

## Plants of Poland

### **Borage** (*Borago officinalis*)

Knab: "In ancient times this plant was called *miodnik* (honey plant) to indicate its usefulness for attracting bees in the garden. Marcin of Urzedow (1595) wrote: 'Anyone who knows herbs, knows borage.' It was used in his time to cleanse the blood." p. 95. As in Western Europe, borage was probably also used in wine as a heart tonic and antidepressant; also in salads for its cucumbery taste.

### **Calendula** (*Calendula officinalis*) aka Pot Marigold

Knab credits its presence in Poland 'from ancient times'. Syreniusz: "All the country folk know marigold..."

Marcin of Urzedow: "Everyone knows that marigold is called wreath, which they use to weave wreathes." Knab, 136.

Syreniusz mentioned it as a remedy for excessive bile. It may also have been used in a salve for wounds, etc. Zevin suggests that Russian herbalists originally used calendula as suggested by Dioscorides. (p. 46)

### **Caraway** (*Carum carvi*)

Knab mentions it as one of the herbs that 16th century Queen Bona Sforza was credited with introducing, but also says that "In the Middle Ages, caraway was a trade item found in parts of Belgium and Poland, however it was already being used as a spice from the time of the first Piasts. It was added to beet soup and all varieties of meats and baked goods, especially breads." p. 99. Caraway seed was probably used in period Poland as it was in other countries, for stomach ailments.

Note: Knab says, "Caraway expels gas when mixed with anise, coriander and fennel" and this mixture makes an excellent cordial. Caraway was probably used in medicinal alcoholic cordials as soon as they were introduced.

According to Knab, one of the herbs to be harvested on St. John's day, June 24.

## **Dill**

16th century used for Pickling in Poland:

Mikolaj Reg: 'pickle cucumbers in salt, add some dill and sour cherry or oak leaves...' (Dembinska, p. 131)

Reg: "Having removed the outside leaves of some nice heads of cabbage, cut them in half and fit them neatly into a vat, spreading beet chards and dill between the layers" (Dembinska p. 124)

"popular with crayfish and with mushrooms, garlic, leeks and mustard-- Poles used both the seeds and the greens" (Dembinska, p. 122)

Syreniusz: "dill is useful not only as a medicine but also used at the table . . . the leaves are used in meats, soups, and vegetables . . . the seed is also added to pickling cabbage, salting meat, and added to sausages for stuffing." (Knab, p.

111-- apparently Syreniusz suggested using the whole plant from the roots up in pickling.) "Marcin of Urzedow indicated that garden dill was 'very good for treating nightmares'." (Knab, p111). Dill appears in Fuch's Great Herbal.

### **Garlic**

The use of garlic and onions in Eastern Europe in food was proverbial. Smith & Christian cite the 17<sup>th</sup> century Sir Thomas Smith on Russia: "Garlicke and Onions, must besauce many of my words, as then it did the most parte of their dishes," and go on, "Garlic was the Russian's third doctor (the first two were the bath and vodka)", which is probably postperiod but indicates health motivations as well as flavor preferences for using garlic.

Knab points out, "In his herbal, Syreniusz listed almost one hundred medicinal uses for garlic including:

increasing urination, opening the veins of the liver and giving aid to asthmatics." p. 115. In later years, garlic hung over the door was an anti-witch/anti-misfortune charm: it's unclear whether this practice dates from period.

According to Struzková and Beranová, Bohemian practitioners used garlic as a preventative but warned against the dangers of eating it as well -- it seems to have been bad for hotblooded people but especially good for intestinal troubles.

### **Lemon Balm (*Melissa Officinalis*)**

As advised by Pliny, Lemon balm was used to smear the inside of beehives.

Marcin of Urzedow: "The bees find it a real delight. . . it is good to have this herb near bees." (Knab, p. 129)

Knab continues: Syreniusz recommended lemon balm for headaches, heart and stomach ailments, mushroom poisoning as well as for rheumatism and asthma. Its other attributes included: "It gladdens the heart, works well for those sad and melancholy and warms the stomach." Taken at night, lemon balm was said to "remove from the body melancholy blood, nightmares and make one merry." (Knab, . 129)

### **Marjoram, sweet (*Origanum majorana*)**

Sweet marjoram is used in Rumpolt's recipe for a marinade of veal. It may also have been used in Polish sausages and other foods. Knab says, "Marjoram was brought to Poland in the 16th Century . . . and became extremely popular both in the kitchen and stillroom. Syreniusz recalls that it was 'sown and planted on windows in various pots." p. 135. Zevin describes its use in Russia as a deodorizer, a practice that might be period.

### **Mullein (*Verbascum thapsus*)**

Marcin Siennik (16th c.): "Spirytus with the flowers of this plant protects against spells and dispels evil spirits." Syreniusz suggested it for diarrhea, four-day fever, toothache, warts, burns, and sore feet. Also, "Syreniusz also believed that the oil

obtained from the flowers of mullein 'works miracles for the hair' and that a decoction from the flowers colors it golden.". Knab, p. 140. Mullein is also used in period dyeing

### **Mustard** (*Brassica nigra*)

The best kind of mustard, say all the period sources, is the black mustard. Dembinska says that mustard was used to season meat, and "Mustard was the most popular Polish condiment for flavoring meat sauces, although Poles appear to have preferred their mustard seeds whole, a texture similar to some of the coarse-grained or 'rustic' mustards made in France and German today." Dembinska, p. 73.

"Mustard seeds appear in the royal accounts on a daily basis..." Dembinska, p. 122. Knab also points out that they occur in the expense accounts of King Jagiello. Mustard was also used in preparing poached herring (with onions). Dembinska p. 101

### **Nettle** (*Urtica dioica*)

Nettle cloth, says Knab, was used in Poland from the 12th century onward; nettle cloth clothes "were worn to frighten away demons." Syrennius (via Knab) mentions nettle cooked with snails, and Lang mentions the same dish in Hungary. Syrennius suggested it for gas and stomach cleansing. Smith & Christian also cite nettle, along with sorrel, goose-foot and ground-elder as plants that were probably harvested and consumed locally in Russia (p.10) Zevin notes ". . . during the seventeenth century physician's primary interest in nettle centered around the treatment of wounds. One Russian herbal of that period (known simply as *The Herbal Book*), describes the use of nettle: 'we chew raw nettle, mash it and apply it to fresh wounds, and so we clean and heal the wounds.' For old, infected wounds, the practitioner was advised to crush both the nettle leaves and seeds, and add salt: 'Apply to old infected wounds and they will get the dead tissue out and heal the wounds.'" (p. 106)

### **Parsley** (*Petroselinum sativum*)

Dembinska says that parsley was often used to season meat (p. 73) and says it was the most popular potherb (p. 121): "It was more common in Poland than in Western Europe, and its known curative properties for helping digestion and 'cleansing the blood' guaranteed it a prominent position in many dishes of the period. It was also eaten to kill the odor of onions which lingered on medieval Poles after every large meal. From greens during the spring and summer to roots during the fall and winter, there was not a season when parsley was absent from the daily menu. It is interesting too, that parsley was not viewed simply as an herb, but as a green vegetable to be eaten boiled. It was also used to color green sauces and to enhance or modify their flavors."

Knab says that in the 16th century it was "being grown both in the garden and in pots on windowsills." p. 146.

Zevin says, "The Greeks brought parsley to Russia between the tenth and eleventh centuries. Petroselinum soon became a common houseplant, especially among people residing near the Black Sea. By the twelfth century, parsley was well known in other parts of Russia . . . Although like the Greeks the Russians always valued parsley as an ornamental plant, they used it medicinally from the beginning. The herbal *Refreshing Windtown*, published in 1672, states that with petrosila herb [parsley] 'stones ran out of the bladder and kidneys, take out weakness of the liver, bellies sometimes make.'" (p.111)

### **Plantain**

Appears depicted in the Marian altarpiece at St. Mary's in Cracow by Wit Stwosz (1477-1533). May have been used to treat skin problems and for blood cleansing in period Poland. According to Zevin, "Centuries ago, plantaine was especially prized by travelers in Russia . . . the serfs believed that this healing herb was a gift from God to travelers. . . and many would pray while spreading plantain seeds along the roadsides to help future travellers" (p. 118) presumably for use as compresses for cuts, wounds and stings.

### **Rose** (*Rosa* sp.)

Knab cites the *Pharmacopea Cracoviensis* 1683 as authority that *Rosa gallica* and *Rosa centifolia* were grown in Poland. Wild Roses (*Rosa canina*) and rose hips were also used: "Marcin Siennik, in his herbal [1564], suggests using the flowers of the wild rose to make a pillow that is soothing and induces sleep. Syreniusz suggested using rose hips for bloody coughs, bloody emesis and diarrhea." Knab, p. 153.

Zevin notes: "In medieval times, the fruit of this flower [i.e., rose hips] was highly esteemed for its pleasant acidic taste. It was used to make preserves and sauces in Germany, while the Russians fermented the hips and made them into wine." (p. 124)

### **Sage** (*Salvia Officinalis*)

Knab says that sage was brought to Poland in the 16th century, and that "three sage leaves ingested in the morning were thought to protect one the whole day 'against the plague and pestilential airs.'" (p. 157) It was probably used to treat throat ailments as a drink or gargle.

### **Shepherd's Purse** (*Capsella bursa-pastoris*)

Zevin: "Traces of this herb have also been found in archaeological digs in territories where early Slavic tribes once thrived . . . During the Middle Ages, Shepherd's purse was used by peasants living throughout Russia and much of Europe primarily to stop bleeding." (p. 132) Knab says, "Considered a garden

weed, shepherd's purse is a very old herbal plant in Polish folk medicine and used frequently during childbirth" to stop bleeding" (p. 160)

### **Savory, Summer** (*Satureia hortensis*)

Dembinska speaks of an herb, used flavor a sauerbraten dish originally imported from Hungary, called 'csombor'. This is savory (*Satureia hortensis*, summer savory; though winter savory might also be indicated, based on the taste described): "Csombor is an herb with a taste that resembles mugwort (*Artemisia vulgaris*). It may be replicated by grinding together equal parts tarragon, dill seed, and caraway seed." While the taste of savory doesn't really resemble mugwort, it is similar to the mixture she mentions.

Marcin of Urzedow: "savory is a common herb and much eaten in Poland" (Knab, p. 160). It was

supposedly good for improving digestion and awakening valor.

Weaver suggests that czombor (savory) vinegar may have been used in Sabrina Welserin's Hungarian style fish dish.

### **Soup greens:**

"water" barszcz or Niedzwidzia l/apa

dziki szczaw (buckler-leaved sorrel *Rumex scutatus*)

Lamb's quarters (*Chenopodium album*)

locyga (nipplewort *Lapsana communis*)

### **Yarrow** (*Achillea millefolium*)

This famous medieval wound herb was apparently also used in Poland, grown in monastery gardens. Knab: "Marcin of Urzedow suggested poultices of yarrow for inflamed and pus filled wounds. Syreniusz suggested its use for internal bleeding, diarrhea and pain in the intestines. He suggested that the herb is good boiled in wine and taken for 'colic and biting in the stomach. Mashed and applied to the body it will stop nosebleeds and decrease tooth pain if the root is chewed.' (p. 175)

Zevin says, "Old herbals document its medicinal use in Russia as far back as the fourteenth century, though it was probably used before that time" (p.149).