

MONTHLY COLUMN FOR SOAP, PERFUMERY & COSMETICS

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Something old, something new, something borrowed and something blue.

We all need stimulation in order to remain creative and innovative, sometimes we need to seek inspiration. Allow me to share with you two trips that I made recently.

Something old (the Chelsea Physic Garden)

It was a rather changeable day in August, when I arrived in front of the small green door at 66 Royal Hospital Road to present a paper to the Summer School on Medicinal plants. In one hand was my case containing lecture notes, slides and laptop data base, in the other, a camera bag that David Bailey would have been proud of.

There is an air about the Chelsea Physic Garden, which I have never felt anywhere else. It oozes history and tradition, it exudes knowledge, but most of all it is run by people who love what they do and who do it very well. Tranquillity and peace hang over the gardens like a thick quilt on a bitterly cold night.

The gardens, breathtaking in any weather, are laid out in themes. For me the "Medicinal plants of the world" is always a first port of call. Valerian (*Valeriana officinalis*) tall and stately, Echinacea (*Echinacea purpurea*) with the beautiful reddish-magenta buttons surrounded by down-turned petals, Witch hazel (*Hamamaelis virginiana*) just coming into leaf, Roman Chamomile (*Anthemis nobilis*) exuding its wonderful fragrance as you gently press its leaf, and a hundred other plants all well known for their curative properties. All labelled, all lovingly tended and many with plaques of descriptive text to explain their function to the most novice of visitors. Beds of traditional Chinese plants, Ayurvedic medicine and Aboriginal medicinal plants bring their names to life.

Around the corner, they have planted out a bed of aromatherapy and fragrance plants. The scent is thick and heady with lemongrass (*Cymbopogon citratus*), Lavender (*Lavandula angustifolia*), Rosemary (*Rosmarinus officinalis*), Sweet Myrtle (*Myrtus communis*) and a host of plants too numerous to mention.

In a long thin green house, close to the wall, where the humidity steamed up lenses and reading glasses, were Patchouli (*Pogostemon patchouli*), Rice (*Oryza sativa*) and rainforest plants clinging to the wall growing over to provide a leafy canopy through which one had to duck. You

could smell the rich dampness of the tropical ferns and taste their earthiness in the air, it was intoxicating.

This is a place of nostalgia, a font of knowledge, a trip through history and a place of creativity. I have described but a fraction to tempt you.

Something new (a Millennium project)

Having discovered Gerard, Culpeper, Dioscorides, Hippocrates and Pliny, I did not think that life was going to get very much better after discovering Hildegard von Bingen (famous stateswoman, writer of holy songs and phenomenal herbalist). Who could have guessed that tucked away in a small village just outside of Carmarthen that there was a source of herbal knowledge that dated back to the 10th century and possibly beyond. I refer, of course, to the Physicians of Myddvai.

Here were a group with whom I would have found great synergy - their medical maxims were brilliant. "If thou desirest to die, eat cabbage in August" - I had been telling my mother that *every* month of the year. "He who cleans his teeth with the point of his knife, may soon clean them with the haft" - I stopped using the carving knife the minute I read this. "It is no insult to deprive an old man of his supper" - my father begged to differ on this one, when we tried it out.

I was thrilled, when I was invited to visit the National Botanic Gardens of Wales in Middleton Hall (burnt down in 1931) in Llanarthne, Carmarthen and not far from the original village of Myddvai. I arrived in June just in time to see some of the first glass being put into the Great Glasshouse designed by Sir Norman Foster (and the largest single span greenhouse in the world). This project will create a site bigger than the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew and will prominently feature the ancient Physicians of Myddvai and their herbal remedies. I give two examples: -

For a livid inflammation of the flesh

"Get eryngo [possibly *Eryngium aquaticum* or Sea Holly], the leaves of red alder [possibly *Alnus rubra*], parsley [*Petroselinum crispum*], broom flowers [*Cytisus scoparius*], and the stinking iris [*Iris foetidissima* or Gladwyn], pound them well together and make an ointment by means of butter and black soap. Anoint the painful part therewith, and it will heal it." [The square brackets are mine - ACD]

The major problem is in identifying the actual plants that would have been available at that time and being sure that the translation from the Welsh was accurate. An effective recipe? Yes, I think it probably would have been, the phytochemistry would support the benefits, though I am not too

sure about the black soap.

For the itch

"Take dock roots [*Rumex crispus* or other species], bruising them thoroughly in new butter, and then frying the whole, mixing and compounding the mass while so doing. Anoint the patient therewith and he will be cured."

Sorrels are well known for their soothing qualities and though we are not used to frying our recipes, it is a technique widely used in traditional Chinese medicine to prepare drug plants.

A whole section of the garden will be devoted to the Physicians, the greenhouse will feature Mediterranean species and they plan a scented walk for the blind. I can hardly wait for the opening.

Something borrowed

Borrowed is what we have done when we have visited these gardens.

Something blue

Blue is for sadness, when wonderful enchanting places like these have to rely on charity for their upkeep and day-to-day running.

Having something old, something new, something borrowed and something blue produced a happy marriage between having found pleasure and a source of inspiration.

[998 words]

