

Aboriginal Bush Medicine

Australian Aborigines have drawn on the resources of the environment for medicines. Many plants have been used, generally without elaborate preparation. Plant material is very often bruised or pounded to use as a poultice, or extracted with water to be taken internally. The Australian flora is particularly rich in aromatic plants such as eucalyptus, tea-trees, boronias and mints and these have always been considered especially suitable for treating respiratory diseases. Aborigines have used a large number of them for treating illnesses.

Plants of value in medicine contain extra chemicals such as :

- **tannins** – usually found in the bark but often in fruits and leaves; complex chemicals which act as an astringent, drawing the tissues together and contracting them which is useful for treating surfaces such as the inflamed mucous membranes characteristic of coughs and colds, and bathing wounds;
- **mucilage** – used as a soothing medication for inflamed mucous membrane;
- **oil** – from plants with oil glands, such as the eucalyptus and the mints, and described as aromatic. A number of oils have proved to have antimicrobial action;
- **latex** – found only in some plants it is a white fluid (sometimes yellow or colourless) which may be harmless, such as in fig trees, but often irritating or even corrosive. Latex often contains enzymes which digest protein so is useful in the removal of small skin eruptions such as warts or corns and, more dramatically, the cleaning of the surface of foul ulcers and wounds; and
- **alkaloids** – the most important class of plants from a medicinal point of view; usually have a bitter taste, are therapeutic and sometimes poisonous. The better known alkaloids to be isolated are caffeine, morphine, quinine, atropine, nicotine, codeine, strychnine and cocaine.

Examples of medicinal plants are :

- ***Melaleuca quinquenervia*** (broad-leaved paperbark) – new leaves were chewed for treatment of head colds and a decoction brewed for headaches, colds and general sickness.
- ***Vigna vexillata*** (native cowpea) – a trailing pea with yellowish flowers tinged with purple. In the N.T., Aborigines ate the roots to treat constipation.
- ***Beyeria leschenaultii*** (pale turpentine bush) – decoction of leaves used as a universal remedy, especially for tuberculosis and fevers.