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Thai Herbs

Earth, wind, fire, and water. No, not a band's name, but the four elements that must be balanced for a person to be healthy. This is the basis for Thai traditional healing.

While this theory has its roots in Indian Ayurvedic principles first introduced in Thailand during the second or third centuries BC, when Buddhist monks arrived to teach their new religion, Thais must have already been concocting herbal remedies, as it has always been the nature of man to discover better solutions for survival. Through trial and error and accident, the earliest people learned about the wild plants that grew around them, and when they settled and became farmers, they would plant gardens for their herbs and spices.



In Thailand, as in other countries, the people would pass on their knowledge orally from generation to generation. In addition to the Indians, the Chinese and Egyptians were writing their herbal treatments down in such treatises as the Sern Nong Pen Lao and Eber Papyrus respectively, both dating back thousands of years.

The Ramkhamhaeng Stone Inscription is the earliest evidence of Thai ethno healing, as it describes the royal plant garden. Even before this, though, during the Khmer Empire that ruled the Northeast, it is recorded that King Jayavarman VII ordered the establishment of 102 *arokaya sala*, or traditional healing hospitals. Much later, in the 16th century, when King Narai ruled Siam from his seat of power in Ayutthaya, he had both hospitals and the herbal dispensaries opened. After the fall of Ayutthaya and the founding of Bangkok, King Rama III began to promote ethno healing, establishing a school at Wat Pho. However, interest waned as the Government and people turned their attention to, and put their trust in, Western medicine.

But, in 1938, a project was initiated in the northern province of Chiang Mai to cultivate the herb cinchona to produce quinine, but it was not economically viable. With World War II and a lack of sufficient quantities of drugs, the Government again turned its attention to herbal remedies. They even engaged a German expert, to establish an experimental medicinal garden in the eastern province of Chanthaburi. After a short time, the doctor produced a report in English and Thai listing as many as 400 indigenous plants, their characteristics, and medicinal values.

After the World Health Organization began to promote national traditional heritage in 1977, the Thai government added ethno medicine to its five-year national economic and social development plans. The Foundation for the Promotion of Thai Traditional Medicine was established and, over the years, the interest in and importance of herbal healing has continued to grow.

Snuff, inhalants, gargling solutions, teas, infusions, tonics, alcoholic macerates, oral dosages, pills, capsules, tablets, poultices, ointments, essential oils, and suppositories - herbal remedies come in a vast variety of forms. Those taken orally are often classified by their taste - sweet, bitter, astringent, acrid, nutty, salty, and sour, which then correlate with their healing attributes. For example, an herb with a cooling flavor will be prescribed for someone suffering from an ailment caused by a fire element imbalance, or an acrid taste will restore the wind element to a balanced level.

Traditional herbalists, like Thai masseurs and masseuses, have a guardian spirit they pay homage to. In addition to Shivaga Komarpaj, the Ayurvedic practitioner who treated the Lord Buddha and is considered the father of Thai traditional medicine, Thai homeopaths also pay homage to Phra Mae Thorani, “Mother Earth,” and will chant a small prayer when they collect the plants. While certain districts and provinces are known for having superior species because of their climate and soil, there are also specific times that are best for collection; for example, the evening flower jasmine should be picked at night or just before sunrise. Furthermore, it is always best to collect plants during the full moon, when the elements are at their maximum power.

There are three basic ways to classify medicinal herbs: those taken internally, applied externally, and inhaled. Many, though, fall under two or even all three of these classifications. Herbal drugs can have from two to as many as 40 different ingredients, which are also classified by species and medicinal attributes. Then, there is Thai cuisine, which, while famous for its flavors, is also known for its healing properties. As the different dishes can kindle and arouse as well as soothe the senses, the different spices and ingredients are again included to achieve a harmony of the body’s elements, thus serving as a preventative or curative of different symptoms and ailments.

Medicinal Herbs

In addition to treating various symptoms and ailments, many Thai medicinal herbs are used to spice up the various dishes. Thais love to combine very different flavors, hot, sour, sweet and bitter, which create culinary delights that are also curatives, as they balance the four elements: wind, water, earth, and fire.



Basil (*Horapha*)

An anti-bacterial, it also relieves constipation and indigestion as well as cold symptoms. It also helps reduce body fat.

Bitter Cucumber (*Mara*)

Reduces blood in sugar and relieves different liver ailments.

Betel (*Phlu*)

A very mild stimulant.

Chili Pepper (*Prik*)

Rich in vitamin C, it can help prevent colds. It also stimulates blood circulation and assists in digesting starchy food.

Clove (*Kan Phlu*)

An aid in digestion, it also relieves cold symptoms and works as an antiseptic for toothaches.

Cumin (*Yira*)

An efficient cure for flatulence, indigestion, and diarrhea.



Coriander (*Phak Chi*)

A good diuretic and detoxicant, it also relieves cold symptoms. Some believe it is an aphrodisiac as well.

Galangal (*Kha*)

An excellent treatment for colds and respiratory problems.

Garlic (*Krathiam*)

A great treatment for colds, coughs, and bronchitis. It also purifies the blood, reduces blood pressure and cholesterol, and controls acne.

Hibiscus (*Krachiap Daeng*)

Reduces fat in the blood.

Wild Ginger (*Krachai*)

A treatment for dysentery, diarrhea, and flatulence, it is also an antidote for certain local poisons.

Nightshade (*Mawaengkhrua*)

Relieves cold symptoms and cough.

Ginger (*Khing*)

Improves circulation and digestion. Relieves coughs as well as nausea and flatulence. An excellent remedy for sea and car sickness.

Kariyat (*Fathalai Chon*)

An excellent treatment to reduce fever and relieve indigestion.

Mint (*Saranae*)

A mild stimulant, it relieves headaches and cold symptoms and reduces flatulence and indigestion.

Nutmeg (*Chanthet*)

Relieves digestive and liver disorders, as well as flatulence. It is also used as a natural stimulant and is thought by some to be an aphrodisiac.

Tumeric (Khamin)

An excellent cure for liver problems and jaundice, particularly when taken in tonic form.

Fresh Fruit and Herbal Juices and Infusions

A good juicer that's easy to clean is a big help, and even a necessity, in producing some of these beverages. Then, a blender is useful for mixing your favorites, either after juicing or chopping them up into small pieces.



Aloe Vera (Wan Hang Jorakhe)
Relieves peptic ulcers and aids digestion. Also high in vitamin E, it accelerates healing and improves the complexion.



Banana (Kluai)
Every part of the banana, from root to tree, leaf and flower, as well as the fruit has medicinal properties. The roots are a diuretic, the sap an astringent, and the leaves can even stop bleeding. While the unripe fruit is also an astringent, the ripe fruit is an excellent laxative.

Asiatic Pennywort (Bua Bok)
Very bitter, it is rich in vitamin A and well known as a remedy for internal injuries and wounds. It is also applied to accelerate the healing of burns and eczema, as it helps to prevent scars.

Champak (Champi)
Another favorite, sweet, fragrant night flower, it reduces body temperature and stimulates the heart.

Bael Fruit (Mathum)
Unripe, it is an astringent and tonic; when ripe, it is a mild laxative. It also increases appetite while relieving thirst. Contains

Chrysanthemum (Kek Huai)
Drunk hot or cold, it eases heartburn and reduces body heat.

vitamin A, calcium, and phosphorus.



Coconut (*Ma Phrao*)

Removes toxins, flushing the kidneys and bladder. High in phosphorus, calcium, and carbohydrates.

Ginger (*Khing*)

Improves circulation and relieves nausea.

Guava (*Farang*)

Cures diarrhea and indigestion. High in vitamin A, B1, B2, B6, and C, and iron and calcium.

Lemon Grass (*Takhrai*)

While the roots act as a diuretic and relieve diarrhea and gas, the plant is used to treat asthma, as it's rich in menthol and camphor. It's also high in vitamin A, calcium, and phosphoric acid.



Pandan / Screw Pine (*Toei Hom*)

A refreshing beverage on hot days can be produced from the leaves, which are also known for treating eczema. The plant itself is an excellent diuretic and the roots an anti-diabetic. Also reduces swelling when applied as a compress.



Lime (*Manao*)

Dissolves phlegm and dislodges parasitic worms, and reduces fever and reduces thirst. High in vitamin A and C.

Mango (*Mamuang*)

Like the banana, the entire tree has medicinal attributes. The bark cures dysentery; the dried leaves stop diarrhea; and the fruit itself helps digest proteins. It's also high in the minerals calcium, magnesium and potassium.

Mulberry (*Mon*)

Reduces sugar in blood as it refreshes. Also relieves sore throat.

Orange (*Som*)

High in vitamin A, B, and C, calcium, iron, and phosphorus.



Pomelo (*Som O*)

High in vitamin C and potassium.

Papaya (*Malako*)

The unripe fruit relieves peptic ulcers, and unripe or ripe, it aids digestion. It's also high in vitamin A and C.

Passion Fruit (*Saowarot*)

High in vitamin C and natural sugars.

Pineapple (*Sapparot*)

Aids digestion and improves menstruation. High in vitamin B and C, calcium, and magnesium.



Sugar Cane (*Oi*)

High in fructose, it boosts energy. Also relieves coughs and is a diuretic.

Sugar Palm (*Tan*)

Relieves fever and thirst. High in vitamin C and phosphorus.

Tamarind (*Makham*)

An excellent laxative, it relieves indigestion and coughs, reducing phlegm in the colon and throat. High in vitamin A and C.

Thai Copper Pod / Cassod (*Khilek*)

A remedy for insomnia, it also relieves constipation.

Roselle (*Krachiap*)

Reduces fats in the blood and lowers body temperature. It works as a diuretic, reduces cholesterol, and destroys bile. And it's high in vitamin A and C and citric acid.

Safflower (*Khamfoi*)

Reduces fats in the blood.

Star Fruit / Carambola (*Mafueng*)

Anti-diabetic, as it reduces sugar levels. It is also a diuretic and relieves coughs. Refreshing in hot weather as well.

Fermented Liquor (*Ya Dong*)

An ancient Thai remedy, some believe it is an elixir for longevity as well as sexual prowess. There are actually a number of concoctions, prepared by dicing and grinding different herbs before placing them in a earthen crock and soaking them in rice whiskey. The mixture should be stirred daily and should not be taken until it has soaked for one month. To speed up the process, put the crocks in water and boil. Then wait a week or two before drinking. Alcoholic macerates are prepared by placing the herbs in a muslin cloth before inserting into a jar with rice whiskey. It should be left for at least a week before drinking.

Pregnant women and those suffering from high blood pressure, diabetes, heart disease, high fever, and allergies to alcohol should not take ya dong or alcoholic macerates.

Many of the herbs listed below have already been cited for their internal curative properties. Often, while a certain fruit can make a refreshing snack or beverage, other parts of the plant offer very effective skin, body, and hair treatments.



Aloe Vera (Wan Hang Jorakhe)
The gel extracted from the leaves is high in vitamin E. It's an excellent treatment for burns and sunburn, as well as dry, flaky skin.

Basil (Horapha)
It works wonderfully to refresh the senses and relieve exhaustion.

Camphor (Kalabun)
The leaves are used in steam baths, and a white powder can be extracted from the tree, which, because of its cool, refreshing scent, relieves cold symptoms.

Cassumunar (Phlai)
A ginger-like rhizome, it is ground and boiled and then applied as a compress to relieve pain and reduce swelling. The oil is also used as a scalp conditioner and in aromatherapy.



Coconut (Maphrao)
The oil softens and restores damaged hair.

Frangipani (Lanthom)
A plant often found flowering in Buddhist temples, the sweet aroma creates a very serene ambiance.

Guava (Farang)
After boiling the leaves, gargle to remove bad breath.

Gourd Leaf (Bai Buap)
Used in a body wrap for its excellent moisturizing properties, it can also soothe skin irritations.

Kaffir (Makrut)
The fruit juice is an excellent remedy for dandruff, while stimulating hair growth. After applying, rinse after three minutes with clean water.



Jasmine (*Mali*)

The scented oil and aroma can be soothing in tea.

Lemon Grass (*Takhrai*)

After squeezing juice from stalks, apply to hair to treat dandruff and stimulate hair growth.

Lime (*Manao*)

The juice treats acne and skin infections

Loofa / Dried Gourd (*Buap*)

An excellent exfoliating sponge because of its thick fibers.

Mangosteen (*Mangkokut*)

After boiling the peels in water, apply the water to the skin to treat infection and remove dark facial marks.



Menthol (*Pimsen*)

Often used in herbal steams, with a fragrance much like camphor, it relieves coughs and cold symptoms.

Mint (*Saranae*)

In addition to being a refreshing tea, the oil is used to invigorate the senses in aromatherapy.

Papaya (*Malako*)

Because of its AHA content, it is a popular ingredient in body wrap exfoliate and treatments.

Pineapple (*Sapparot*)

The fruit rubbed on the skin is an excellent facial cleanser. After rubbing it on, rinse with warm water.



Red Lime (*Nam Pun Sai*)

An excellent deodorant, it also relieves inflammation.

Rice (*Khao*)

In addition to being the main staple of the Thai diet, it makes an excellent natural body scrub when it's uncooked and dry.

Sea Salt (*Kluea*)



Tamarind (*Makham*)

Applied as a paste, the fruit cleanses and nourishes the skin.

Thai Copper Pod / Cassod (*Khilek*)

Boil the leaves in water and then apply to hair as a shampoo to treat dandruff and leave hair soft and glossy.

Tumeric (*Khamin*)

Another very effective natural body scrub, usually mixed with essential oils.

Sesame (*Nga*)

The oil is an excellent moisturizer, as it softens skin.

Grind and mix the powder in water to relieve rashes.

White Turnip (*Hua Phakkat*)

Rub thin slices of the root on the face to remove freckles.