In Pursuit of Plants

Plant Medicine

During the First and Second World Wars, the British Government drew up a list of key plants to grow or forage for, dry and process to produce medicines.

Both World Wars caused severe disruption to the supply of foreign goods to Britain, including medicines and medicinal raw materials. Britain had to rethink, look to the past and develop home-grown plant-based medicines.

Botanical drawings by William Catto and medicine bottles from the George Shepherd Pharmaceutical Collection allow us to explore some of the medicinal plants that were in demand during the First and Second World Wars.

Bottling It

Atropine was extracted from *Atropa belladonna* (Deadly Nightshade).

Pharmacists could choose from the many different bottle and label designs that were available. These labels are made of gilded paper, hand painted with black lettering. Varnish has been applied over the label to prevent damage and staining.

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1 *Deadly Nightshade* (*Atropa Belladonna*)
William Catto, 1921, watercolour on paper
ABDAG016205

2 Green glass bottle LIN: BELLAD: M:
(weak liniment of belladonna)
about 1900
The George Shepherd Pharmaceutical Collection
ABDMS089357

3 Green glass bottle TINCT: BELLAD:
(tincture of belladonna)
about 1900
The George Shepherd Pharmaceutical Collection
ABDMS089356

LIN: BELLAD: M stands for *Linimentum Belladonnae Mitis* (weak liniment of belladonna). Liniments are rubbed into the body to relieve muscular aches and strains.

TINCT: stands for Tinctures, which are alcoholic extracts of plants.

Name Your Poison

Poison bottles were often designed to be identified by touch. Many methods were used to achieve this including attaching sandpaper, painting thick lines or tying bells to the neck which would make a noise to alert the pharmacist when lifted. The most common method was to use bottles with vertical or horizontal grooves. They were available in various colours: blue, brown or clear, but most poison bottles were green.

Hyoscine was extracted from *Hyoscyamus niger* (Henbane).

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1 **Green glass bottle TINCT: HYOSCYAM: (tincture of henbane)**
about 1900

The George Shepherd Pharmaceutical Collection
ABDMS0893511

2 Henbane (*Hyoscyamus niger*)
William Catto, 1904,
watercolour on paper

ABDAG016206

Plant Properties

Digitalis was extracted from *Digitalis purpurea* (Foxglove). The abbreviations INF: DIGIT: CONC on the bottle stand for **Infusum Digitalis Concentratum** (concentrated infusion of digitalis). An infusion is produced by soaking plants in water to extract the active ingredients.

During the Second World War the Ministry of Health set up a nationwide medicinal plant collecting scheme. It found that a number of imported drugs were derived from plants that were also native to Britain. By 1941 the Ministry had published guides on how to identify medicinal plants and what to collect. Various groups such as Boy Scouts, Girl Guides and Women's Institutes all participated in collecting plants as a part of the war effort.

1 2

1 Green glass bottle TINCT: DIGITAL: (tincture of foxglove)
about 1900

The George Shepherd Pharmaceutical Collection
ABDMS089358

2 Green glass bottle INF: DIGITAL: CONC: (infusion of concentrated foxglove)
about 1900

The George Shepherd Pharmaceutical Collection
ABDMS089352

3 **Foxglove** (*Digitalis purpurea*)
William Catto, 1915,
watercolour on paper

ABDAG0163042