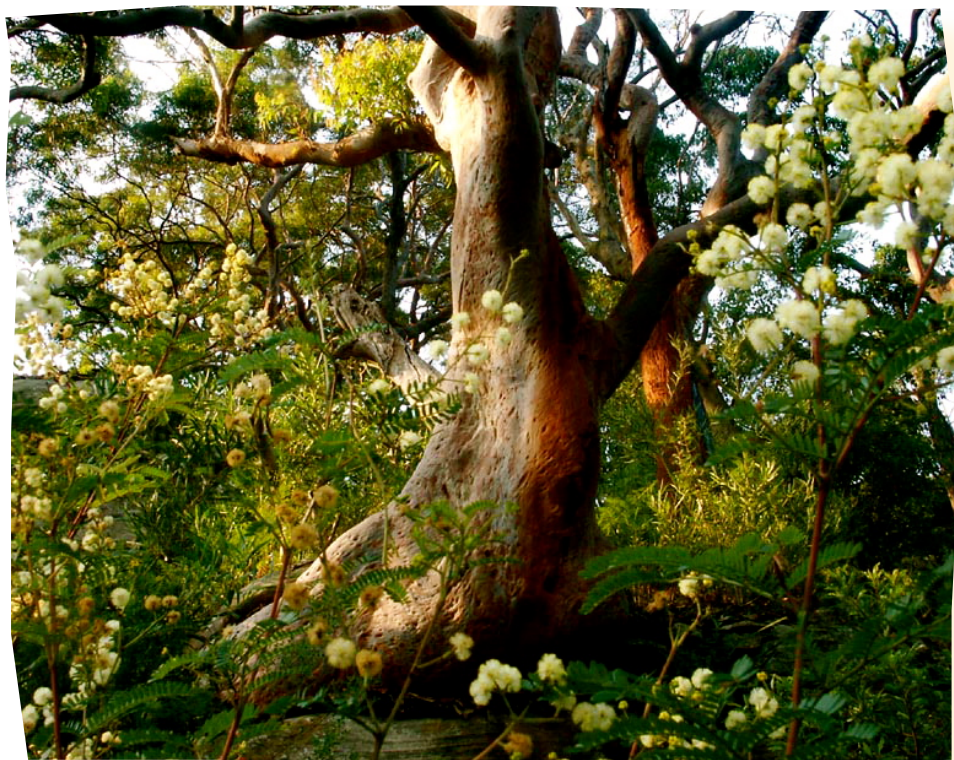


Vanessa Tent

Traditional Bush Medicine

of the Darug People



A concise catalogue describing Aboriginal medicinal plants found in Sydney and the Blue Mountains, and their uses.



Vanessa Tent
Aboriginal Studies Major Work
Cheltenham Girls High School
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Traditional Bush Medicine of the Darug People

Vanessa Tent



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This work would not have been possible without the generous contributions of Uncle Greg Simms and Evan Yanna Muru. I am so grateful for the knowledge they have shared with me, and I have loved learning about the culture of the Darug people.

A massive thank you also to the lovely Mrs Karen Doyle for her ongoing support, enthusiasm and guidance.

Undertaking this project has been a wonderful, enriching experience. I'm so glad I have been given the opportunity to learn about the medicine of Australia's first peoples.



Uncle Greg Simms



Victoria Barovs and Evan Yanna Muru

Caution:

This book describes Australian native plants and their *reported* uses. I do not endorse any plant or method of application found here as a prescription for any particular ailment. I strongly discourage experimentation by untrained persons in the collection and administration of native plants for medicinal purposes, because many plants can be dangerous if taken internally or applied externally. Their pharmacological effects are yet to be determined scientifically.



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Introduction

Traditional Aboriginal Health and Healing

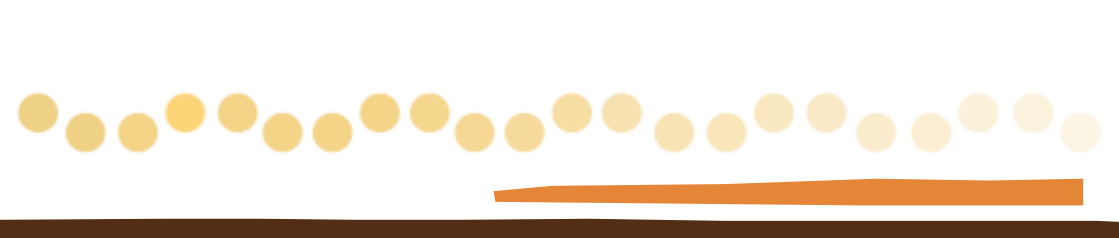
Before the settlement of Europeans in the 18th Century, Aboriginal people were much healthier than Australians are today. They lived in the open, in a land predominantly free of disease, with a balanced, healthy diet, lots of exercise, supportive and close-knit communities and strong spiritual well-being. Lifestyle diseases of today, such as diabetes and heart disease were non-existent, and medical concerns mainly consisted of burns, headaches, digestive upsets, worn-down teeth, stings, gashes and bruises.

The fast and inexplicable onset of disease was often attributed to supernatural forces, for example sorcery, breaking of taboos, or the disruption of the power surrounding Dreaming places. Healers or medicine men, known to the Darug as *Kadatchi*, had a very important role in Aboriginal healing. Equivalent to a professional who is both a general practitioner and a psychiatrist in Western European society, healers had special powers to 'see' into the body of their patients and cure them. Serious illness caused by damaged human and spiritual relationships, often relating to misuse of land, would be treated by medicine men.

The Aboriginal approach to health is a holistic one, encompassing the physical, personal and spiritual dimensions of life.

"Health, to Aborigines, is not a simple matter of good fortune, a prudent lifestyle or good diet. It is the outcome of a complex interplay between the individual, his territory of conception, and his spiritual integrity: his body, his land, and his spirit." (Reid, 1982; page 91)

A wide range of medical skills and treatments could be used for a variety of conditions. These included herbal medicines, ochre,



diet, animal products, charcoal and mud, massages, amulets, smoke, steam and heat, the skills of the healer, and, if the cause was spiritual, procedures to restore harmony.


Bush Medicine

Every adult in a clan and many older children would have had knowledge of at least some bush medicines, and it was the older women especially who collected and prepared them. In the earlier stages of illness, bush medicines would be administered, but for serious or chronic conditions that did not respond to the usual medications, the exceptionally knowledgeable and powerful healer would be consulted.

The botanical knowledge Aboriginal people committed to memory was both vast and essential to their survival. With no written language, they remembered the optimal season for selection, and the correct method of preparation and use. The time of collection of plants is important as chemical content varies with seasons and soil types. This knowledge was passed down generations through example, stories, song and dance.

Complicated ritual often accompanied the collection of medicinal plants. Special Dreaming songs and Dreaming pathways were part of the process to ensure the plants' medicinal value.

Because plants had to be quickly obtained when needed, most bush medicines were common and widespread. Except for ointments, which are crushed leaves mixed with animal fat, medicines were rarely mixed and very occasionally two plants were used together. As the majority of remedies were applied externally, there was little risk of overdosing.



Today, with access to a large range of Western medicines and treatments, the use of bush medicines is decreasing. Normally they are now used as an occasional addition to Western medicine, not as an alternative.

Traditional Knowledge

It is important to acknowledge that Aboriginal medicine, as with language, varies greatly between clans. Due to the immediate and devastating effects of colonisation on South-Eastern nations (causing 50-90% depletion of the Sydney region's population within a few years), little is known about their traditional medical lore, compared to the well-documented knowledge of North-Western and Central Australian Aborigines.

There has been a dramatic loss of traditional knowledge of bush medicines among the young in large communities. The dwindling use of bush medicines appears to lie, not in a lack of faith in the effectiveness of plants, but in the difficulties to obtain them. If health centres are close by, it is easier to go there first seeking care when the medicines they provide are accepted to be effective for most conditions. The vast majority of Darug land has been cleared for development, making access to bush medicines even harder.

The oral nature of Aboriginal heritage makes its documentation an important way of preserving this invaluable knowledge for future generations. There is very little available information on the bush medicines in the Sydney region, so I hope that by recording some of it here, I have made a small contribution to respecting and upholding this ancient culture.

The Darug People

The largest group of people in the Sydney region is the Darug. Their land stretches from the coast out west to the Blue Mountains. There is some dispute over whether the Eora people (of whom three plant names are used in this book), are included in the Darug nation. One plant name from the Dharawal people, south of the Darug is also used.

In the words of Darug Elder, Uncle Greg Simms, “This is the Darug lands. The land of our ancestors. Their spirits still walk among us, spirits that have been here since the Dreaming. Our language and culture has been passed down from generation to generation to continue an unbroken culture that has extended for thousands of years.”



Nations of the Sydney area

This Book

The following descriptions are only selected examples of an immense body of living oral tradition concerning Aboriginal herbal medicine. I have grouped the book into three sections: narcotics and painkillers, headaches, colds and fevers, and antiseptics and skin ailments. Many plants have uses in more than one of these areas, but I have grouped them in the area they are predominately used for.

The common names are listed first, with the Aboriginal name where possible (unfortunately most have been lost with colonisation). Latin names, family, description and uses are then listed.

Narcotics and Painkillers



Blackwood:

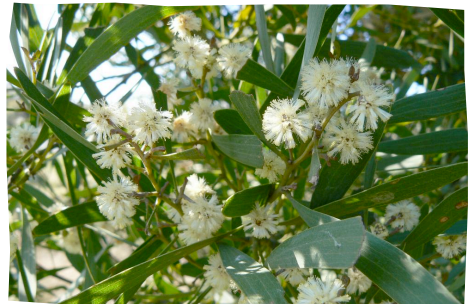
Acacia melanoxylon (Fabaceae family)

Description:

This wattle species can reach up to 20m tall and has dark brown, deeply furrowed bark. Its ball-shaped flowers are yellow and have a sweet fragrance.

Uses:

Bark is soaked in water to bathe painful joints.



Blunt Sandalwood:

Santalum obtusifolium (Santalaceae family)

Description:

Found in coastal areas, the Blunt Sandalwood is a bluish-green shrub, up to 2m high. It has long, narrow leaves which are dark green on top and paler underneath. Its clustered flowers produce 7mm berries.

Uses:

A wood decoction is drunk for constipation and stomach aches and pains.



Cork Tree:

Erythrina vespertilio (Fabaceae family)

Description:

The Cork Tree is found in dry scrub, open forest and woodlands. Up to 30m high, it has greyish-brown uneven bark and thorny branches. It has orange-red to pale red flowers and pods 6-9cm long containing red or yellow seeds.

Uses:

- The leaves are used to make a sedative decoction.
- The bast and bark are soaked in water then externally applied to sore eyes and for headache.



Mat-Rush:

Lomandra Longifolia
(Lomandraceae family)

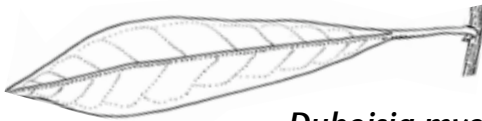
Description:

The Mat-Rush is wide spread, especially in sandy soils. It has long, thin leaves and its flowers are very fragrant and spiky.



Uses:

The leaves are wrapped tightly around aching parts of the body to lessen pain.



Poison Corkwood:

Duboisia myoporoides (Solanaceae family)

Description:

Found in high rainfall areas, the Poison Corkwood has grey, corky and broken bark. It has alternate leaves, small white flowers and distinctive seeds.

Uses:

Holes are made in the trunk to obtain liquid which is drunk a few hours later to produce stupor.



Red Ash/Mountain Ash/Leather Jacket:

Alphitonia excelsa (Rhamnaceae family)

Description:

Found in or near rain forest areas, this is a tall tree with tough grey bark and broad leaves which are usually white and hairy on the underside. It has small, 5-petalled flowers with 5-10mm blackish berries.

Uses:

- The leaves are applied to sore eyes.
- An infusion of the leaves in warm water is used for bathing in to relieve headache.
- An infusion of the bark, root and wood can be rubbed on the body as a liniment for body pains.
- A tonic made from bark and wood decoction can be used as a gargle for tooth ache.
- Young leaf tips are chewed for an upset stomach.



River Mangrove:

Aegiceras corniculatum (Myrsinaceae family)

Description:

Found in coastal mangrove swamps, fringing tidal rivers, creeks and salt marshes. It is a tall shrub with broad, leathery leaves often covered with salt crystals, and pleasantly scented flowers.

Uses:

A decoction of the leaves or juice squeezed from leaves is used as eardrops for earache (for females only).



Sticky/Giant Hopbush:

Dodonaea viscosa (Sapindaceae family)

Description:

This is a tall shrub with thin, reddish-brown bark, narrow leaves and brightly-coloured purplish or red fruit.

Uses:

- The leaves and roots are chewed (juice not swallowed) to lessen toothache.
- Leaves are bound to stone fish or stingray wounds for several days.
- A root decoction can be applied to open wounds and cuts.



Sarsaparilla (Waraburra - Eora People):

Smilax glyciphylla (Smilacaceae family)

Description:

This is a widespread shrubby climber with wiry stems and is up to 3m high. It has small, greenish-white flowers and black berries.

Uses:

- Leaves and stems are boiled in water which is then drunk to relieve stomach pains.
- The decoction is also helpful in the treatment of colds, coughs, bronchitis, arthritis, rheumatism and diabetes.
- Some people have been using it for internal cancer treatment.
- People have begun selling the bottled tonic.



Silky Heads:

Cymbopogon oblectus (Poaceae family)

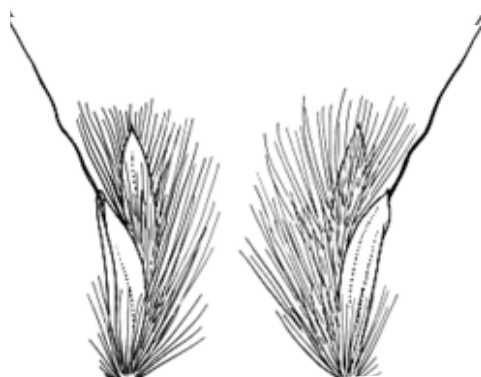
Description:

Widespread near watercourses, Silky Heads are an aromatic herb that grows up to 1m. The leaves can be narrow, flat or folded, and the flower heads have long fluffy hairs.



Uses:

- The leaves are chopped finely and boiled for 5-10mins in a litre of water. The yellow-green liquid is drunk to reduce cough and cold symptoms.
- The liquid can also be used as a liniment for sore muscles or headaches, and as an antiseptic to treat sores.
- The leaves can be rubbed into a ball and placed in the nostrils to clear congestion.
- The roots can be crushed and liquid poured into the ear to relieve earache.





Wilga/Australian Willow:

Geijera parviflora (Rutaceae family)

Description:

This plant has long, thin leaves that are leathery and dark green. The flowers are white and strongly citrus-scented.

Uses:

- The insides of the outer bark are scraped off, then pounded or chewed and dried. It is then put on open wounds, boils or sores as an anaesthetic.
- The leaves can be placed over hot ashes for people to lie on to alleviate aches and pains in their joints.



Headaches, colds and fevers



Headache Vine (Guwalyari - Dharawal People):

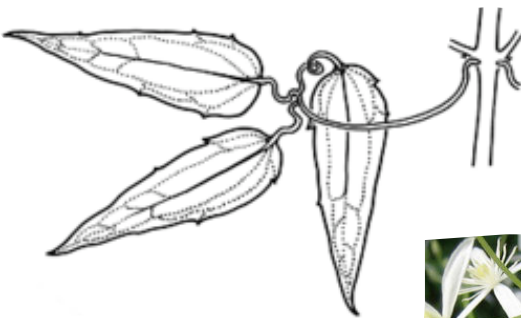
Clematis glycinoides (Ranunculaceae family)

Description:

This woody climber can be found in moist gullies and coastal tablelands. It has wiry stems and masses of white flowers.

Uses:

The strong, sharp aroma from crushed foliage is inhaled to relieve headaches and colds.



Hillock Bush:

Melaleuca hypericifolia (Myrtaceae family)

Description:

This medium-sized shrub has spread branches and corky bark. Its fruit are spiky and woody, and flowers bright red “bottlebrushes.”

Uses:

The foliage is crushed and smelt for the relief of headache.



Narrowleaf Hopbush:

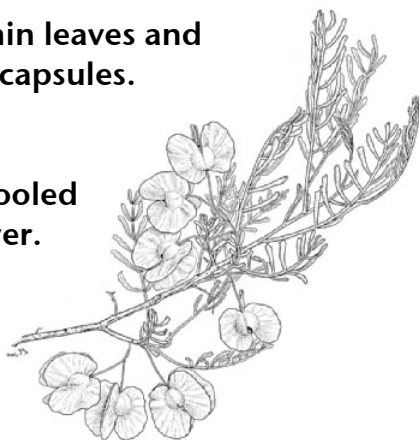
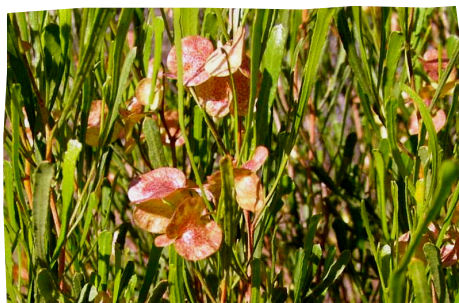
Dodonaea attenuata (Sapindaceae family)

Description:

This slender, 3m tall shrub has long, thin leaves and reddish-purple fruit that have winged capsules.

Uses:

An infusion made from the foliage is cooled the sponged on the body to relieve fever.



Native Grape/Gippsland Grape:

Cissus hypoglauca (Vitaceae family)

Description:

Located in sheltered places along the coast, this is a tall, evergreen climber with yellow flowers, bluish-black, edible berries that are 1-2cm in size.

Uses:

A gargle is made from the berries to soothe sore throats.



Native Pennyroyal:

Mentha satureioides (Lamiaceae family)

Description:

This strongly scented 30cm tall herb is found near river and creek banks and open forest, usually on shale. It has 4-lobed white flowers.

Uses:

The dry or fresh leaves are boiled in water for 15mins to produce a warm decoction, which can be sweetened with honey or sugar. The liquid is taken to relieve colds, nasal congestion, coughs, various aches and pains and to invigorate the body.

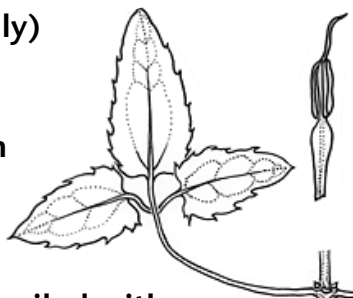


Old Man's Beard/Australian Clematis:

Clematis aristata (Ranunculaceae family)

Description:

A climbing shrub with white or cream star-shaped flowers.



Uses:

- The fragrant, oil-bearing leaves are boiled with water and aroma inhaled to relieve colds, headaches and fevers.
- Gum can be applied directly to sores and abrasions or boiled in water and used as a wash.



River Mint/Australian Mint/ Native Mint:

Mentha australis (Lamiaceae family)

Description:

Found along streams, this small and strongly aromatic herb has soft, short leaves and numerous white flowers.

Uses:

A leaf decoction is used for the relief of coughs and colds. The leaves can also be crushed and smelt to aid in the treatment of headache.



Prickly-leaved Tea Tree:

Melaleuca styphelioides (Myrtaceae family)

Description:

This tea tree grows up to 20m high and has spongy, papery bark which is white or light brown. It has tiny leaves and cream or white flowers that are cylindrical “bottle-brush” spikes.

Uses:

Leaves are bruised then placed in the nasal septum to clear congestion associated with colds.



Sydney Blue Gum:

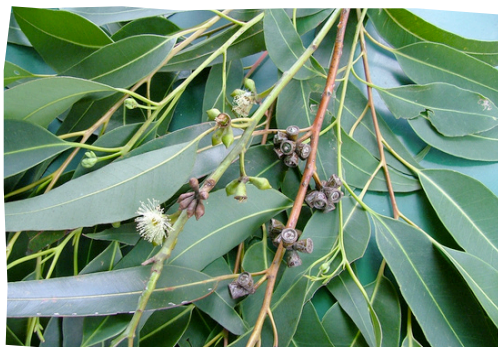
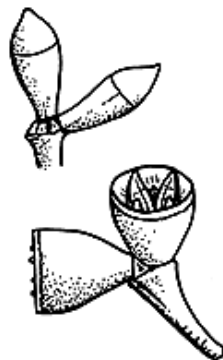
Eucalyptus saligna (Myrtaceae family)

Description:

The Blue Gum is common in the Sydney basin and can reach 50m high. It has white flowers and smooth, powdery, white or grey bark.

Uses:

The fragrant, oil-bearing leaves are boiled with water and aroma inhaled to relieve colds, headaches and fevers.



Antiseptics and skin ailments



Australian Bugle:

Ajuga australis (Lamiaceae family)

Description:

A 45cm tall herb covered with soft hair, purplish-green leaves and blue or purple flowers.

Uses:

Leaves are bruised and infused in hot water, then used to bathe sores and boils.





Bracken (Gurgi - Darug People):

Pteridium esculentum (Dennstaedtiaceae family)

Description:

This hardy fern has glossy and leathery fronds up to 1.5m long. Tiny black spore cases are found around the edges of the underside of fronds, and the long, creeping rhizome is densely covered with dark, red-brown hairs.

Uses:

Juice from young stems relieves the pain from insect and nettle stings.



Darling Pea/Indigo Plant:

Swainsona galegifolia (Fabaceae family)

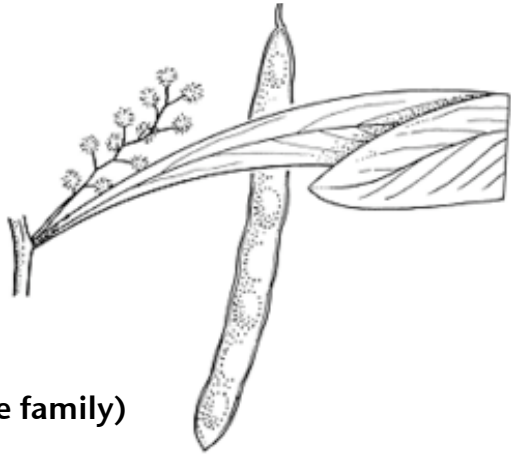
Description:

Up to 50cm high, this under-shrub has light grey bark and red, purple or white flowers.

Uses:

A warm poultice of crushed leaves, stems and roots is applied to bruises and swelling.





Hickory:

Acacia falcata (Mimosaceae family)

Description:

2-5m high shrub with angular branches and tiny, pale yellow flowers. It has bluish fruit 7-10cm long containing egg-shaped seeds.

Uses:

A solution made from bark is rubbed on the skin to relieve irritations.



Native Yam (Midiny - Eora People):

Dioscorea transversa (Dioscoreaceae family)

Description:

This is a herb with twining stems 2-4m long, shiny heart-shaped leaves and rounded seed pods that are green, pink or brown. Its flowers are small and green or yellow in colour.

Uses:

Liquid squeezed from the vine has been used in the treatment of skin cancer.



Nodding Blue Lily:

Stypandra glauca (Phormiaceae family)

Description:

This 0.3-1m tall herb has small, blue flowers with conspicuous yellow stamens. The bluish leaves clasp the stem in an alternate arrangement.

Uses:

Juice from crushed stems applied to wounds promotes healing.

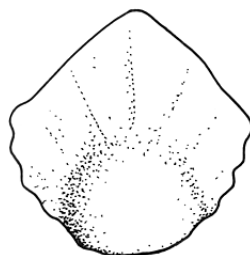


Old Man Salt Bush:

Atriplex nummularia (Chenopodiaceae family)

Description:

A greyish-white shrub between 1.5 and 3m tall with thick leaves and red or cream flowers.



Uses:

The leaves are boiled then dabbed on open wounds, boils, scabies and cold sores.



Paper Bark (Bujor - Darug People):

Melaleuca quinquenervia (Myrtaceae family)

Description:

One of the many paper-bark melaleucas, this species grows 10-15m high and has heavily scented leaves, cream, brush-like flowers and woody fruits 4-5mm in diameter.

Uses:

The bark is peeled off in strips and used for bandaging and dressing wounds.



Port Jackson Fig (Damun - Darug People):

Ficus rubiginosa (Moraceae family)

Description:

This tree, widespread in the Sydney basin, usually reaches 10m in height. It has a dense, shading canopy and a wide, buttressed trunk. The leaves are dark green and oval-shaped and fruit are yellow to red.

Uses:

The milky sap can be used as a latex covering for wounds.



Rock Lily/Rock Orchid (Wargaldarra and Buruwan - Eora People):

Dendrobium speciosum (Orchidaceae family)

Description:

This is a lithophyte (grows on rocks) and an epiphyte (grows on other plants.) It has large succulent leaves and long cream or yellow flowers spotted with purple on the lower petals.

Uses:

Stems are chewed then rubbed into sores, wounds and burns.





Sandpaper Fig:

Ficus coronata (Moraceae family)

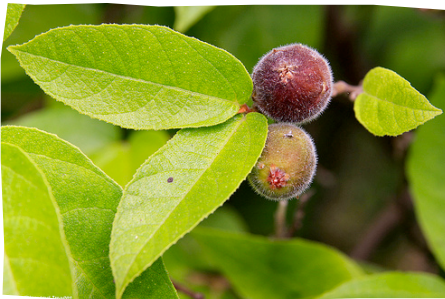


Description:

Found along creeks, in rain forest and open country, this small tree has hairy and rough leaves and branches. The round figs are also hairy, turning purple-black when mature.

Uses:

The sap can be applied to wounds to promote healing. It has been used in the treatment of ring worm.



Spotted Gum:

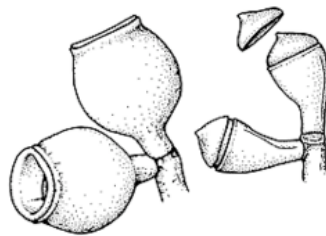
Eucalyptus maculata (Myrtaceae family)

Description:

Tall, straight tree up to 40m high, with smooth, whitish-grey bark, peeling in irregular places giving the tree a spotted appearance.

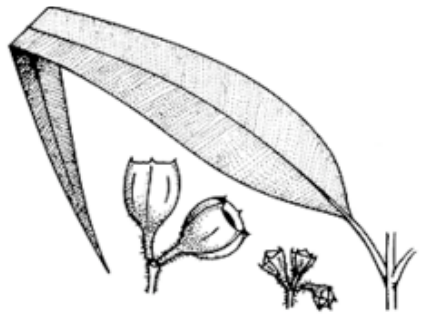
Uses:

Water solution of the kino can be drunk to relieve bladder inflammation.



Sydney Red Gum:

Angophora costata (Myrtaceae family)



Description:

Ranging from 15-35m tall, the red gum's trunk is often gnarled and crooked with pink to pale grey bark.

Uses:

- Gum, or kino, (*Yarra* in Darug) can be applied directly to sores, abrasions and bites, or boiled in water and used as a wash. It is a mild antiseptic and a mild pain killer.
- 150-200mL of 10% solution of kino water can be drunk for treating diarrhoea.



Bush Medicine in a Contemporary Context

Would reviving the use of traditional bush medicines be an effective means of addressing contemporary Indigenous health issues?

There is no denying that Indigenous Australians suffer a far lower standard of health than other Australians. The vast inequality across a range of determinants is a national crisis and must be addressed swiftly and appropriately. A question that came to mind while researching this topic was whether combining traditional medical treatments with modern ones would be effective at combating these issues.

The sad truth is that illnesses causing major concern in the Indigenous population are a result of European colonisation. A wide variety of factors such as dramatic lifestyle change, land dispossession and most predominately the introduction of infectious Western diseases have contributed to the dire state of Indigenous health today. And unfortunately, the medicinal practices of Aboriginal people, which have survived thousands of years, were not made for these diseases and haven't had time to adapt.

Uncle Greg Simms believes that because the diets of Aboriginal people have changed so dramatically, bush medicines would not be compatible with their bodies and lifestyle, and therefore no longer as effective as they traditionally were. The spiritual component of Aboriginal medicine, vital to its practice, also has been reduced.

The difficulty of obtaining bush medicines in an urbanised society further reduces the potential of traditional medicine being integrated into contemporary medicine.

However, I believe that more extensive research, including chemical analysis, is needed on Aboriginal herbal medicines to evaluate their therapeutic properties and realise their full potential, while respecting the traditional owners of this knowledge. Also, increasing cross-cultural awareness by learning about these medicines will improve the ability of health practitioners to relate to Indigenous patients, and subsequently improve treatment.

Glossary

Anesthetic: A substance that reduces sensitivity to pain.

Antiseptic: A substance that inhibits the growth and reproduction of micro-organisms such as bacteria and fungi, thus preventing the spread of infection.

Bast: Fibrous material from the phloem or vascular tissue of a plant.

Decoction: A liquid made by boiling or simmering finely-cut plant material in water, usually for 15-20 minutes, then strained when cool. They are best prepared fresh.

Dressing: A covering applied to skin surfaces to protect and promote healing.

Foliage: Plant leaves, collectively.

Infusion: A preparation made by pouring boiling water onto finely cut plant material and leaving it to soak for some time, before straining without pressing the residue.

Kino: A sap exuded by a tree.

Latex: A liquid found in the excretory tissues of certain plants containing essential oils, resins, alkaloids and enzymes.

Liniment: A liquid or lotion, especially one made of oil, for rubbing on the body to alleviate pain.



Poultice: A moist, soft application placed when hot over an affected part of the body if the skin is unbroken. It relieves pain and relaxes muscles, and increases blood circulation to the affected part.

Tonic: A liquid which invigorates or restores a sense of well-being.

Wash: An aqueous solution, applied with the hand in a gentle, rubbing action. Some of the liquid is usually poured over the body and allowed to dry on the skin.



Eucalyptus saligna Sydney Blue Gum

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This booklet describes 33 plants native to the Sydney and Blue Mountains region used in traditional Darug medicine. These plants have been used to treat a variety of ailments including burns, headaches, coughs and colds, and wounds.



Accompanying each plant description is its method of use, botanical drawings and photographs.

Traditional Aboriginal health and healing, and bush medicine in a contemporary context are also discussed.

It is based on information obtained from a number of sources and knowledge from Darug people, whose valuable contribution I am very grateful for.

