Book Reviews

Book Review Editor, Daniel F. Austin

Edible Medicines: An Ethnopharmacology of Food.


This most recent book from Nina Etkin’s desk makes an excellent and important addition to the existing literature in ethnobotany. Many systems of traditional medicine, most prominently Ayurveda, clearly recognize the role of food for human wellbeing and healing. In contrast, western ethnobotanical science often has difficulties with this concept.

Edible Medicines portrays the healing properties of food in a holistic context. The introductory chapter gives interesting insights into the development of secondary plant compounds, and their role in evolution. It also introduces the reader to the development of plant use and production from hunter-gatherer societies to modern agrobusiness, and does not forget to relate to the cultural function of food. The overview on the origin of domesticated plants and animals is comprehensive, but Quinoa (Chenopodium quinoa Willd., Chenopodiaceae) should be added to the list.

Etkin extends this perspective by adding an in-depth analysis on the perception of the role of food in medicine, ranging from Hippocrates to western-style intensive care and modern nutrition science.

The most fascinating part of Edible Medicines comes with the chapters on spices, fermented foods, and foods used in social context. The introductions to phyto- and biochemistry are easy to follow. The reviews on detailed use-history, contemporary use, and especially pharmacological effects of spices and fermented foods are excellent. Etkin always presents examples from her own long research career, and explains in detail what specific plants are used for, and which health concepts these uses are derived from. This puts the everyday use of plants in a completely new perspective. Etkin also elaborates on the important link between the consumption of stimulants and the traditional social setting, and describes possible adverse health effects if the original ritual context is abandoned.

The chapter Medicinal qualities of animal food not only treats zoopharmacology, how animals treat themselves by eating specific diets, but also the use of animals in medicine, and as foods for medicinal purposes. The discourse on the value of insects and their products in disease treatment and nutrition compiles information that is otherwise difficult to find.

A book on foods as medicine would hardly be complete without an outlook on the global marketplace for complementary and alternative medicine, functional-, health- and design–foods, and dietary supplements. The addition of this topic makes sense, but this last short chapter can’t possibly do this topic justice.

The appendix presents a practical condensed summary on the most common spices and their constituents and activities. This should have been provided for all the plants treated in the book.

Overall, this is a wonderful book, delightful to read, with a wealth of information, and outstanding bibliography. It is of interest to advanced scholars and students, as well as laypersons interested in the subject. It is definitely worth the buy, and one hopes that a paperback edition will soon be available.

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Taiwanese Native Medicinal Plants. Phytopharmacology and Therapeutic Values.


This is a concise book. It begins with the usual Foreword, Preface, Acknowledgements, and Introduction. After that, it is a huge table (pages 2–116) listing the native medicinal plants of Taiwan. Major chemical constituents found in the medicinal plants are provided. This particular set of information is substantiated with literature references, which I find extremely useful. In addition, specific plant parts that contain these chemicals are also provided. The last piece of information included in the table is the “claimed therapeutic values.” The descriptions of the therapeutic values are very general in nature. Unfortunately, it is not entirely clear about the sources of this particular set of information. One last thing to note about the table is that scientific names of the plants are used. The plant names are sorted in ascending alphabetical order which makes searching for a particular plant of interest easy.

Following the table is the Appendix section. Appendix 1 is a list of chemical constituents with corresponding scientific name of plants that contain the chemi-