

MEDICINAL AND USEFUL PLANTS OF THE SAXON VILLAGES

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Plants provide all us with food, medicines, timber, fibre and a host of other everyday products. We often take plants for granted, failing to spot the link between the living plant and what industry creates from it. In the Saxon Villages one sees an economy directly and consciously based on wild plant products, whether it be the forage plants of pastures and meadows, construction timber from the extensive semi-natural woodlands or the gathering of medicinal plants. For, despite modern drugs, medicinal plants remain a major item of trade in Europe, especially in the countries of eastern Europe. Several of these plants remain in use by local people, while others – the majority – have fallen out of use.

A living museum of medicinal plants exists in each Saxon Villages, a special group of wildflowers that occurs in and around villages and along roadsides. These plants are *ruderals*, literally in Latin ‘rubbish-plants’, a mixture of weeds and old medicinal plants that are associated with human activity. Many have at some stage been used for food, medicine, dyeing or other activities. Little employed today and sometimes forgotten even by botanists, they are a characteristic feature of village life.

Ruderal communities of this type, with their ancient relic plants, have disappeared over much of Europe, often replaced by introduced or *alien* plants from North America and elsewhere. Some of these aliens are becoming a problem in the Saxon villages, especially Japanese Knotweed (*Fallopia japonica*), which forms dense thickets by streams.

Here are some interesting medicinal and other useful plants in and around the villages:

- Yarrow or Milfoil (*Achillea millefolium*) is extensively gathered and used for stomach complaints. An infusion is used as a stimulant to digestion, a mild laxative, and to ease hypertension and other ailments of the heart and blood; it has general antiseptic and anti-fever properties and helps staunch wounds. It is sometimes mixed with Lovage.
- Ground Elder (*Aegopodium podagraria*) is a weed in Transylvania just as in Britain, to where it was introduced by the Romans. Native to woodland margins in central and eastern Europe, it plausibly might have reached Britain from Romania, then the Roman province of Dacia! The leaves can be cooked and eaten, and are reputedly a remedy for gout. Note that a very similar but slightly more robust and hairy plant, *Peucedanum aegopodioides*, grows in and around woods in the Saxon Villages.
- Marsh Mallow (*Alcea officinalis*), with loose spikes of soft pink mallow-flowers and locally common around Bunesti, was used to soothe sore throats and coughs. The active ingredient is the mucilaginous sap of this and related mallows such as the more widespread Common Mallow (*M. sylvestris*).

- Lady's Mantle (*Alchemilla* sp.), an inconspicuous plant of dam grassland, with green flowers and slightly lobed umbrella-like leaves, treats diarrhoea.
- Greater Burdock (*Arctium major*) and Cobwebbed Burdock (*A. tomentosum*), tall and branched, with large greyish leaves and attractive mauve flowers, grow both on woodland margins and around village yards. The roots have been used to treat skin complaints. The clusters of the hooked seed-heads or 'burs' – thrown by children everywhere as missiles that stick to clothes – were placed on the strings that suspended hams in the Saxon churches to deter marauding mice.
- Black Horehound (*Ballota nigra*), like a coarse, smelly purplish-pink-flowered dead-nettle, was formerly used to treat stomach complaints and infected wounds.
- Pot Marigold (*Calendula officinalis*), the familiar orange-flowered ornamental plant, is widely grown in village gardens. Its antiseptic and anti-inflammatory properties make it a good remedy for cuts and abrasions. It is used as a tea, or applied in a cream or as a tincture in alcohol.
- Centaury (*Centaureum erythraea*) is a small pink-flowered gentian extensively gathered and used as a general tonic and stimulant to digestion. The plant has an extremely bitter taste.
- Greater Celandine (*Chelidonium majus*), with compound leaves and loose clusters of yellow flowers, often growing on or at the base of walls, has bright orange sap that is still used to cure warts.
- Good King Henry (*Chenopodium bonus-henricus*), which has triangular leaves and spikes of small green flowers, native to the Carpathians and other mountains of S and C Europe, was formerly widely grown as a spinach-like leaf vegetable. It persists on a few waysides, often among nettles. Fat Hen (*C. album*), a common scruffy annual weed of village vegetable plots was formerly an important spinach-like leaf vegetable, and up to the medieval times or later was a grain crop. Stinking Goosefoot (*C. vulvaria*), a scruffy greyish-green plant of sidewalks, prostrate and with paddle-like leaves that smell hideously of rotten fish when bruised, was once widespread in Britain and elsewhere as a street weed and was used medicinally.
- Chicory (*Cichorium intybus*) colours fallow fields and waysides in summer with its blue-dandelion flowers, but is not used by local people. In the Mediterranean region and elsewhere the leaves are a salad, the roots a substitute for coffee. Dandelion (*Taraxacum officinale*), always with yellow flowers, has similar uses. Both are diuretics.
- Hemlock (*Conium maculatum*) is a **highly poisonous** member of the carrot family. Looking a little like cow parsley or hogweed, it has tall erect stems, finely divided leaves and conspicuous, slightly sinister reddish blotches on the stems. It had some medicinal use, but external only.
- Hawthorn (*Crataegus monogyna*) is extensively gathered and appreciated by local people. An infusion is drunk to alleviate heart and circulatory problems and high

blood pressure. Hawthorn has the great advantage that it is non-toxic, unlike foxglove, a traditional heart drug plant in other parts of Europe.

- Common Horsetail (*Equisetum arvense*), like a ‘miniature Christmas tree’ of waysides and damp ground, has been used as a poultice and pot-scourer.
- Henbane (*Hyoscyamus nigra*), with sticky-hairy greyish-green stems and yellowish, conspicuously purple-veined flowers, occasionally springs up on waste ground and roadsides. It was used since ancient times as an anaesthetic, and its hallucinogenic properties reputedly made it popular with witches – giving them the sensation of flying! The whole plant is highly poisonous, beautiful but sinister.
- Perforate St John's-wort or Johanneskraut (*Hypericum perforatum*), with conspicuous heads of 5-petalled yellow flowers, is drunk alone as an infusion or mixed with Small-leaved Lime (*Tilia cordata*) flowers and Mint (*Mentha*). It is a general herbal tonic and calmant, and used to treat stomach upsets, indigestion, insomnia and headaches. It is used locally to treat diarrhoea, but local people are unaware of its extensive use to treat depression. It is extensively gathered by local people, who say that you shouldn't pick St John's-wort where you can hear the cock crow – only far away from the village.
- Elecampane (*Inula helenium*), with rosettes of spear-shaped leaves tall stems bearing large yellow daisy flowers, locally common near Meşendorf and a few other places, was used as a remedy for severer coughs and chest complaints, and to treat diarrhoea and stomach complaints.
- White Dead-nettle (*Lamium album*), in the mint family, nettle-like but with whorls of sage-like white flowers, treats urinary disorders.
- Motherwort (*Leonurus cardiacus*), tall and somewhat cannabis-like but with pink mint-like flowers, is a feature of some villages. An infusion of this plant was regarded as an indispensable medicine over much of Europe, apparently lowering blood pressure and curing many ills.
- Lovage (*Levisticum officinale*) is widely grown as culinary herb and, like a huge parsley plant, is a feature of village gardens. It stimulates digestion and is a mild diuretic. The chopped leaves can neutralize smells in an earth closet!
- Mint (*Mentha* sp.) is widely drunk as an infusion, often mixed with Perforate St John's-wort and Small-leaved Lime. Mint tea soothes coughs and colds.
- Ribwort Plantain (*Plantago lanceolata*) and Greater Plantain (*Plantago major*) sooth wounds, burns and (the mucilaginous seeds) coughs. A purple-leaved variant of Greater Plantain, which occurs on sidewalks in Viscri, is probably a wild population of *Plantago* ‘Purpurea’ grown for ornament in gardens.
- Sage (*Salvia* spp.) is gathered from the wild and used as a general tonic, with strong antiseptic properties. Several species grow in the hay-meadows: Meadow Clary (*Salvia pratensis*), with rich blue flowers, is the commonest.

- Soapwort (*Saponaria officinalis*), a white or pink-flowered campion-like plant, grown in gardens and also forming patches in ditches and on roadsides, was formerly used for soap, and still a useful cleaning agent for fabrics. The plants in the Saxon Villages are mostly single- rather than (as in north European gardens) double-flowered.
- Elder (*Sambucus nigra*) is common around villages, often as a hedge around yards. An infusion of the flowers reduces fevers and chest congestion. A cordial made from the flowers (*suc de soc*) is a refreshing summer drink.
- Small-leaved Lime (*Tilia cordata*), a herbal tonic, is often combined with Perforate St John's-wort and Mint in an infusion. It boosts the immune system, benefits blood circulation and aids digestion. These limes, rather characteristic of eastern Europe, occur in the woods but are also planted as street trees.
- Stinging Nettle (*Urtica dioica*) is used to treat kidney and urine problems. Rich in iron and vitamins, the chopped leaves are mixed with maize and fed to young poultry.
- Vervain (*Verbena officinalis*), like a delicate lavender plant that grows on waysides, is a sedative and general tonic.
- Heath Speedwell (*Veronica officinalis*), a plant of poor grasslands with loose spikes of pale bluish flowers, is a general tonic, good for the skin.
- Mistletoe (*Viscum album*), festooning old poplars and other trees, is said to lower blood pressure, enhance the immune system and possess anti-cancer properties. It is **highly poisonous**.
- Maize or Corn (*Zea mais*) is the principal crop of fields and village vegetable plots and the grain feeds people and animals. It is the basis of that Romanian staple, *mamaliga* or polenta. The long female stigmas or 'silks' are used to treat wounds. As an infusion, they can alleviate urinary disorders and stomach complaints.

Other common wayside and grassland plants are not reported to be used locally but have considerable medicinal value and a history of use in rural Europe. The mint family has contributed many herbal medicines: e.g. Ground-ivy (*Glechoma hederacea*) is a general tonic and soothes bruises, Self-heal (*Prunella vulgaris*) is a tonic and antiseptic that staunches wounds, and several species of woundwort (*Stachys*) have also been used to treat wounds. In the borage family, Comfrey (*Symphytum officinale*) is an all-round healing plant, a remedy for bruises and inflammation, and famously ('knitbone') for promoting the mending of broken bones.

The people of the Saxon Villages continue their living tradition of plant use. Although most of the botanically interesting ruderals are rarely employed today, medicinal plants continue to provide a means by which some local people earn a living. The national harvest of medicinal herbs is huge: Hawthorn, (58.0 tonnes per annum, mostly from Transylvania), Yarrow (12.8 tonnes per annum) and Burdock (10.5 tonnes in 2001) are among the most important wild-harvested herbs in Romania.

Species such as Hawthorn and Yarrow are common enough for more or less unregulated harvest to continue, others such as Centaury and other are probably over-collected, others are not apparently collected at all. Autumn Crocus or Meadow Saffron (*Colchicum autumnale*) which colours damp hay-meadows lilac in September, is not collected, although known as a medicinal plant (*Semen Colchici*) since ancient Greece and still a remedy for gout.

ADEPT is actively working on these sort of conservation and economic problems in the context of sustainable development and providing employment and incomes for local people.