

SEPTEMBER COLUMN FOR SOAP, PERFUMERY & COSMETICS

Anthony C. Dweck

Full of Eastern Promise

I arrived in the early hours of the morning and was treated with nothing but kindness and courtesy from the moment that I left the plane. The people of the Philippines showed a warmth and concern for a visitor's comfort both mentally and physically that seems to have virtually disappeared from most western cultures. However, presented with any form of motorised transport these gentle folk become the most aggressive and demoniacal roadsters that I have ever experienced. Manila is one of the most white-knuckled commutes that I have ever experienced and how on earth we managed to maintain a scratch-free paint job, on the daily journey (which was more akin to a chariot race) to my client, remains a haunting question to this day.

In amongst this bustle and energy, amid the sprawling hubbub and frenetic energy that is typical of this country, were vibrant green banana palms, white-flowered fragrant frangipani and mango trees. As we coasted along the side of the road, we were treated to the exotic smells of small market stalls selling granadilla, guava, custard apples and papaya along with fruits that were totally unrecognisable to me, but which nonetheless were delicious, aromatic and refreshing.

There is a whole world of medicinal plants and beneficial raw materials that nobody seems to have explored in the West. At every turn there seemed to be fresh ideas and possibilities that could be used in our products.

Mango (*Mangifera indica*), especially green mango, was as refreshing and tingling in taste as lemon and lime. Most of us have experience of the fruit, but a decoction of the leaves can be used as a wash for bruises and wounds. The resin from the trunk is used for skin diseases (aphthae) and pruritic conditions, while mixed with coconut oil is used for the treatment of scabies. The bark and the seeds are astringent. Even the ashes of the leaves are used as a popular remedy for scalds and burns.

Taro (*Colocasia esculenta*) has large corms and underground stems which are full of a nutritious starch. The taste (to my thinking) was similar to Arrowroot (*Maranta arundinaceae*), a convalescent food I remembered from my childhood. The juice of the petioles is highly styptic and the juice of the corm has been cited for alopecia. The use of this starch in a facemask could be a nutritious and mineral-rich treatment that is good enough to eat.

Custard Apple (*Anona squamosa*) or the sugar apple or sweetsop is a fruit that has fascinated me for quite some time and seems to be an ingredient that is begging for further investigation. The

crushed seeds mixed with coconut oil or water are used on the scalp to rid the hair of lice, though it appears in another reference that the powdered seeds mixed with alcohol is a good remedy for dandruff. The leaves, the unripe fruit and the seeds also are reported to have insecticidal properties; perhaps at lower levels the effect might be repellent?

Purslane. I recently discovered a new extract being offered in the UK, which was *Portulacca oleracea*, but it was only when I read about the use in the Philippines that I realised the full potential importance of this plant. It is used to cure eye inflammation. Used externally, the leaves and the stems applied topically over burns will not only help to relieve the pain, but also improve the condition of the underlying skin. Placed over wounds, the plant improved the rate of healing. It is even reported to increase the flow of milk in nursing mothers. The plant has a reputation that goes further, since in China the plant is considered emollient, and is used in the treatment of ulcers and in oedematous swellings. In West Tropical Africa the ground leaves mixed with oil are applied to boils to bring them to a head and as a local application to swellings, whitlows and other skin conditions (such as whitlows). The Tamils use the plant externally for the treatment of erysipelas.

Mother-in-law. Amongst this amazing plethora of exciting new possibilities I found a plant called the goodluck leaf, miracle leaf or floppers (*Kalanchoe* sp). The leaves, which can be slightly toasted, are applied over bruises, boils and insect bites. Alternatively, the leaves can be pulped and are used on chronic ulcers and sores. In other parts of the world, the roasted or bruised leaves are applied to contusions and bruises to prevent inflammation and prevent the characteristic discolouration. The plant also has styptic properties and can be applied to cuts, bites, wounds and insect bites.

I was also reminded that an ingredient considered to be wonderful in the West is not always viewed with equal admiration in every country you visit. I was discussing the care of baby's delicate skin and without hesitation (or thinking!) recommended coconut oil. The response was one of horror: "Why should we want to cover our child in cooking oil?" It was one of those very rare moments when I was totally lost for words!

For over ten years I have been desperately trying to find a copy of Eduardo Quisumbing's *Medicinal Plants of the Philippines*, since it is a classic work in the field of ethnopharmacy. My hosts were more than a little surprised at my emotions on being presented this volume as a gift – but how could they have possibly known that to me this book was probably as important as the discovery of the tomb of Tutankhamen had been to Howard Carter?

