

BOOK REVIEW

JUDITH SUMNER. 2000. **The Natural History of Medicinal Plants.** (ISBN 0-88192-483-0, hbk.). Timber Press, Inc., The Haseltine Building, 133 S.W. Second Avenue, Suite 450. Portland, OR 97204-3527, U.S.A. (503-227-2878, 503-227-3070 fax; www.timberpress.com). \$24.95 hbk. 235 pp. Line drawings, 30 color plates.

Despite the modest title, *The Natural History of Medicinal Plants*, is much more than just a historical account of the uses of plant medicine. The author, Judith Sumner of the Arnold Arboretum, covers that and in doing so reviews everything from medicinal chemistry to zoopharmacognosy. Though not necessarily designed as such, this book is an excellent overview of the contemporary issues concerning medicinal plants. Complete with a foreword by the ubiquitous Mark Plotkin and being just over 200 pages, this book should attract a wide readership and deservedly so. The writing within bares all the wisdom of a historian, botanist, and enthusiast of a subject whose time has come. Indeed, westerners are experiencing a renaissance of interest in medicinal plants and their potential to treat modern diseases. And new drugs aren't the only concern; conservation of global biodiversity is an increasingly salient issue for academic and lay readers. While I refer to the title as being modest, the author's goal to, "...connect the human concerns of botanical medicines and ethnobotany with the role of medicinal plants and their secondary compounds in nature" is anything but and she admirably succeeds.

The book is laid out in ten chapters: **1)** A Brief History of Medicinal Botany, **2)** Acquiring Knowledge, **3)** Medicinal Plants in Nature, **4)** Toxins and Cures: A Cabinet of Plant Chemicals, **5)** Defensive Strategies and Plant Chemistry, **6)** Significant Discoveries, **7)** Zoopharmacognosy and Botanical Toxins, **8)** Chemical Prospecting and New Plant Medicines, **9)** Protecting Medicinal Biodiversity and Knowledge, **10)** Herbal Histories, Considerations, and Caveats. A brief- 1/2a page- glossary, three pages of further reading and an index follow these chapters. Throughout the book Sumner covers plant medicines in prehistory, medicinal chemistry, herbarium collections, healing gardens, dispersal and naturalization of medicinal plants, alkaloids, curare plants, coca, chimpanzees and self-medication, cancer drugs from plants, and tropical conservation- just to name a few.

Strong points are in chapters four through six in which the author covers plant compounds, chemical evolution, and significant discoveries in the field. Chapters eight and nine are of interest to the budding ethnobotanists among us, as Sumner discusses new plant drugs, future prospects, ownership of medicinal plants and traditional knowledge, and conservation. But, Sumner does more than just cover big-ticket issues of ethnobotany; this is a history book after all. Chapter's one, three, and ten are exceptionally written historical discussions of plant medicines, their discovery and uses. It is perhaps the author's skillful writing that makes this book so valuable. While written for a lay audience, this book is sure to hold the attention and interest of any scholar. The breadth of academia covered in this relatively small book is remarkable and for twenty-five dollars, a bargain.

Simply put, *anyone* interested in medicinal plants, ethnobotany, history, anthropology and conservation should have this book on their shelves. The book is not only accessible to a large academic audience, but also lay readers of a wide variety of interests. The potential readership alone is enough to say that it is only a matter of time before this book becomes a classic. *The Natural History of Medicinal Plants* is well suited for college level classes covering Medical Anthropology, Ethnobotany, and Medical Botany, as an introduction to a field with a myriad of contemporary concerns.—Kevin D. Janni, Botanical Research Institute of Texas, kjanni@brit.org.



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