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The

# Herbal Review



## BOOK REVIEWS

**Herbs, Spices, and Medicinal Plants: Recent Advances in Botany, Horticulture and Pharmacology, Vol. 2**, edited by Lyle E. Craker and James E. Simon (Oryx Press, 1987. Clio Distribution Services, 55 St Thomas' Street, Oxford OX1 1JG), 255pp. £48.15.

The second volume of this annual series is even better than the first. The greatest appeal will be to medical herbalists and to commercial propagators, though the keen general reader in this field would gain much. Two Chinese experts have written a fascinating account of 'Pharmacologically Active Substances of Chinese Traditional and Herbal Medicines' in which they reveal that of the 5,500 medicinal plants known in China, 250 pharmacologically active compounds have been reported by modern research, leading to 60 new drugs deriving from those compounds. Although restricted to exterior use because it poisons the liver, the anti-carcinogenic drug monocrotaline has successfully inhibited skin cancer. It is an old folk remedy, being an alkaloid from *Crotalaria sessiliflora*. The authors also explain how Chinese antiseptics which are mass-produced today are based on the alkaloid anisodine which is also an old herbal remedy. The Chinese scientific studies of herbal medicine are of potential worldwide importance; as these two authors remark: 'Even though humans have reached the "atomic age", the precious ethnopharmacologic information gathered throughout history can

still be used in eliminating human suffering.'

The book includes also a splendid account of 'The Botanical Characteristics of Ginseng', though this article gives no details whatever of the effects the saponins in ginseng actually have on human beings. The various species and secondary species of ginseng are elucidated in what appears to be a definitive account.

Of enormous social consequence is the article by three authors on the alkaloids of a *Papaver* species which could be substituted for the opium poppy without endangering the world's supply of medically useful opiates such as codeine. The answer to the problem is *Papaver bracteatum* Lindl., which 'contains, almost exclusively, the alkaloid thebaine, which can serve as an excellent substitute for morphine as a starting material for chemical conversion into codeine'. Apparently, this discovery can help 'contribute to a curtailment of the heroin market'.

Another interesting article in the book concerns the synergistic actions of herbal drugs taken together, as is invariably the case when an actual plant is used. Many examples are given. This article is invaluable to all herbal medical practitioners and gives a timely caution against the attempted replacement of whole plants by isolated drugs in herbal treatments. With ipecac, for instance, 'the presence of tannins reduces the absorption of alkaloids from the intestinal tract'; 'several of the alkaloids of *Colchicum autumnale* have similar and thus additive action'; with the American Indian drug *Veratrum viride*, 'Cevadine and protoveratrine increase respiration, where veratrosine reduces respira-

tion'. Subtle bodily systems seem to have both excitatory and inhibitory receptors stimulated simultaneously by drug plants in orchestral modulations which we are only beginning to understand.

A brief account is given of 'Vegetative Propagation of Aromatic Plants of the Mediterranean Region', which will be of interest to growers.

And finally, another massive terminological sorting-out takes place (as was the case with the preceding volume). This time, the authors Tucker and Lawrence clarify for us the 'Botanical Nomenclature of Commercial Sources of Essential Oils, Concretes, and Absolutes'. The book is worth purchase for this alone, being an indispensable work of reference for obtaining clarity from the notorious chaos of herbal oils and products. Lists of foreign terms are also given, so that the list is of international appeal: Sachalin fir is called in Japanese *aka-todo-matsu*, and now we know. So much confusion is eliminated by this splendid list, that the authors are to be highly congratulated, as are the editors of this valuable book.

*Robert Temple*