MONTHLY COLUMN FOR SOAP, PERFUMERY & COSMETICS

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ASHES OF ROSES

Standing on the back door step at 6.00 a.m., enjoying a quiet infusion of *Camellia sinensis* and a gentle inhalation of *Nicotianum tabacum*, it seemed appropriate to tackle the idea of inspiration, since it was not the raucous singing of the crows, nor the monotonous banter of the wood pigeons that had brought me to my thinking place.

While many people rush to their computers to surf the Internet seeking inspiration and new ideas, some of us venture into the dingiest book shop for a few hours of quiet untroubled contemplation. There amongst the musty, dusty volumes can reside a treasure chest of history long forgotten, just waiting for the spark to rekindle it into a viable marketing proposition.

Donning the suitable garb for bookshop exploration, a pair of gardening trousers, a faded jacket and a pair of half-moon reading glasses, the first expedition started with a visit to a particularly seedy establishment. I extracted a volume entitled "Wonders of the Tropical Forest" (1888). Amongst the fragrant pages that only damp books can produce was a reference to *Ceroxylon andicola*, a tree from the slopes of the Andes, which exudes a wax from the rings of its trunk. A natural wax that is no longer available, or a wax that has never been exploited? The South Americans call the tree 'Palma de cera' (literally wax palm) and this could be a promising lead for a new natural wax.

I found a small bookshop, that had "The Cyclopaedia of Botany (Vol.1)", and browsing through this undated (circa 1850) leather bound edition was a reference to *Alchemilla vulgaris* or Ladies' Mantle. "The good women in the north of England apply the leaves to their breasts, to make them recover form after they have been swelled with milk". Leaving aside my thoughts on what the good/bad women in the south might do, it was easy to appreciate that this material would have application in skin firming, body toning and slenderising products.

Another find was Dr. O. Phelps Brown's "The Complete Herbalist" (1875), a book packed full of historic data from the USA. The settlers dispatched most of the native populations, so early data is very rare. One herb he described was Matico (*Piper angustifolium*), which was cited as a topical anti-haemorrhagic agent (a property confirmed by the British Herbal Pharmacopoeia). It has a particularly masculine sounding name and thoughts quickly turned to the idea of a shaving product, where it might be an ideal additive for shaving nicks and cuts.

Incidentally, this plant was also recommended for catarrh, but I particularly liked the alternative approach in the book - the nasal douche apparatus, which seems to have been modelled by Alice in Wonderland.

It was on a trip to London, that another American book came to light on one of those dreary wet days, when the lure of a run-down Charing Cross Road book shop had more appeal than the heaving tourist bustle of Leicester Square. Charles F. Millspaugh's volume (1892) on Medicinal Plants provided a fascinating list of natural waxes, many of which seem to have disappeared. Bayberry Wax (now commercially available again) was mentioned, but so were a large number that I had never seen before. Koya wax (*Cinnamomum pedunculatum*), Chinese Vegetable Tallow (*Stillingia sebifera*), Cow Tree Wax (*Galactodendron utile*), Chinese Wax (*Coccus ceriferus*), Ibota Wax (*Lingustrum ibota*) and Sela Wax (*Fraxinus chinensis*). These natural waxes must be an opportunity for the future as new alternatives to hydrocarbon derived waxes.

Weary, hot and foot sore, I meandered into another dreary retailer, where the proprietor felt that a 40 watt bulb carefully concealed behind a stack of books was conducive to reading. In the gloom, I found (more by luck than judgement) the Englishman's Flora by Geoffrey Grigson. The entry on Lady's Bedstraw (*Galium verum*) quoted Robert Turner (Botonologia, 1664), which seemed appropriate for that moment: "The decoction is excellent good to bathe the surbated Feet of Footmen and Lackies in hot weather". Like the dust, the passage stuck, and more modern texts revealed that the plant is a natural deodorant, and soothing on swellings and abrasions, so useful in a foot soak or cooling foot spray.

In another bookshop that specialised in pharmaceutical textbooks, I selected the 1923 British Pharmaceutical Codex. Leafing through the pages, I found a section on Quassia wood (*Picraena excelsa*), formerly employed to denature potable alcohol (before the days of Bitrex). One line at the end of the paragraph stated: "a solution painted on the skin keeps away small insects", which could be very useful in a sun care product. This shop turned out to be a bonus (it also turned out to be very expensive with a 100 watt light bulb and customer toilet) because it also had a 5th edition of the Merck Index.

Finally, I purchased a very old and sad edition of the USA Dispensatory (1883). Marking one of the pages was a seal from some long since discarded packaging; that page was for betain (discovered 1875) in Sugar Beet (*Beta vulgaris*). One wonders who it was that picked up a convenient book mark and placed it at that spot, could they possibly have known that it would take one hundred and twenty years for a company to supply a commercial source of this material? Could they have known of its implications for hair care?

Incidentally, the seal was for "Ashes of Roses" from Bourjois, Paris. The function of this material remains unknown to me, but if there is anyone who does know the history, then please let me know.

It seemed appropriate that a marker placed over a hundred years ago in a scientific book that today is beyond value, should be the title of this month's column. From the ashes will rise the Phoenix of new ideas and innovation.

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