



by Judy Fleming, HCMG

Medicinal Plants: The Aloe Vera

Plants and herbs are nature's medicine cabinet. The modern pharmaceutical industry has its roots (literally and figuratively) in herbal remedies. The most widely used medicinal plant is Aloe vera, *Aloe barbadensis*. Aloe vera's use can be traced back 6,000 years to early Egypt, where the plant, known as the "plant of immortality," was depicted on stone carvings. Aloe was used topically to heal wounds and for various skin conditions, and orally as a laxative. People use Aloe vera topically for osteoarthritis, burns, and sunburns and the gel can be found in hundreds of skin products, including lotions and sunblocks. The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has approved Aloe vera as a natural food flavoring.



Aloe vera leaves contain a clear gel that is often used as a topical ointment for skin abrasions and burns, while the green part of the leaf can be used to produce a juice or a dried substance (called latex) that can be taken by mouth. Aloe vera latex contains strong laxative compounds. The gel contains aloin, aloemodin, and barbaloin.

Use of topical Aloe vera is not associated with significant side effects, although people with diabetes who use glucose-lowering medication should be cautious if also taking aloe by mouth because Aloe vera may lower blood glucose levels. Also, consumption of Aloe vera can decrease the absorption of many drugs.

Aloe is very easy to grow and propagates by vegetative offshoots. It prefers well-drained soil and is partial to full sun. Make sure you water thoroughly once a week. It is not winter hardy and should be brought into the house or a protected area from November through March.

SOURCES: National Center for Complimentary and Alternative Medicine. Aloe, Natural Medicines; Comprehensive Database Web site, June 5, 2007. Aloe (Aloe vera) Natural Standard Database site, Accessed on June 3, 2007.