, as in coltsfoot (for worn down the villa of the lungs from coughs etc). Those herbs with sharp thorns or prickles can often be used for pain, not as a pain reliever, but to “strike” at the causes of pain, such as motherwort, milk thistle,

Shape

How does it look like to you? The shape of the plant can give you clues. Vines are associated with the nervous system and the blood system. Eyebright looks like an eye on the flower; hence it is used for eye and sinus problems. Ginkgo looks like a cross section of the brain, and is being used for memory and mental focus. Knobby parts of a plant, such as red root, are indicative for swollen glands. Knobbiness can also represent swollen, rheumatic joints. Devil’s claw looks like a knurled hand.

Aroma

Aromatic herbs are known as disinfectants and deodorizer, employed in hospitals or sick rooms, such as eucalyptus or lavender. They usually contain antibacterial and antiviral properties. Scientists have found that eucalyptus can destroy all types of viruses.

Sound

Although plants do not make a sound, but the wind blowing through them have a medicinal effect. Pine strengthens the nerves, aspen relieves pain, physical or emotional, and cypress soothes the respiratory system (also helps with grieving). In Europe, the sound and energy emanating from the “Lindenbaum” is very well known for its strengthening and recuperative powers, so very often mentioned in songs and poeties.

Roots, Leaves and Stalks, Flowers

Roots are for physical ailments, affecting the physical structure, the atom itself in the cellular structure. Roots have their greatest potency in the winter. Leaves and stalks have an effect on the mind, the thoughts, mind to body. Leaves and stalks have their greatest potency in the spring. Flowers have an impact on the emotions, affecting the physical body through the emotions. Flowers have their greatest potency in late spring into summer, unless they bloom in the fall.

How To Interpret A Plant's Purpose

There are several ways of learning the values of edible and medicinal plants. You can take an herb class at a University or other school, a weekend course, or you may apprentice with a practicing herbalist. But, the quickest and most effective way is by learning in the field. There you can see and touch the plants, closely observe the plant’s habitat, the way it grows, the color of the flowers, its taste and scent, or the designs on the leaves or roots. With time the interior eye is trained, knowledge is gained, and confidence increased.

Whenever I want to learn more about a particular plant, I purchase some seeds or a potted plant, and place it in my garden. By caring for it on a daily basis, I learn a tremendous amount straightforwardly from the plant itself.

Quick Step-By-Step Guide

- ☼ Choose a plant, or go to the plant you are drawn to.
- ☼ Carefully observe everything about the plant, including its roots. You may want to write your findings on a notepad.
- ☼ Observe your feelings. What kind of feelings does this plant elicit?
- ☼ If that plant were a person, what would it tell you?
- ☼ Use all of your senses to get to know your plant.
- ☼ Be patient, this process may take several hours, even days, or months.
- ☼ You may want to start your own material medica on your researched plants.
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The Herb Stop will be offering classes and field trips in the near future for those who want to learn more about the doctrine of signatures. Please contact us for dates, or visit us on our website www.HerbStopOnline.com.

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