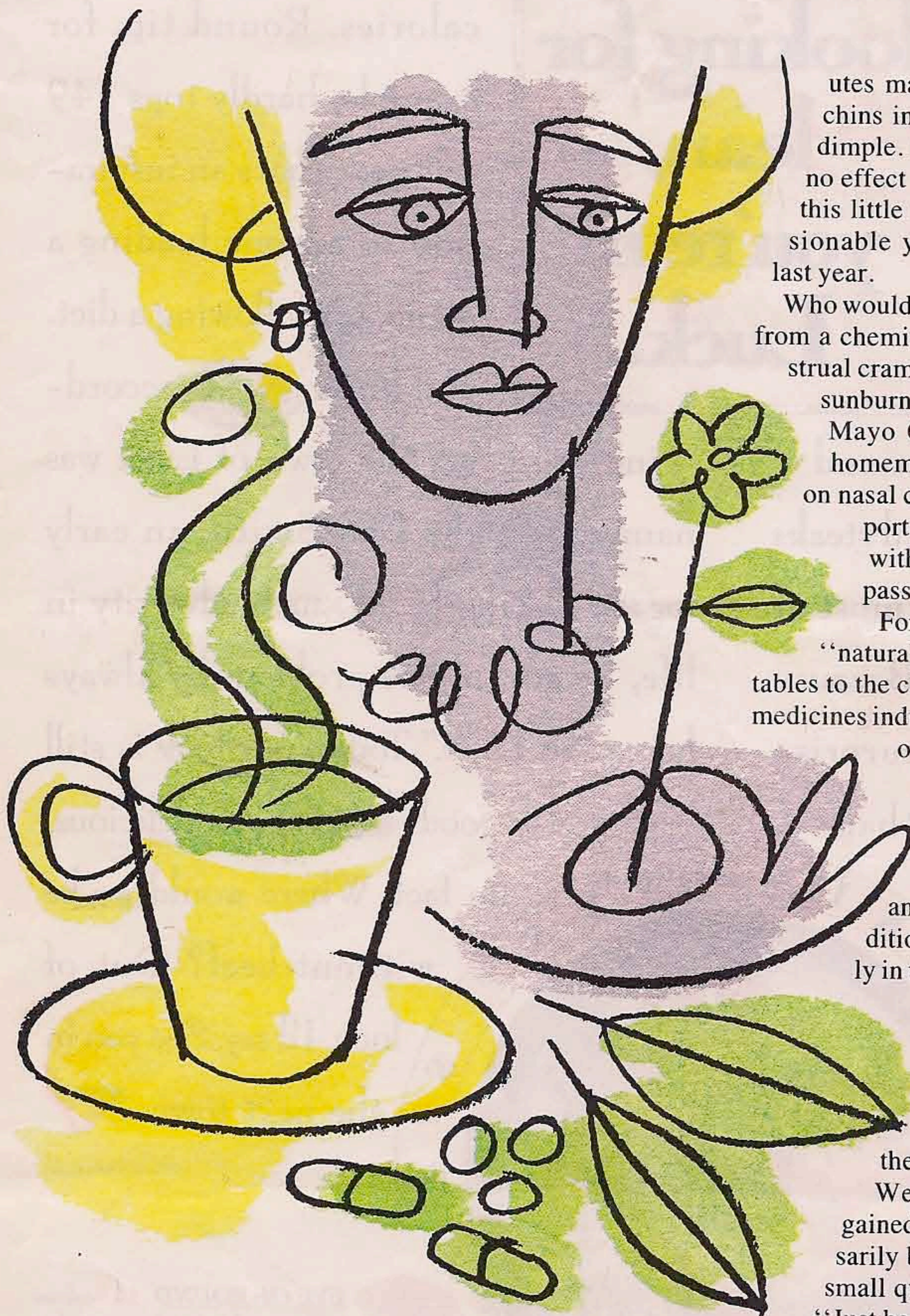


Herbal tonics now share drugstore shelves with Dristan. Some of them even work. But as AIMEE LEE BALL reports, we can't always trust Mother Nature



THIS PROBABLY FALLS INTO THE CATEGORY OF MORE Than You Really Need to Know About Me, but I bring it up as a useful benchmark for gullibility: a friend and I were sitting around reading a charming book on folk and herbal remedies and decided to try the cures for constipation. First we drained a can of sauerkraut, threw away the kraut, and drank the liquid—warmed—followed immediately by an equal amount of grapefruit juice. Then we sat for five min-

utes massaging the middle of our respective chins in the spot where Kirk Douglas has the dimple. I regret to report that the treatment had no effect whatsoever. I also regret to report that this little incident took place not in my impressionable youth or flower-child days but only last year.

Who wouldn't prefer a cure from nature rather than from a chemistry lab, whether the problem is menstrual cramps or motion sickness, a headache or a sunburn? And after no less an authority than the Mayo Clinic upheld the healing powers of homemade chicken soup (even more effective on nasal congestion than other hot liquids, it reported), who's to say you can't cure acne with a nettle brew or sleeplessness with passionflower tea?

For those of us conditioned to seek out the "natural" in everything from the dinner on our tables to the clothes on our backs, a thriving herbal-medicines industry has emerged from the back rooms of health-food stores. Celestial Seasonings' teas are sold right next to Lipton's at the A&P; herbal powders share pharmacy shelves with Dristan. The market is growing along with an increasingly common feeling that traditional medicine has failed us, particularly in treating petty grievances and ailments. Herbal cures offer reassuringly homey relief for less than life-or-death matters, and we buy into the sense of history and lore that accompanies an old-fashioned treatment from the garden.

We may be getting more than we bargained for. Herbal remedies are not necessarily benign, and those that are harmless in small quantities can be toxic in larger doses. "Just because something is genuinely 'herbal' or 'natural' doesn't mean it's good for you," says Varro E. Tyler, a plant-drug specialist at Purdue University and author of *The New Honest Herbal*. "Poisonous mushrooms are all-natural too." Sassafras was once reputed to cure venereal disease and, tangentially, to "purify" the blood—little old ladies drank sassafras tea as a spring tonic every year. But it is a proven carcinogen: the Food and Drug Administration took it out of root beer thirty years ago. ▶ 456

Comfrey was thought to help mend broken bones and to heal wounds and is still sold as a digestive aid. It contains alkaloids shown to cause serious liver damage and has been banned from sale in Canada. "It's utter folly to take these things on a regular basis," says Tyler.

Tyler points out that some of the healing herbs now in fashion were once listed as official drugs in the *U.S. Pharmacopeia*. But as drug companies never spent the time or money to prove them safe or effective, they were dropped from reputable medicine and picked up by herbalists, some of whom added legendary claims to the herbs' reputations. A purified alkaloid of goldenseal was used (legitimately) in eyedrops and as a balm for cold sores and cracked or bleeding lips. Then the herb became known as a panacea for digestive problems and heavy menstrual flow. Lately it's developed a cult following among those who believe it can mask the presence of marijuana and cocaine if swallowed before a urine test. "It doesn't do that," says Tyler. Goldenseal does work as an astringent on the skin, he says, but it has no real internal effects—except in toxic doses. Taking it for long periods or in too big a dose can raise your blood pressure, cause nausea and vomiting, induce miscarriage, or even cause death.

Anyone who peruses a local Chinatown for sesame oil and soy sauce may be tempted by the colorful and

seemingly innocuous oriental medications with names like Madame Pearl's Cough Syrup and Po Ying Tan Baby Protector. But the Food and Drug Branch of the California Department of Health Services warns that Madame Pearl is actually pushing codeine, and the Baby Protector is 20 percent camphor. One drug, called *chui fong toukuwan*, smuggled in from Asia and distributed in this country under such names as Miracle Herb, is purported to relieve arthritis and rheumatism. Depending on the manufacturer, it can contain powerful prescription pain relievers, tranquilizers, steroids, and potentially toxic amounts of lead.

Most of the herbal preparations around—at least, those that *are* actually herbs—are more dangerous to fiscal than physical health, according to Andrew Weil, author of the new book *Natural Health, Natural Medicine*. Weil is a Harvard-trained physician with a degree in botany who now practices in Tucson, Arizona—a maverick in his profession because he writes forty times as many prescriptions for herbs as for pharmaceutical drugs. Weil says that loose herbs sold in bulk or powdered in capsules are likely to be worthless from exposure to air, light, and moisture; they may also carry residues of pesticides and molds. (He uses only freeze-dried herbs and tinctures in carefully measured doses.) But, like Tyler, he warns against ingesting comfrey and decries the pop- ▶ 458

The Herbal Medicine Chest

Aspirin, morphine, and the heart drug digitalis all came from plants—a fact worth remembering when you're dosing yourself with herbal remedies. Herbs can be very potent in small quantities, and it's not easy to determine effective dosages. For guidelines on using herbs safely, refer to a book by a reputable authority, such as Varro E. Tyler's *The New Honest Herbal* (Lippincott, 1987) or Andrew Weil's *Natural Health, Natural Medicine* (Houghton Mifflin, 1990).

Other commonsense caveats: don't take prescription and herbal medications at the same time without a doctor's OK. Never give strong herbal medications to children. And be especially careful if you are pregnant or suffer from severe allergies.

Herbs that can help

Herbalists could add dozens of remedies to this list, but here are some that devotees actually agree on.

Aloe gel from the inner leaves of the aloe plant eases the pain of burns. Can sometimes cause rashes.

Chamomile tea, which relieves stomach upset, heartburn, and indigestion, also acts as a mild sedative. May trigger reaction in people with ragweed allergies.

Feverfew tea is a cold, flu, and migraine-headache remedy. Can cause allergic reaction in some people.

Garlic can counteract blood clotting and lower cholesterol. A mild diuretic, it also lowers blood pressure and helps relieve menstrual cramps. When eaten raw, it acts as a mild antibiotic.

Gingerroot tea can counter motion sickness. A possible side effect: mild heartburn.

Peppermint and spearmint tea can alleviate heartburn, indigestion, nausea, and cold and flu symptoms.

Raspberry leaf tea helps alleviate diarrhea and menstrual cramps. May cause mild indigestion.

Herbs to avoid

You won't find belladonna in a health-food store, but you may run across these. (Be forewarned: this is not an exhaustive list.)

Calamus is reputed to increase stamina, quiet nerves, and clear skin problems. The common Jammu variety is a carcinogen.

Coltsfoot, a cough suppressant, contains suspected carcinogens.

Comfrey, reputed to aid digestion when brewed in tea and heal wounds and sores when used in a poultice, can cause liver damage when taken internally.

Ginseng, sold as an aphrodisiac, leads to nervousness, insomnia, and high blood pressure with prolonged use.

Goldenseal is known as a digestive aid and a remedy for heavy menstrual flow; large doses can raise blood pressure and cause nausea, vomiting, miscarriage, or death.

Licorice, a cough suppressant, can raise blood pressure and affect the heartbeat when ingested in large amounts.

Sassafras, a blood "purifier," is carcinogenic and can damage the liver.

Senna is a potent laxative. Large doses have sent people to emergency rooms. It can also cause miscarriage.

ularity of senna, a violent herbal laxative. "It's easy to become dependent on senna," he says. "The fact that it's herbal doesn't mean it's any better than Ex-Lax."

If herbs can be as powerful as drugs—and if the wrong dose can produce such frightening results—it would seem reasonable that their sale should be regulated by the government. But the FDA classifies an herbal formula as a drug only if its supplier makes a medical claim. Otherwise the preparation is considered a food, subject to less stringent standards, even if most consumers buy it for medicinal purposes.

That's why at the Integral Yoga Natural Apothecary in New York City you can spend a small fortune on "nutritional herbs" with such enticing names as Women's Creativity, Post-Workout Recovery, Luminous Spirit, and Emotional Rescue. There is a Stress Free formula (made of dragon bone and skullcap) and a Female Cy-

cle Tonifier (with cramp bark and false unicorn—I swear I'm not making this up). Mindful of the rules, few come right out and promise physical or emotional well-being, although one line of products is "guaranteed to create positive energy in mind, body, and spirit or your money back." But the shelves of herbal lotions and potions sit cheek by jowl with shelves of books detailing the miracle properties of everything from anise to "zombi cucumber," with endorsements from Dr. Feelgoods of other centuries. (If even a fraction of the extensive list in *Herbal Aphrodisiacs* proved reliable, we'd never get out of bed.)

It's alarming to think that someone with a genuine muscle, skin, stomach, tension, or menstrual problem might look for an herbal panacea among these products. But the one that really scares me is the bottle labeled Calm Child—Children's Nervine. I have images of some ingenuous parent pushing these pills on an overactive kid—pills that

contain hawthorn (a diuretic) and gota kola (a stimulant), neither of which has any business being in a formula for children, according to Weil.

The government's position on monitoring herbal remedies is a variation on locking the barn door after the cows break free: action is taken against potentially dangerous remedies only when enough people complain about them. The FDA does keep a list of herbs considered unsafe, but that hasn't necessarily kept them off the market. The inherent flaw in government policy became painfully obvious last year in the case of L-tryptophan, an amino acid popularly used to treat insomnia, jet lag, depression, and obesity. L-tryptophan supplements were recalled from stores after they were linked to more than 1,500 cases of a rare blood disorder, twenty-one of which were fatal.

On the other hand, the government is not totally indifferent to the potentially good properties of herbs: there actually is a Natural Products Grants division at the National Cancer Institute, headed by chemist Matthew Suffness. "A tremendous percentage of compounds used in medicine can trace their origins back to nature in one way or another," says Suffness. "All the antibiotics are pretty much natural. People realize there are potential drug leads out there."


But drug discovery, for the most part, is in the hands of industry, explains Suffness, and the drug companies aren't that interested in traditional therapies. "By and large, these are less potent kinds of materials, used for minor complaints," he says. "And that's not what the pharmaceutical industry is looking for."

It may be instructive to know that despite his enthusiasm for research in nature's garden, Suffness says, "I wouldn't go near a natural apothecary myself." The truth about herbs probably lies somewhere between the outrageous promises of the herbal industry and the conservative warnings of mainstream medicine. The consumer can get caught in the middle—sometimes sheepishly rubbing the Kirk Douglas dimple in her chin. ●

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