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Anthony C. Dweck
Consultant

Heaven and Hell or Paradise Lost

Spring is coming and the sap is rising, however, speaking personally the sap seems to be going everywhere but up. It was when I overheard someone describe me as the Fat Controller from Thomas the Tank Engine, that *Dweckus maximus* I.M. Efty decided that it was high time to start the diet.

It seemed a great idea to look at the plant kingdom for my salvation, and before I could stop myself was looking at the Beefsteak plant (*Perilla frutescens*). The seed produce Shiso oil, which is a great choice for treating acne externally, but internally is used as a spice or for treating nausea. There are times when nausea would have been nice, because at least it meant you had probably eaten something.

I turned my thoughts to a treat, something special, something from paradise that would make up for the hardship of abstinence. My hopes were dashed, when the major players from the literature turned out to be *Musa paradisiaca* (banana), *Ampelopsis Grana paradisi* (Melegueta pepper) and *Citrus paradisi* (grapefruit). Banana is great for face masks but full of diuretic potassium, which demands total dedication to the water closet. Melegueta pepper (or Grains of Paradise) is a rubefacient that is strong enough for horse liniment, and could burn a hole in the hardest of stomach linings. Grapefruit is a great astringent in toners, and the essential oil is wonderful, but eating the thing just creates more visits to the bathroom.

I also discovered the Paradise nut (*Lecythis usita*), how the description of the 2 kg seed pods, which are similar to Brazil nuts, made my mouth water! At the bottom of the page I discovered that these nuts cause abdominal pain, vomiting, diarrhoea, loss of scalp and body hair, and can cause "blind staggers" which are the signs of acute selenium poisoning. My appetite diminished.

If paradise was too ambitious, then surely heaven would offer me some cause for celebration.

The Tree of Heaven (*Ailanthus altissima*) was formerly used for the treatment of dysentery and diarrhoea, but itself causes nausea, because the odour and taste are so acrid. It is also called the varnish tree, but it does not provide any varnish, which is a puzzle that could keep you awake at nights with worry.

The Gift of Heaven (*Brassica oleraceae*) or Sea Cabbage is supposed to assuage drunkenness. Sadly, consuming vast quantities of ale and shedding excess flab are not two ideas that sit very comfortably together. The plant has been used for varicose ulcers, eczema, burns, wounds and contusions. For the domesticated and house proud amongst us, here is an old tip from the French, cut a cabbage in half and use it like a brush to renovate and clean your carpet. The outstanding flaw (suppresses a chuckle) with this idea is the obvious lack of bristles possessed by cabbage.

The Key(s) of Heaven (*Primula veris*) is Cowslip and an infusion of the flowers is a weak diuretic and mild laxative with sedative properties. The whole plant has been infused and employed as a treatment for a variety of skin problems. The name Cowlip comes from the Anglo-Saxon “*cusloppe*” meaning cow’s breath, which is supposed to be an enticing description of the flowers’ scent.

The Root of Heaven (*Panax ginseng*), Korean Ginseng or Five Fingers is a tonic and definitely one of the things to take on a diet, since it revitalises body and soul. It is also very good topically and recently there has been a great deal of scientific activity to prove its useful application in preventing the signs of skin ageing.

The Ladder to Heaven (*Polygonum officinale*), Jacob’s Ladder or Lady’s Seal had the reputation of “sealing” wounds, and for knitting bones (in much the same way as Comfrey). Gerard said it would *take away in one or two nights, any bruise, black or blue spots gotten by falls or women’s wilfulness in stumbling upon their hasty husbands fists!* The roots can be cooked and eaten like asparagus, when they also have the reputation of lowering blood sugar.

Heaven Grass (*Laminaria japonica*) is also known as Long Xu Cai in Chinese or in English as Sea Tangle. It is a seaweed, which has mucilaginous moisturising effects on the skin and has also been used internally to treat obesity. It is also used to treat chronic constipation.

Wands of Heaven (*Aloe barbadensis*) or Aloe vera has so many beneficial properties on the skin that there is not enough space to do justice to its cooling, soothing and healing properties. In its dried form, it is a powerful purgative when taken internally. The gel is used as a tonic and for lack of appetite in Aloe vera drinks. Lack of appetite is not a problem right now.

As paradise and heaven had very little to offer, I decided to go to the other place.

Hellweed or Devil’s Guts (*Cuscuta chinensis*) should be just the answer. As soon as the reference mentioned kidneys I knew it was another recipe for chronic water production, it was also a laxative, but at least this plant was cited for impotence and as an aphrodisiac (assuming you could fit something in between other pressing visits).

Devil's Club (*Echinopanax horridum* or *Oplopanax horridum*) has been used externally on cuts and burns (how appropriate!) and promotes wound healing. However, it is purgative and emetic.

Devil's Claw (*Harpagophytum procumbens*) root is applied to wounds to stimulate healing and is taken internally as an anti-inflammatory for arthritic joints and swelling, rheumatism, lumbago and gout.

Devil's Bit (*Succisa pratensis* or *Scabiosa succisa*) is used topically for itching conditions of the skin and taken internally promotes sweating.

Devil's Plague (*Daucus carota*) is the Wild Carrot, which is used for urinary infections and cystitis.

Devil's Tree (*Alstonia scholaris*) causes minor irritation of the genitals and acts as a bladder irritant, not very useful you might think, but these are the features of those aphrodisiacs that increase male duration. Hmmm!

Devil's Dung (*Ferula assafoetida*) has a putrid odour and nauseating taste and is sold in health food stores as a food preservative and spice!

Devil's Ear (*Arum triphyllum*) is dangerous and only the dried root is used for asthma, flatulence, croup, whooping cough. The fresh plant causes violent gastroenteritis and may cause death, so probably not one for the diet.

Devil's Bones (*Dioscorea villosa*) is another aphrodisiac and also a topical vulnerary (wound healing agent) which contains diosgenin the starting point for the synthesis of many hormones and corticosteroids.

Devil-s Fuge (*Phoradendron villosum*) is better known as mistletoe and highly toxic. (See December's column)

Devil's Vine (*Convolvulus arvensis*) is the invasive Hedge Bindweed, which can be used as a poultice to bring out boils, but internally is a powerful purgative, one reference said that it was used as a brain tonic to treat insanity (so it is probably worth trying!). It also has the name Devil's Garters.

Devil's Apple (*Podophyllum peltatum*) is used as the ground rhizome to treat warts and tumorous growths on the skin, but is too toxic to take internally. The name is also applied to Mandrake (*Mandragora officinarum*), which is also very toxic and also had the name Devil's Testicles, which should brighten up your next dinner party with the local vicar. *Datura stramonium* or

Jimsonweed also shared this name and was also called Devil's Trumpet – it is very poisonous.

Devil's Darning Needle (*Clematis virginiana*) is a Native American remedy for skin disorders, including ulcers and pruritis (itching), when applied topically. However, it has the internal side effects of profuse salivation, inflamed eyes, painful and excessive urination, dizziness, possible fainting fits and convulsions. Conditions that one normally associates with a good aggressive diet!

The Devil's Shrub (*Acanthopanax senticosus*) is another name for Siberian Ginseng, and at last I may have found something for my diet, since it is an excellent tonic which is said to stimulate the immune system, increase body energy levels and increase work capacity. It is also known by the name Devil's Bush.

Devil's Hat (*Tussilago petasites*) or Butterbur, the fresh leaves have been used externally as a wound dressing, but unfortunately they are diuretic if taken internally. The rhizome was once prescribed for stammering and one is left wondering how the poor inflicted sufferer ever managed to ask for it by the Latin name.

Devil's Milk (*Chelidonium majus*) or Celandine is a very beneficial plant externally and is used for eczema, diseases of the skin, haemorrhoids, and other topical complaints. The stem contains a latex which has been used to remove warts, verrucae and corns. It is not to be taken internally.

Devil's Scourge (*Hypericum perforatum*) is St. John's Wort, which is a wonderful cicatrising agent for wounds, cuts, burns, varicose veins and bruises. It is also good for bed-wetting, though mercifully this is not one of my problems at the time of writing.

Devil's Nettle (*Achillea millefolium*) or Yarrow is another diuretic that will cause unnecessary excursions to that smallest of rooms. Topically it is an excellent treatment for skin infections, boils, rashes and other problems. It has an effect not dissimilar to German Chamomile (*Matricaria recutita*), which has similar components and is also a member of the Compositae family.

It would seem that the inferno of Hades has little to offer either and so I looked for other slimming aids.

Chickweed (*Stellaria media*) taken with lemon and orange peel is supposed to be good for slimming, it would also make an excellent wash for boils and carbuncles, as well as a very refreshing eye lotion.

Gooseberry (*Ribes uva-crispa*) is full of AHAs (alpha hydroxy acids) and will also help to

dissolve urinary stones and gravel. It will also make a good astringent application to wounds and have a cleansing effect on greasy skin.

Cleavers (*Galium aparine*) or Goosegrass is a reputed to be a good skin deodorant, an excellent remedy for numerous skin complaints and of benefit in the control of dandruff. As it is referred to as a dry and bitter herb with cleansing and slimming properties (a nice way to describe a laxative) with diuretic properties, I decided to leave it for the skin care.

Brindle Berry (*Garcinia cambogia*) or the Malibar Tamarind is used in a variety of skin ailments such as ulcers, fissures, inflamed wounds and sores. It is also supposed to inhibit fat production, curb the appetite and help to reduce food intake, which makes it quite a good choice.

The Jerusalem Artichoke (*Helianthus tuberosum*) is high in polyunsaturated fatty acids, inulin and protein, which would suggest that this material would be ideal for the care of the skin. It has been attributed with great benefit in dieting, but has the rather large draw back of producing chronic flatulence, which might have undesirable social consequences.

Celery (*Apium graveolens*) is another powerful diuretic that has been used with success as a slimming aid. As a salad or tea, the plant is said to be useful in clearing up skin problems and may also lower blood pressure.

It would seem from the survey that between heaven and hell there are no easy ways to loose weight, though it does appear that those things that do you good from the inside, will most certainly do you good applied on the outside.

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