Introduction to Herbal Actions Through the Senses

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For the beginning herbalist learning all of the specific information about dozens or hundreds of herbs can be overwhelming. By understanding a few of the major herbal actions and how they are expressed in the plants, we can begin to develop a palette of herbal actions that are reflected in how we perceive the plants.

For example: Instead of memorizing that such-and-such an herb is good for digestion, it may be helpful to understand how bitter and aromatic plants affect the digestive system. This opens up an array of plants that can be used for digestion based on readily accessible plant traits that we can smell and/or taste.

In this workshop we will discuss important herbal actions including astringents, demulcents and emollients, bitters, aromatics and nutritives. All of these are actions that we can actually perceive with our senses through organoleptic testing. We will look at how to use these broad actions to develop care plans that take advantage of the facts that many plants have similar actions and many plants have multiple actions. We will introduce organoleptic [“being, affecting, or relating to qualities (as taste, color, odor, and feel) of a substance (as a food or drug) that stimulate the sense organs” – Merriam Webster] methods, and stress the safety considerations of proper identification.

Astringents

Body Systems Most Affected: Skin and mucosa

Mode of Action: By binding to, and precipitating, proteins, tannic acid astringents can dry, draw, shrink swollen tissue and are mildly anti-microbial.

Indications: First aid (cuts, stings, burns, bites, splinters) Inflammation (redness, swelling, pain, heat), oily rash (poison oak), boils, acne, mouthwash.

Application: Direct contact - spit poultice, tea, tincture, compress, liniment

Materia medica: Any green leaf (that’s non-toxic) – all plants have tannins; blackberry, geraniums, lawn daisy, oak, pipsissewa, plantain, tea, tobacco, willow, uva-ursi

Organoleptics: Drying, puckering of the mouth, as after dry red wine.

Demulcents & Emollients

Body Systems Most Affected: Soothing and healing to mucous membranes (demulcents) and the skin (emollients). Urinary tract, GI tract, throat, skin.

Mode of Action: Direct contact (mucilage), reflex action – stimulates the body to produce its own mucus.

Indications: Burns, dry skin, dry rash, dry lips, sore throat, dry cough, ulcers, UTI.

Application: Cold tea, food, lotion, spit poultice, compress.

Materia medica: Cherry bark, comfrey, corn silk, flaxseed, licorice, lungwort, marshmallow, oatmeal, okra, plantain, slippery elm, violets.

Organoleptics: Complex mucilaginous polysaccharides that become slimy and gummy when in contact with water.

Bitters

Body Systems Most Affected: GI tract

Mode of Action: Bitterness may be due to a volatile oil, an alkaloid, iridoid or sesquiterpene. A range of physiological responses occur following stimulation of the bitter receptors of the tongue. This range of reactions are often referred to as the "bitter reflex." This includes stimulating the flow of digestive juices in the mouth, stomach, pancreas, gall bladder and liver. The flow of digestive juices will typically stimulate the appetite as well as aid in digestion.

Indications: Digestive issues, constipation, flatulence. A range of conditions can be improved by efficient digestion, even beyond the GI tract specifically. Some bitters (but not all) are also liver stimulants, and have been used traditionally for skin issues as well (general metabolic filter).

Application: Taste it - reflex action. Best before eating. (tea, tincture, vinegar, raw)

Materia medica: Burdock, centaury, dandelion, gentian, goldenseal, horehound, kale, mugwort, Oregon grape, rue, yarrow, yellow dock.

Organoleptics: Bitter. May stimulate salivation.

Aromatics

Body Systems Most Affected: GI, respiratory, skin, genito-urinary tract, reproductive system

Mode of Action: Direct contact; by irritation – stimulate function.

Indications: Basic indication is similar to bitters - digestive issues, constipation, flatulence. Depending on how the aromatic oils are excreted though, these plants can have effects on different organ systems. Respiratory congestion can be relieved by plants in this group for example.

Application: Tea, tincture, food, oil, vinegar, liniment, inhalation / aromatherapy

Materia medica: Angelica, aniseed, caraway, cardamom, celery seed, chamomile, cinnamon, dill, elecampane, eucalyptus, fennel, garlic, ginger, lemon balm, mint, mugwort, parsley, rosemary, sage, thyme, yarrow.

Organoleptics: Aromatic, pungent, spicy, 'herbal,' 'medicinal,' strongly scented/flavored.

Nutritives

Body Systems Most Affected: Whole body (generally working through GI tract).

Mode of Action: Nutrient dense, antioxidants, tonics. Improved metabolism and vitality.

Indications: Chronic health issues, circulatory issues, brittle nails, acne, stress.

Application: Food, tea, vinegars.

Materia medica: Beets, blackberries, blueberries, carrots, chickweed, dandelion, hawthorn, kale, lamb's quarters, nettles.

Organoleptics: Dark greens and bright colors.

References

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