

An important part of ethnomedicine is the practice of treating illness using local knowledge of plants and other foodstuffs. Traditional societies across the world have recognized the importance of using the things that are ingested into one's body to support health and healing. Humoral theories of body equilibrium, such as Traditional Chinese Medicine and Ayurveda, described later in this chapter, rely heavily on making choices about food and drink that will restore balance to the body.

Plant materials may be eaten or drunk as an infusion (in which the plant is steeped in water, such as a tea) or decoction (in which the plant parts are boiled and concentrated, then added to water; mostly used for stems, bark, seeds, and roots). Anyone can access the materials to heal in the environment; therefore, non-specialists can treat themselves or members of their community.

However, specialists may train to learn deeper knowledge and may be sought out by patients who don't have access to or knowledge of the treatments they need.

According to ethnobotanist Daniel Moerman (2009), approximately 2,700 species of plants were used as medicine by the Indigenous peoples of North America. Some of the uses include pain relief, contraceptives and abortifacients, anaesthetics, poison antidotes, reducing the effects of colds, diuretics, burn remedies, and sedatives. In North America today, people routinely seek out specialists with knowledge of foods that support health. From nutritionists (with a bioscientific perspective) to herbalists and integrated medicine practitioners (with a shared focus on scientific data and received wisdom), these specialists treat sufferers with illnesses of all types.

Knowing that edible plants themselves are used to heal in traditional societies, it also makes sense that most modern medicines come from constituents of plants. Cancer treatment today uses 121 drugs; 90 of those come from plant sources

(Prasad and Tyagi 2015). Table 11.2 contains a brief list of plants that are used in traditional healing around the world and whose derivatives have also been incorporated into modern Western medicine.

**TABLE 11.2**

**Edible Plants Used by Native Populations and in Modern Pharmaceuticals**

<b>Common Name of Plant</b>	<b>Scientific Name of Plant</b>	<b>Pharmaceutical Using Plant Derivative</b>	<b>Healing Properties</b>
Chili	<i>Capsicum frutescens</i>	Capsaicin	Pain relief
Foxglove	<i>Digitalis lanata</i>	Digoxin	Heart disease/arrhythmia
Garlic	<i>Allium sativum</i>	Raw garlic/garlic oil/aged garlic extract	Heart disease
Wild mandrake or mayapple	<i>Podophyllum peltatum</i>	Etoposide	Used in cancer chemotherapy
Tea tree	<i>Melaleuca alternifolia</i>	Tea tree oil	Antibacterial/anti-fungal
Thyme	<i>Thymus vulgaris</i>	Thymol	Antibacterial/anti-inflammatory
White willow	<i>Salix alba</i>	Salicylic acid/aspirin	Headache/pain/anti-inflammatory