

## Digestive System

Herbal medicine is uniquely suited for the treatment of illness of the digestive system. Throughout the evolutionary process, our food has been our medicine, ensuring that the unique healing properties of the herbs concerned have a direct effect upon the lining of the alimentary canal. Not only will there be the effects due to the metabolism and absorption of the whole range of plant chemicals present, but there will also be a direct action upon the tissue through contact.

Much of digestive system illness in our society is simply due to abuse. Today's average diet has a preponderance of overly processed foods, a high proportion of chemical additives of differing function and the direct chemical irritation of alcohol, carbonated drinks and tobacco. In this context it is easy to see why herbal remedies are so helpful in the various inflammations and reactions that plague such abusers. The direct soothing of demulcents, healing of astringents and general toning of bitters does much to reverse the damage.

However, as with all true healing, any potential cure lies beyond the range of medicines, whether they be herbal or drug in nature. The healing process must involve a change of whatever dietary indiscretions are occurring as well as attention being given to life style changes that may be called for to reduce stress. Herbal medicine can bring about dramatic improvements in even profound digestive system problems but the long term maintenance of benefit lies in the hands of the person seeking treatment.

Used within such a holistic context, herbal medicine offers specific remedies for particular pathological syndromes and also tonics and normalizers that can help prevent problems manifesting at all. The possibility arises of treating the problem within a context of general nurturing that speeds the improvement in health and enables a re-establishing of health and harmony.

This raises the thorny question again of how these remedies work. Usually there is no answer because no academic research has been undertaken to find a mechanism to explain the clinical findings. This may be because no researcher has been interested or funded, or because the complex of factors is so multi-factorial that coherent analysis is almost impossible.

In the hands of a skilled Herbalist there is much that can be achieved therapeutically, and whilst each unique individual with, say, a gastric ulcer will have their own array of factors involved, it is possible to identify some useful herbal generalities.

A number of herbal actions are of broad value for the digestive system. This is a more helpful way to approach the choice and evaluation of herbal remedies than thinking in terms of specific plants or combinations for certain syndromes. There are certain plants that are specific for certain pathologies, but these are the exception rather than the rule.

It is the whole tradition of herbs for aiding digestion that has maintained the strongest foothold in the memory of modern Europe. Whether it be culinary herbs such as Rosemary or as medicinal alcohols like Vermouth or Chartreuse, therapeutic remedies are used in large quantities. The very name vermouth comes from the bitter remedy Wormwood. Herbs maintain their foothold in the official pharmacopoeias as the major therapeutic agents in the categories of digestive bitters, carminatives and

varying strengths of laxatives.

### **Primary Actions for the Digestive System**

**Demulcent** : Comfrey root., Marshmallow root., Slippery Elm, Liquorice

**Bitter** : Wormwood, Gentian, Golden Seal, Rue. **Milder bitters include** - Yarrow, Centaury

**Astringent** : Agrimony, Oak Bark, Cranesbill, Meadowsweet,

**Carminatives** : Aromatics e.g. Fennel, Ginger, Caraway, Peppermint, Chamomile, Lavender

**Anti-Inflammatories** : Chamomile, Carminatives etc.

**Anti-Spasmodic** : Chamomile, Valerian, Cramp Bark, Carminatives

**Aperient & Laxative** : Yellow Dock, Senna, Dandelion root

**Hepatics & Cholagogues** : Dandelion, Bitters, Milk Thistle, Golden Seal, Balmony

**Nervines** : Depends on the indications. Chamomile, Lavender, Valerian, Rosemary, Mugwort

**Anthelmintic** : *Artemisia absinthium*, *Dryopteris felix-mas*

**Other Actions** : as needed to ensure good general health, e.g. diuretics & emmenagogues.