

# **Medicinal Plant Use in Dominica**

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**May 24-June 14, 2005**

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## **Abstract**

Around the world, in many countries herbs are used as a natural way of healing. In Dominica despite the introduction of western drugs and cures, some people are still using plants and home remedies for relief of pain and cure of diseases. The purpose of this project was to interview various locals and determine the commonly used medicinal herbs in Dominica, W.I. This project was completed within the three weeks of a study abroad program launched by Texas A&M University. Based on several interviews, various people had different opinions about the uses of certain plant and some plants had a consistent use agreed upon by most people.

## **Introduction**

Herbal medicines are still to this day commonly used around the world. In Dominica the introduction of modern medicine has lead to the decrease in use of herbal medicine, or 'bush medicine.' According to Disciple Caesar's *The Healer is here*, the use of natural things is "becoming a fashion and not a reality" and this is because many Dominicans want American things, and don't understand the power of the herbs on the island. Dominica has remained the main point of reference for herb medicine, and this is mainly because the remaining Carib population is on this Island. There are many plants still being used today, but lemon grass (*Cymbopogon citratus*), bay leaf (*Pimenta racemosa*), noni (*Morinda citrifolia*), castor (*Ricinus communis*), and guava (*Psidium guajava*) seem to be commonly used plants. Medicinal uses for herbs in Dominica range from pain

relief during labor to cure for cuts and bruises.

### **Methods**

Most of the data for this research project was collected by informally interviewing the locals around Springfield Plantation. The approach that was used began with a simple conversation about each individual's family and background. This approach was effective in making the person being interviewed more open and helpful. Some individuals were very approachable so the interview was just focused on the plants.

Cecil Espirt and Totos are the guards at the stream house, and both were interviewed individually. The ladies in the kitchen: Karen John, Sandra Phillip, and Sabrina Thomas were all interviewed together while they were cooking dinner. Gloria Thomas was interviewed in the presence of her sister Sabrina. Desmond was interviewed while he was working in the kitchen in the presence of his sister, Sandra. Clem James was very informative during our trips around Dominica at various times during the three weeks. Dorcely Selamise was interviewed with the help of Sabrina who translated the information. Since most of the names were given in common local names, Nancy Osler helped with providing the scientific names. Kell George and Kendal Pascal both helped identify plants that were located around Springfield.

### **Results**

Table 1 lists the common names, scientific names, and cures that were mentioned in all the interviews for all plants considered in this study.

The data show that the most commonly used plants on the island are lemon grass, noni, guava, castor oil, and bay leaf.

Lemon grass is an 'all-cure' for many diseases and symptoms. A simple tea with ginger (*Zingiber officinale*) brings relief to someone with a sore throat or cough. An employee of the Springfield Plantation, Sabrina, has made tea for fellow employees and students that have stayed at the plantation. Mavizoo, ginger, lemon grass, and gros tete (*Leonotis nepetifolia*) were also mentioned as a relief or cure for cough. There were many cures that have been mentioned for fever such as: basilic (*Ocimum basilicum*), canne-a-sucre (*Saccharinum officinarum*), mavizoo, masaquazil, and teamyok.

Noni is a well known pain killer that is used to increase blood circulation and is known to be used around the world. In other countries, Noni is commonly sold in a pill or juice form. A paste form is used commonly in Dominica and wrapped around the sore area. Balisavan (*Sidarthonbifolia manvaceae*) is also used in the paste form and wrapped around sprain ankles and sore joints. Plants that are used for body aches are mango leaves (*Mangifera indica*), noni, and silk cotton tree (*Ceiba pentandra*).

A common cure for diarrhea that was mentioned frequently during the interviews is a plant known as guava. Castor and wormbush (*Chenopodium ambrosioides*), is used often for constipation and treatment of worms. Wormbush is most commonly use for treatment of worms for small children and also given to pregnant mothers in the form of tea. Other plants that were mentioned as cures for stomach discomfort such as loose bowl, ulcer, or aches are raspberry (*Rubus*

*stringosus*), herbe a fer (*Erymigung fortidum*), and chabonique (*Urena sinuata*), respectively.

Spices such as, bayleaf and thyme (*Petite diten*), are used in the bath for a relaxing or sleep sedative. Gommier trees (*Dacryodes excelsa*) secrete a white latex gum which is used for toothaches. Cashew (*Anacardium occidentale*) have a high quantity of toxins before being processed and can easily burn skin, therefore this plant is used carefully to remove warts. Asthma is not a major problem in Dominica, but cochlaia (*Peperomia pellucida*) was mentioned as a temporary relief. Bois chandelle (*Erithalis fruticosa*) is a plant that is used to keep the body warm during the winter or when a person has a cold, and laloes (*Aloe vera*) is used to calm the nerves and cooling for sunburns.

### **Discussion**

Although all the medicinal plants in Dominica were not mentioned during the interviews, a common mention of some plants led me to believe that the data shows what plants are used commonly on the island today.

Interviewing a wide range of Dominicans with different age, educations, customs, and economic status presented a clear opinion of 'bush medicine' today. Totos, Cecil and Dorcelly were advocates of bush medicine. They were enthusiastic about bringing me plants and explaining what each one did. They all mentioned how it was cheaper to use what God gave us, and the fact that they did not visit doctors because of the expense. The ladies who worked in the kitchen, Sandra, Sabrina, Gloria, and Karen, were enthusiastic about sharing the knowledge they had about plants, but did not use all the plants they knew about.

Noni, lemon grass, and ginger were the ones they used, and frequently visited doctors when they and their family members were ill. Clem and Saxon both shared the knowledge of what they knew locals and as tour guides, but did not frequently use plants as medicine.

In a research project done by Jessica Demulder in 2002 on noni, she interviewed Clem about his knowledge of noni. He said that certain regions of Dominica view some plants in different ways. In the east, noni is known as a cure, but in the west it is a poison. Clem grew up in the west part of the island and was told to stay away from noni when he was younger. Clem also spoke to me about the different views of herbe a fer. In the Caribe territories, this plant is called 'spirit weed' and will protect them from evil. In other regions, it is used to cure headaches and ulcers. Clem uses it as a spice and said that if Caribs knew it was in their food they would not even touch it. The different opinions of plants are because of the different cultures both regions have. The east region of Dominica is where the Carib territory is located, and the west is somewhat the more modern educated region of the island. Further studies can be done by interviewing more individuals from certain regions of Dominica to compare the different uses for each plant

In conclusion, Dominicans are still using plants for medicinal purposes. Even though it is apparent that fewer individuals believe in its healing power, there are some who still appreciate the plants.

## **Acknowledgment**

I would like to thank Cecil Espirt, Karen John, Clem James, Sandra Philip, Dorcely Selamise, Sabrina Thomas, Gloria Thomas, Totos, Saxon, and Desmond for the time and effort they took in bringing the plants to Springfield and sharing their knowledge. I would like to thanks Kell Georges and Kendal Pascal for identifying plants around the Springfield area. I would like to thank Nancy Osler for helping me find the scientific names for the plants. Last but not least, Dr. Wharton for being patient and answering all my questions.

## **References**

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## Table 1: Plant and Medicinal Uses

<b>Common Name</b>	<b>Scientific Names</b>	<b>Cure/Uses</b>
bois chandelle	Erithalis fruticosa	cold, keeps warm
laloos	Aloe vera	calm down when scared, sunburn
chabonique	Urena sinuata	with addition of salt cures stomach ache
canne-a-sucré	Saaccharinum officinarum	fever
mango leaves	Mangifera indica	sore body
basilic	Ocimum basilicum	fever
Gros tete	Leonotis nepetifolia	cough
Bay leaf	Pimenta Racemosa	headache, bath to relax
castor	Ricinus communis	taken with milk for constipation, worms
guava	Psidium guajava	diarrhea
herbe a fer	Erymigum fortidum	headache, ulcer
raspberry	Rubus stringosus	loose bowl
ginger	Zinglber officinale	add lemon grass for cough
thyme	Petite ditén	puts you to sleep
wormbush	Chenopodium ambrosioides	taken with milk for children with worms, tea for pregnant mothers
lemon grass	Cymbogogon citratus	various teas for pneumonia, cough
cochlaia	Peperomia pellucida	asthma
balisavan	Sidarhonbifolia manvaceae	sprain ankle, joints
mavizoo	*n/a	fever, cough
masaquazil	*n/a	fever
teamyok	*n/a	fever
noni	Morinda citrifolia	sore body, blood circulation
silk cotton tree	Ceiba pentandra	sore body
gommier	Dacryodes excelsa	gum for toothache
cashew	Anacardium occidentale	remove warts

\* The exact plant was not identified, therefore the scientific name was not found.