

“Herbs & Remedies”

When European people arrived to Nova Scotia they did not know about local herbs and could not risk gathering or ingesting plants that could be harmful. The First Peoples of Nova Scotia could offer advice and assistance to those that needed remedies or help in collecting plants.

When settlers arrived to the New World, they had to make sure that they had medicine in case they came down with an illness. Many families brought some herbs with them from Europe; they planted some herbs and made their own medicines from them. Herbs are plants, roots, and bark that are beneficial because they could be used for other purposes than just healing, including flavouring food or dyeing with colours.

Two types of drugs could be made from herbs. Benefits were used to prevent illness, and simples were used to cure an illness or pain.

Many herbs can be found in the forests. Women of the household were the collectors and advisors in relation to these plants and remedies. In the fall, women would go into the woods at moonlight to gather the herbs that would be used as medicine. At home, they would be hung from the ceiling in front of the fire to dry. These plants became powders, tonics, teas, and lotions.

Indigenous people taught settlers how to treat fevers, dysentery and other ailments of the stomach and intestines. Chewing the inside bark of the willow tree subdued stomach pain. Today, aspirin is made of this material and to relieve stomach upset the bark of elm tree is still used in medicine.

Local indigenous people were skilled at treating bones that were fractured or dislocated, poisons or bad wounds. European settlers copied the remedy of making a poultice of boiled spruce. The First Nations Peoples were often seen using this poultice to remove embedded arrowheads or splinters. They would then clean the wound and sew it with a fiber taken from the inner bark of a tree or from the long tendon of a deer’s leg.

Indigenous communities also used sweat-houses. Hot stones were placed in the centre of a tepee with the doors closed tight. Water was poured on the stones until a thick steam would fill the tent. Once the ill person was sweating, they would be plunged into cold water and then given a strong massage followed by a long nap.



People still take sauna baths regularly believing that sweating removes some of the toxins in our body. Toxins are produced by bacteria and can accumulate and make us sick. In many cases, using a sweat-house or sauna cured some ailments.