

BOTANICAL ASPECTS OF MEDICINAL PLANTS

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History

The primitive man, most certainly, would have experimented with plants for his therapeutics as he experimented with plants for his sustenance. The information passed on to subsequent generations in this regard, would have resulted in the accumulation (and loss) of a wealth of knowledge. However, the records of the usage of medicinal plants by primitive societies are unknown.

During historic times, medical - botanical treatises began to appear among various civilizations of the world. The Ayurvedic system of medicine was founded in India by Rishis about 3000 years ago. This was brought to Sri Lanka along with Vijayan invasion in the 5th Century B.C.

Nomenclature

In the utilization of plants in medicine, their accurate identification is of supreme importance. The sole use of vernacular names for medicinal plants has created difficulties, and often undesired results. Therefore, the use of scientific nomenclature and identification techniques are important.

Current Progress

Jayaweera (1981-82) listed 625 species of plants used in Ayurvedic practice in Sri Lanka. A major portion of them belongs to our indigenous flora, with a few being endemic to the island. Several species are exotic

in origin, but they are successfully cultivated in Sri Lanka, while some have been naturalized forming a part of our natural flora. However, notable amounts of medicinal plant materials are imported.

Conservation

Due to the increased consumption of naturally occurring medicinal plants, they invariably become less frequent or rare. The dwindling of the natural vegetation of the island is also a main cause for the depletion of this natural resource.

New Potentials

The traditional use of plants in medicine, during recent decades, has assumed a new trend. The chemists and pharmacologists are conducting intensive investigations of various medicinal plants. Furthermore, they are also researching into similar aspects of some plants which were not known to be useful and have come up with some encouraging findings. This has resulted in the entry of several new plants into the medical arena.