

Monthly Column (August)
for Soap Perfumery & Cosmetics
by Anthony C. Dweck

Worts and Banes

In 1995, there appeared in the *Pharmaceutical Journal* a paper by C.G. Searle entitled “Of worts and banes”, where the author listed a few dozen relevant plants. This work is this month’s inspiration.

As you probably may have realised over the period of this column, anything that serves no purpose, is capable of being listed, collated, manipulated and is botanical, can become a consuming obsession to me. I am pleased to announce that after nearly five years of searching and collecting, I have grown the original published list by Searle of thirty plus worts to one hundred and twenty seven.

So what are these plants? A wort, which is pronounced ‘wert’, was a plant that had some medical or domestic use. Perhaps the word “worth” was in some way associated with this term. The expression “you are the wort of my life” never seemed to have caught on, but the other word ‘bane’ did, which is something to ponder and mull over on those long winter nights.

A bane, was a poison, so one has Bugbane, Cowbane, Fleabane and Dogsbane, which are plants that could effectively dispatch those species. (I assume that the cows and dogs ate it by mistake). Perhaps the word “banish” is in some way connected.

Many of the true meanings of these herbs has been lost in the mists of time with only their names left for perpetuity, some of the uses mentioned are reliable, others are most certainly not.

It is the year 625 AD, as we join the family in their hut with your wife busy washing up the dishes and pots with her pewterwort (*Equisetum arvense*) and glasswort (*Salicornia europaea*) scouring mix. One of the children is coughing, another is in bed moaning and sneezing with a high temperature and there is nothing on the window worth watching. The mother in law continues to run you down to her daughter with a relentless passion.

In no time at all, your wife has singled you out as man in need of a mission. You are dispatched to find some coughwort (*Tussilago farfara*), some feverworts (*Centaureum vulgare* or *erythraea*) or (*Eupatorium perfoliatum*) and most of all some sneezwort (*Achillea ptarmica*).

The gods are not being very kind this day and you fall over a large log left carelessly in your path. Within minutes you can feel a contusion forming. It is time for the bruisewort, luckily there

was a choice, Comfrey (*Symphitum officinale*) and Daisy (*Bellis perennis*) The wound was more severe than you at first thought, and you decide to clean it first with Soapwort or Wild Sweet William (*Saponaria officinalis*), which was also called latherwort and bruisewort.

There is a cut that you missed and the wound is bleeding, so you search for the *Sanguinaria canadensis* or Bloodroot, which takes a little time because it grows mainly in North America. You decide to look for a woundwort and come across Self Heal (*Prunella vulgaris*) also known as healwort, Golden Rod (*Solidago virgaurea*) and Yarrow (*Achillea millefolium*), which was also known as soldiers' woundwort.

Sadly, as you toppled over the wooden obstacle, part of you was dealt a blow by a projecting protrusion. With eyes watering you seek the comfort of rupturewort or burstwort (*Herniaria glabra*). As you wipe away the tears, you inadvertently push a piece of detritus into your eye and you make a mental note to add Clary wort (*Salvia sclarea*) to your list. Clary was better known in those days as Clear Eye.

You collect wild pansy or bonewort (*Viola tricolor*) and ribwort (*Plantago lanceolata*) and are grateful that on this occasion you have need of neither. For the coughing child at home you find some lungwort (*Pulmonaria officinalis*) to ease the congestion in his chest.

You hobble on through the forest and are rewarded with a present for the old crone, a small stand of *Chenopodium olidum* and close relative of Fat Hen called Stinking Motherwort, which though it smells absolutely disgusting is an excellent nerve tonic. You also find something for her complexion that may cheer her up and collect up large quantities of scabwort or St. James's Wort (*Senecio jacobaea*) and the closely related cankerwort (*Senecio vulgaris*). The discovery of lousewort (also called licebane) or *Delphinium* is a further bonus, which might make her less of an irritation about the house.

Two valuable herbs (that have remained popular to this day) are found on the damp fringes of the forest, they are St. John's Wort (*Hypericum perforatum*) and scarwort (*Stellaria media*). The *Stellaria* might be better known as Chickweed, though it also had the names stitchwort and starwort. It is a wonderfully soothing herb for itching, bruises, swellings, acne, spots and even conditions such as mastitis, thrush and hives (urticaria). You know your wife will be pleased to add these to the herbal chest, once she has pounded them into lard or animal fat.

As you prepare to turn back, you spot a small patch of *Stachys palustris* or Opopanewort. Though this name has no meaning to you (because you know it as clown's woundwort) you do know it as an excellent remedy for pain, cramps, sprains, wounds and falling sickness. Seeing the humour of the herb you add it to the basket.

Three final herbs grace your basket. Two for your wife, because you know how she likes to look her best, *Heracleum lanatum* and *Drosera anglica* known as Youthwort, and hopefully you and your wife can enjoy the last, which is *Tanacetum parthenium* or Flirtwort.