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# The Desert Pharmacy

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## A NATURAL PHARMACOPOEIA

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For those who think the desert is a place void of vegetation, especially flowering plants, you need only take a slow walk across the true desert in the spring. Vibrant colors emerge from almost every spot along the trail. The Native Americans knew that these colors flagged the emergence of new “products” for their “medicine chests.” These plants and herbs were building their rich reserves of beneficial components, soon to be used by the people who lived among them, the Papago, Pima, Apache, Yavapai, and Yaqui.

If the Papago (or O’odham as they call themselves) were to have only one plant from the desert pharmacopoeia it would be the Greasewood bush also known as the Creosote bush or Chaparral [*Larrea tridentata* var. *tridentata*]. Along the flat land of the desert there is no more prolific plant, covering almost every square meter. You have to be on that spring walk to even see the color produced by the flowers, a small yellow composite.



Gather a few leaves in your hand, squeeze them a bit and then sniff. It should remind you of the smell after a rain on the desert. This bush is the drugstore of the desert! The O’odham use it to cure fevers, influenza, colds, upset stomach, gas, gout, arthritis, sinusitis, bursitis, rheumatism, anemia and fungus infections. It is used like a spring tonic, to clean house inside and out! Many families kept a bundle of branches hanging from the inside of the lodge within easy reach should any malady begin to brew. A small



handful of leaves and branches placed in a quart of water and allowed to steep in the sun would provide all the medication a family needed for a few days. Wait for the next spring rain to fall to see if you can smell the “drugstore of the desert.”

Another plant used as a “life medicine” was the Desert Globemallow [*Sphaeralcea ambigua*], the orange-flowered “weed” which is commonly seen growing along the sides of desert roads. The Navajo would opt for the plants growing in the more sterile areas of the desert to refill their collections of this extremely important medicinal plant. The roots were dried and beat to a powder, then used in teas for coughs, colds and influenza. After soaking, the root powder was also

used on bleeding sores and as a skin lotion. Fresh or dried leaves were used for blisters on the soles of the feet. In fact, it was common for them to line their shoes with fresh Globemallow leaves. A tea made of fresh leaves was used for sore throats, tonsillitis and upset stomach. A good spring harvest of this plant provided a well-stocked medicine chest for the remainder of the year.

Probably the most beautiful of spring wildflowers is the Desert Penstemon [*Penstemon pseudospectabilis*] with its crimson, pink, purple or blue flowers. These plants were collected and beaten to a pulp, heated in the sun in a little natural oil, then mixed with beeswax or lard to form an ointment. For skin irritations or dried lips, there was nothing



photos: Dave Mills



better.

Focus on other plants as you travel throughout the natural desert areas and list those you might be inclined to choose for your medicine bag. With so much diversity in our Sonoran Desert, it is no wonder that the indigenous people were rarely at a loss to find a cure for their ills.

