

# An Accolade for Herbs

Celebrating 10,000 years of Herbal Medicine

by Moira Elliott, Medical Herbalist

The four herbs for  
Herb Awareness Week of 2010 are :

dill  
aloe vera  
mullein  
plantain

– two digestive herbs and two respiratory herbs with  
a myriad of other therapeutic uses in between.



**Herb Awareness Week 1-8 March 2010**  
Herb Federation of New Zealand  
[www.herbs.org.nz](http://www.herbs.org.nz)

## Dill (*Anethum graveolens*)

This delicate herb is still in use after well over 10,000 years and deserves the title of **International Herb of the Year for 2010**

Archaeological evidence of the cultivation of dill dates back to Europe around 8500 BC in the Neolithic Era. Dill was one of the herbs and spices with which the Israelites paid tithing. The Greeks used dill in cooking. The Romans believed it had fortifying properties, feeding it to gladiators to give them strength. It was used in a pain-killing mixture by ancient Egyptians and Hippocrates formulated a mouthwash with dill seeds boiled in wine. The common name dill is derived from the Norse 'dylla', meaning to lull or soothe. 'Graveolens' in the botanical name means 'strong smelling'. This strong smell comes from the essential oils found throughout the plant.

Altogether proof of what humanity has known for thousands of years – with these plant chemicals dill is indeed fortifying:

- It kills infections of the gastrointestinal tract.
- It supports digestion.
- It calms smooth muscle spasm in the digestive and urinary tracts.

**Tip** – For the easiest home use for all ages, pour hot water over a teaspoon of seeds, let cool a little and sip after meals to ease digestion.

### Some of the scientifically discovered compounds really give credence to the traditional uses of dill:

- **Beta-sitosterol** aids the prostate, verifying one of dill's lesser known historic uses in the male urinary tract.
- **Quercetin** is antioxidant and calming, dill is well known for lulling upset babies.
- **Multiple volatile oils** found in dill are responsible for releasing gas in both the upper and lower digestive tract, relieving colic for babies and indigestion and bloating for all ages.



There are at least  
410 compounds in  
dill's leaves and  
small seeds:

- 71 compounds are  
pesticidal
- 47 have cancer  
preventative effect
- 43 are antibacterial and
- 43 anti-inflammatory
- 40 antioxidant  
compounds
- 35 are antispasmodic



## Aloe vera (*Aloe barbadensis*)

Aloe vera is a succulent perennial of the lily family, with spiky leaves, native to parts of Africa.

The gel is the slimy, clear, mucilage found in the thick fleshy leaves. Although it has antimicrobial properties the gel needs strong preservative additives to give it a commercial shelf life. The best way to use this plant is to have it growing in your own garden and use it fresh. It thrives in most conditions of sub tropical areas, enjoying plenty of sun with a little shade and will readily multiply with little pups, miniatures of the parent plant, shooting off it.

### uses of the gel – topical

- Wellknown for instant pain relieving, healing action on mild burns and sunburn.
- Protects minor wounds from infection.
- Soothing and healing for rashes and other skin conditions.
- Cell-proliferant properties help minimise scarring.
- Promotes hair growth applied topically.

### uses of the inner leaf juice– internal

*Whereas the gel is strongly laxative and not used internally, drinking the inner leaf juice is beneficial.*

- Soothes digestive discomfort, pain, cramping.
- Heals the mucous membrane of the digestive tract.
- Helpful in reflux (heartburn).
- Reduces inflammation throughout the body from gastric, to urinary, to skin.

## Mullein (*Verbascum thapsus*)

Indigenous to southern Europe and West Asia, mullein is now naturalised throughout temperate regions of the world. In its second year of growth mullein grows a tall spike of flowers from a rosette of leaves. This flower spike can grow to a height of four feet.

**The medicinal parts of the mullein plant are the hairy leaves and yellow flowers.**



### uses of mullein

- Coughs, especially unproductive, dry coughs associated with viral infection, whooping cough, allergy, bronchitis.
- Mucous membrane tonic improves fluid production in dry respiratory conditions, reduces inflammation.
- Expectorant and will aid where there is excess mucus such as with wet bronchitis, emphysema, bronchiectasis or tuberculosis.
- The leaves relax bronchial spasm.
- Tonsillitis.
- Earache (oil infusion of yellow flowers). Works well with garlic oil for ear infection.

Traditionally used in childhood illnesses, measles, chicken pox and mumps, mullein is safe.

### Mullein oil recipe – grow mullein and make your own oil

Cover dried flowers and chopped garlic with olive or almond oil in a glass jar. The dried leaves may also be added. Cover with muslin to allow moisture from the garlic to evaporate and keep dust out. Leave to infuse away from sunlight for four weeks, stirring occasionally. Strain and store in a clean glass jar.

### Mullein medicinal tea

Simmer fresh leaves in water for 20 minutes or dried leaves for five minutes.

- Sweeten with a little honey and drink for any of the above respiratory or viral conditions.
- Add a few drops of pure vanilla essence or use vanilla pods for flavour.

### Tips

- Mullein oil can be dropped into ears if the eardrum is not perforated.
- Use it on warts, rashes, eczema and haemorrhoids.



## Plantain (*Plantago major*)

Another plant from Europe and Asia that is naturalised throughout the world, plantain grows easily. You may think it is a weed in your garden, but greater plantain is a valuable medicinal plant.

Herbalists tend to use the leaves of ribwort (*Plantago minor* or *P. lanceolata*) more for respiratory conditions, but *Plantago major* is also very useful for asthma, emphysema and bronchitis. Use for urinary problems – again both plants benefit the urinary tract but *Plantago major* is perhaps more useful here.

The root is therapeutic for digestive tract conditions – diarrhoea, stomach upset, stomach ulcers, irritable bowel syndrome and bleeding from the bowel in addition to respiratory problems, bronchitis, sinusitis, coughs and allergies.

American Indians used Greater Plantain root as an antidote for rattlesnake bite. The leaves would be chewed or steamed and used as a poultice to stop bleeding and repair damaged tissue.

### Tips

- As an aid in stopping smoking, the boiled roots and their decocted water cause an aversion to tobacco.
- Leaves applied as a poultice will draw infection from wounds and ulcers.
- A hot poultice will draw out splinters.

- Soothes coughs.
- Stops bleeding.
- Kills intestinal worm.
- You can eat it! Young leaves raw in salads or as a steamed vegetable.
- Rich in vitamin B1 and riboflavin.
- Antibacterial.
- Astringent, anti-inflammatory and healing. Can be taken internally and used as a poultice or infused in oil.

## uses of plantain

*Moir Elliott is a medical herbalist practising in Tauranga, New Zealand. You might also enjoy reading our regular Herbal Insights articles written by Moira and her husband, medical herbalist Brett Elliott. Email: moira@iconherb.com or see www.iconherb.com*

