



Conservation Corner

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Garden Remedies

Being self-sufficient and sustainable in these uncertain times is pretty important. But before you rush off to fill up your larder with loo rolls, I'd like to let you in on a little secret: Here in South Africa we are blessed with a rich ethnobotanical knowledge, which has fed, clothed, and most pertinently nursed us back to health for countless generations.

Here are but a few medicinal indigenous plants that are likely to be found in your own garden and in friends' and family's too.

Mother-in-law's tongue (*Sansevieria hyacinthoides*)

Depending on who you talk to this plant is aptly named for its long sharp leaves. Nowadays, it is a popular ornamental plant grown easily both indoors and out. Historically, it was used as a fibre crop. In 1903 *Curtis's Botanical Magazine* praised the strength of the fibre in a most macabre manner, saying that just "a few strands of it being sufficient enough to hang a man". The root is said to be an excellent cure for haemorrhoids along with other intestinal ailments and can be boiled or freshly chewed. A healing ointment can also be made from the boiled root and used to help heal open sores and ulcers.

Pelargoniums galore

There's a dizzying array Pelargonium species in South Africa with many accompanying folk uses. The easily cultivated *P. reniforme* and *P. sidoides* can still be found in muthi-markets, often being referred to as *izolo-zonke*

"cure all" medicines and are used to treat chest ailments as well as a general tonic for colds and flu. The ubiquitous garden variety, commonly referred to as the ivy-leaved geranium, is the (often hybridized) *Pelargonium peltatum*. This plant was once highly prized by Xhosa warriors, who used bruised leaves to treat battle wounds.

Plakkie (*Cotyledon orbiculate*)

The plakkie or pig's ear is a water-wise garden favourite. This attractive succulent is an excellent addition to every garden. Not only because it requires low maintenance, but it also has great medicinal value. The fresh juice can be gargled once a day to treat sore throats. A warmed leaf can be applied to boils and abscesses. The leaves may also be applied to aid in the removal of warts. It is also said that the cut leaf surface can be used to soothe nappy rash.

Sweet Thorn (*Acacia karroo*)

By far the most common tree in our neck of the woods. The *Acacia karroo* is hardy and fairly fast-growing. Its sweet-smelling flowers attract many insects and therefore birds. Occurring throughout much of southern Africa the tree has many recorded medicinal uses across many cultures. To name just a few: an infusion of the bark is used to treat cold and flu symptoms; a bark, root, and leaf concoction is used as a remedy for diarrhoea; the gum may be applied to treat mouth ulcers and used in a general mouth wash; the roots have been used to treat colic in infants. In Zimbabwe the roots are even used as an



A watercolour depicting *Pelargonium peltatum*, made in 1701 by Jan Moninckx

aphrodisiac!

Studies show that exposure to nature positively benefits an individual's mental health and wellbeing. So, although you may balk at the idea of using boiled *Sansevieria* root to treat your piles; I firmly believe that as soon as you know just one little fact or story, a plant is no longer just a plant. There has never been a better time to get to know and celebrate the marvels of the natural world, that have been right here in front of us all this time. ■