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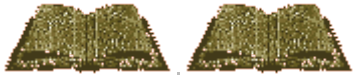
Book Reviews: Popular Books Section



(Page 4 a)

FEATURED BOOK : REVIEW 1

RECOMMENDED TO ETHNO BOTANISTS, PHYTOCHEMISTS, PHARMACOLOGISTS AND OTHER SCIENTISTS INTERESTED IN TRADITIONAL MEDICINE

Rating : 9.5
★★★★★★★★★½
(9.5/5)

[Review 1] [Main Page] [Review 2]

Medicinal Plants in the South Pacific - Information on 102 commonly used medicinal plants in the South Pacific (WHO Regional Publications-Western Pacific Series No 19) , Paperback, 5.5" x 8.5". World Health Organization Regional Office for the Western Pacific, Manila, Publication Date 1998, i-xvii and 254, ISBN 92-9061-119-7: Price: Sw.fr. 33.- Price for Developing Countries : Sw.fr. 23.10

WHO's Catalogue of Publications

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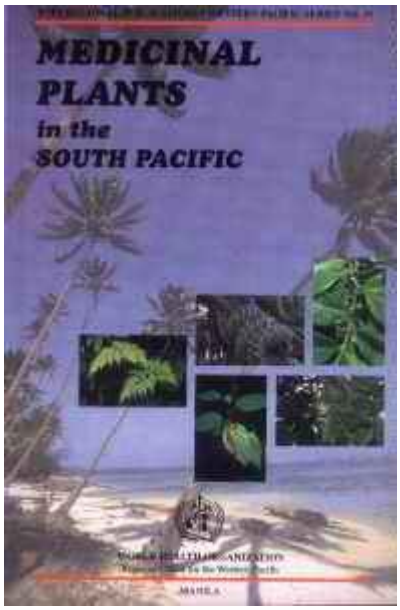


This book is one of the series of books on medicinal plants published by the World Health Organisation regional office for the Western Pacific. Other volumes in the series include medicinal plants of Vietnam, Korea and China.

The WHO regional office in Manila is one of six regional offices throughout the world, each with its own programme geared to the particular health problems of the countries or areas it serves. This publication covers Pacific Islands as well as Papua New Guinea.

Living in a region with abundant natural resources, people of the South Pacific have traditionally used the plants growing around them as medicine. Herbal medicine continues to play a role in this region in spite of the availability of modern medicine partly as a result of strong cultural beliefs and partly as a result of easy availability.

The knowledge of medicinal plants and their uses traditionally has been passed down orally from one generation to the other. However, the isolation of the Pacific Islands has restricted inter-island transfer of information, even between neighbouring islands. People of other parts of the world are even less familiar with medicinal plants of the South Pacific.

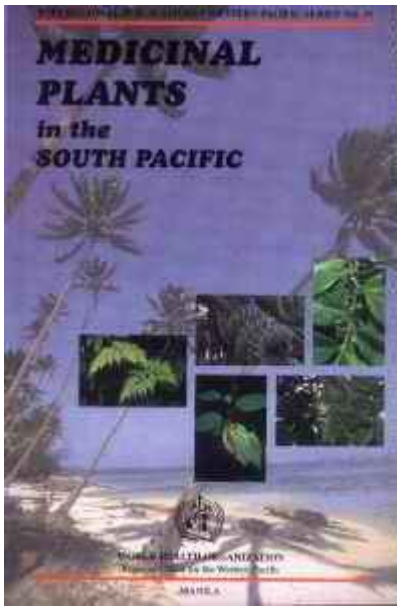
View this book on Amazon

The aim of this book, as with the other books in the series, is to record information on medicinal plants and to disseminate it.

The book describes 102 medicinal plants from the South Pacific. This apparently is only a small selection of the vast number of medicinal plants in this region. For example, Fiji alone is known to have 2500 species of vascular plants. Fiji is somewhat unique in respect of the use of medicinal plants because of the Indian influence. Indians comprise 45% of the population of Fiji and have introduced the rich herbal system of the Indian sub-continent.

The use of herbal remedies was officially discouraged during the colonial period. This policy is apparently changing now with doctors and scientists and traditional healers working together. Tahiti has a traditional healer group and recently regional workshops of women healers have been organised by a group calling themselves WAINIMATE.

Some familiar plants described in this book



As the subtitle of this book mentions, this book gives information on 102 commonly used medicinal plants in the South Pacific. Many of these have been discussed here in this review by Dr. Gyan Fernando. Some other medicinal plants of note mentioned in the book are:

& *Alocassia macrorhiza* (Giant Taro)
& *Capsicum frutescens* (Chili pepper)
& *Centella asiatica* (Indian pennywort, Gotukola)
& *Codiaeum variegatum* (Croton)
& *Colocasia esculenta* (Taro)
& *Curcuma longa* (Turmeric)
& *Hibiscus rosasinensis* (Red Hibiscus)
& *Manihot esculenta* (Manioc)
& *Mimosa pudica* (sensitive plant)
& *Plumeria rubra* (Frangipani)
& *Punica granatum* (pomegranate)
& *Ricinus communis* (castor bean)

The most important cultural and medicinal plant to emerge from the Pacific Region has been Kava (Piper methysticum), which has been developed into an antianxiety drug.

This book follows a similar format as the other books in this series. Each plant is allocated one page of text and one page of illustrations. The book is illustrated with colour photographs. The plants are listed in alphabetical order based on their Latin binomials or botanical names. The local names and the common English names are listed. There then follows a botanical description of the plant, its habitat, distribution, constituents, biological activity and traditional uses. This formula is repeated for each plant. References for each plant are provided at the end of the book.

The book opens with a short introductory section, a map of the region covered and a section listing the geographical distribution of each plant. There then follows the main section.

For the reviewer it was a delight to review this book. This was mostly because of his familiarity with 31 of the plants included. Indeed some of the plants are so well known that most in the western world would have at least heard of them. Other plants are not so familiar and a number of plants are limited to this region. Another interesting feature about the plants is that a large number are edible in one form or the other and indeed form part of the standard diet of this region. For example, taro, coconut, manihot, sugar cane, breadfruit and banana are all included in this book.

The plants

The following is a selection of plants chosen partly on the basis of the reviewer's familiarity with the species. Altogether there are 102 plants in this volume.

Adenanthera pavonina

Adenanthera pavonina is the red bead tree the bright red seeds of which have been a delight to generations of children in the Indian sub continent. The bark is used in the Solomon Islands to treat leprosy.

Some images from this book: Left - *Artocarpus altilis* (Parkinson) Fosb., popularly known as breadfruit. The liquid squeezed from the bark or leaves is traditionally given to remedy chest pains and vomiting resulting from heart trouble. Right - *Hoya australis* R. Br., popularly known as wax plant. In Fiji, the plant is used to treat swollen testicles. These images are from pages 18 and 98 respectively

Aloe vera

Aloe vera is well known in the west. The plant is used as a purgative and the sap is used to treat sunburns, rashes and x-ray burns. (It is not clear from the book how one sustains x-ray burns in the

Pacific!) In Tahiti, Cook Islands, Tonga and Samoa; the plant is used in treating cuts, burns and stomachache.

Anona muricata

Anona muricata is the soursop. The fruit (technically a syncarp) of this plant is fleshy, green and spiky. The flesh is slightly sour, sweet and juicy. In Tonga an infusion of the leaves is used to treat stomach ailments.

Artocarpus altilis

Artocarpus altilis is the familiar breadfruit associated with Admiral Bligh and the Mutiny on the Bounty. The sap of the leaves, bark, roots and other parts are used in treating a variety of differing ailments. For example Tahitians use the sap for sprains contusions and dislocations whilst Samoans and Tongans use the bark to treat stomachaches and digestive tract problems.

Azadirachta indica

Azadirachta indica is margosa, which has well known antiseptic properties and is commonly used in the Indian sub-continent for this purpose.

Carica papaya

Carica papaya is the familiar papaya or paw-paw, which is a source of papain.

Cocos nucifera

Cocos nucifera is the coconut. (see box)

Ipomea indica

Ipomea indica is the well-known morning glory. The plant is used as a laxative in Tonga and Fiji.

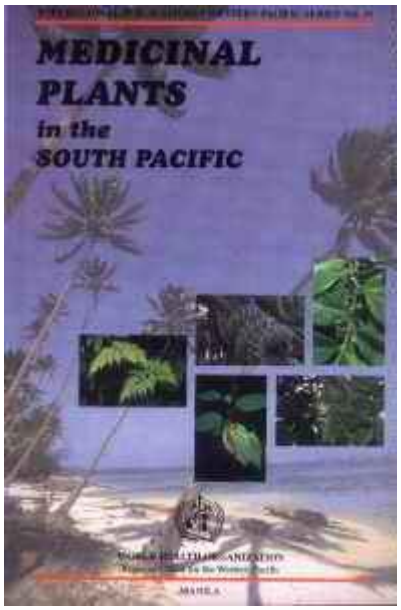
Mikania micrantha

Mikania micrantha is a rapidly growing common weed (English name: mile-a-minute) considered a nuisance by gardeners. Apparently it is used as a haemostatic and to treat gastritis, insect bite and skin irritations.

Momordica charantia

Momordica charantia is the biiter gourd or Karela (Indo-Fijian) the fruit of which is a well-known vegetable in the Indian sub-continent. The extracts of the fruit have well-established antihyperglycemic properties.

THE COCONUT



The coconut is romantically associated with the South Pacific. Swaying coconut palms and sunsets are part of that magical image. The coconut is obviously more than that to the natives. Almost every part of the coconut tree is used for some purpose or the other. The medicinal uses mentioned in the book include:

& In Fiji weakness after childbirth is treated with liquid from the stem.
& Coconut milk is used to treat fish poisoning.
& The root may be used as a toothbrush.
& Coconut oil is rubbed into stiff joints and is also used to maintain a smooth skin.
& Coconut oil mixed with turmeric is used to treat sick newborn infants and post-partum women.

Psidium guajava

Psidium guajava is the gauva a common fruit found throughout tropical Asia. The leaves are used in Fiji for treating diarrhoea, stomachache and coughs. In the Cook Islands new mothers are bathed in a warm infusion of the leaves.

Sansevieria trifasciata

Sansevieria trifasciata is the mother-in-law's tongue a well-known ornamental plant with fleshy leaves. In Fiji the plant is used to treat ringworm and fungal diseases.

Thespesia populnea

Thespesia populnea is known as Miro in Tahiti.(Pitcairn Islanders make ornaments out of its wood) It is a familiar tree in tropical Asia. In Tonga a drink made of the leaves and bark is given to children who are teething.

The book

The book is of the same format as the other books in this series and measures 14 x 21.5 CMS. Each plant is illustrated with the help of a single, full-page colour photograph, which successfully manages to record the essential features of the plant. The photographs are of a very good quality. The photographs originate from various sources but the ones of the Fijian plants are credited to Dr

Michael Doyle. Dr Doyle is the Director of the South Pacific Herbarium of the University of the South Pacific, Suva Fiji who was also responsible for the final editing of the book whilst the data collection and compilation was co-ordinated by Professor Subramaniam Sotheeswaran of the University of the South Pacific.

An index of local names completes the book.

The printing and colour reproduction is of very good quality and as far as print quality goes this is the best book in the series.

The book is recommended to ethno botanists, phytochemists, pharmacologists and other scientists interested in traditional medicine. Environmentally aware tourists to the pacific islands might find this book interesting.

-Gyan Fernando
Dr Gyan C. A. Fernando is a native of Sri Lanka and is familiar with plants used in Ayurvedic remedies. He now works as a Forensic Pathologist in Devon, England.

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