



Plants and Prayers

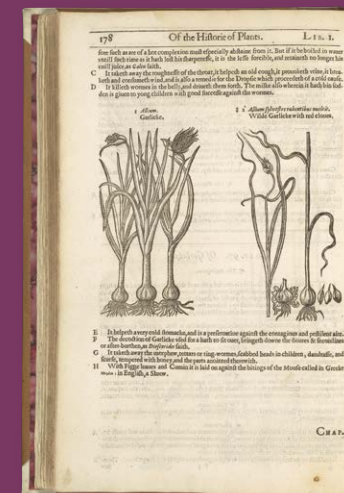
Health and healing before 1700

The herbal tradition

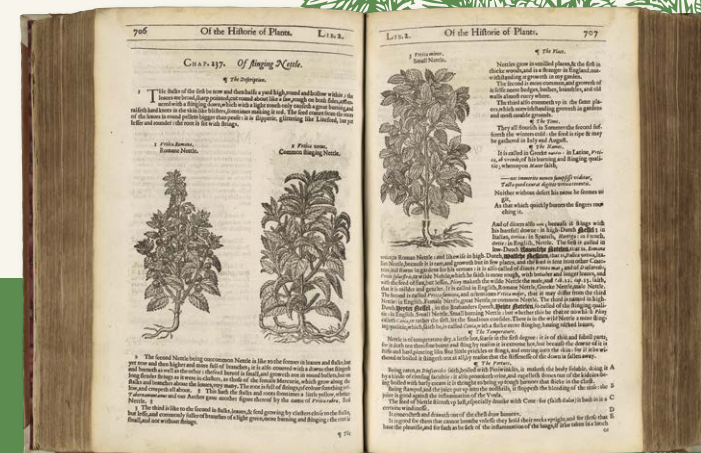
Plants are the backbone of pre-modern medicine. Methods for how to prepare remedies were contained in medical texts, as well as herbals. Herbals contain information on which plants to use, how to prepare them, how to collect them, their attributes according to humoral theory (hot, cold, dry, or wet) and the diseases or conditions they can treat.

Plants for medicinal purposes could come from individual kitchen gardens, special physic gardens grown in monastic or medical contexts, and from trade connections. Other ingredients from the kitchen, such as butter, oil, or alcohol were foundational components to healing remedies. Often historical remedies will specify the plant part (leaves, stem, roots, juice, flowers) and physical state (fresh, infused, or dried plant material). We now know such specifications can have critical effects on the chemical composition of the plant and extraction of bioactive ingredients.

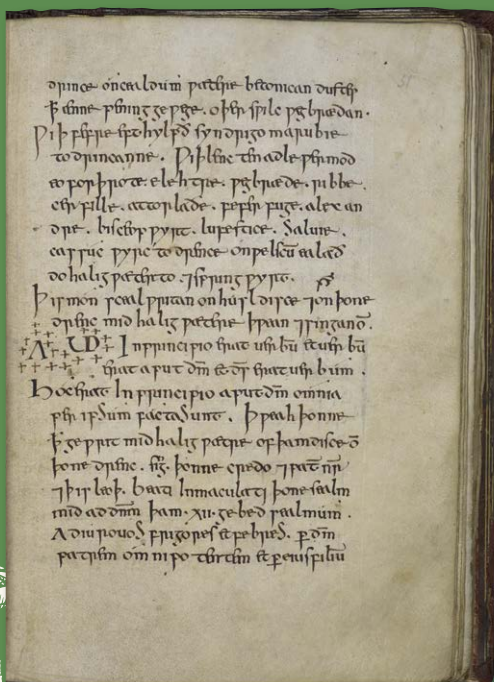
The absence of precise steps and exact measurements, as would be expected in a modern laboratory, as well as the fact that some remedies contain religious elements has led to the assumption that much of early medicine was superstition or 'unscientific'. However, a recent project by the Ancientbiotics Collaboration explored one remedy from a 10th century medical text, *Bald's Leechbook*, described as 'the best remedy'. This recipe likely was intended to treat a sty (infection) in the eye. The team found that this remedy has antimicrobial properties which even work against one of the most notorious of antibiotic-resistant bacteria, MRSA. To understand and potentially replicate medieval remedies it takes more than just being able to translate a text. Plants have been cultivated and may have changed over time, the methods may be unfamiliar, and sometimes the ingredients cannot be accurately determined. It takes a collaborative effort to explore the potential of historical medical recipes.



Garlic from 'The herbal, or, General historie of plantes gathered by Iohn Gerarde' (1636). Special Collection Over.X RS164 GER



Nettles from 'The herbal, or, General historie of plantes gathered by Iohn Gerarde' (London, 1636). Special Collection Over.X RS164 GER



A recipe written in Old English to treat a fever that uses wormwood, from a 10th century medical manuscript, compiled by Cild, but named Bald's Leechbook after the man who commissioned and owned it. Image courtesy of the British Library, Royal MS 12 D XVII f.51r.

