by *David Square*

Sage advice from my garden

There's so much folklore surrounding the medicinal uses of herbs that Job himself would lose patience attempting to cull the pretenders — plants with absolutely no beneficial medicinal qualities — from those with some medicinal value. The herbs discussed in this article were chosen randomly by the author because they are generally assumed to belong to the latter group. The common denominator? I grew (or attempted to grow) all of them in my garden this summer at the behest of *CMAJ*. I was also the sole test subject, since other family members refused to participate in my late-summer trials involving the herbal produce. Our dog, bless her soul, indicated that she was willing to participate on several occasions but was not included in the trials for ethical reasons. With these caveats in mind, let's venture into my garden.

First stop is the alliums, members of the lily family, which includes garlic, onions, chives and shallots. Folklore tells us that when Satan departed the Garden of Eden, garlic sprouted in his left footprint and onions in his right. It appears that he did a disservice to generations of future undead by cultivating the alliums. How many vampires have been thwarted and how many maidens saved from eternal damnation by a necklace of garlic braided with onions, chives and shallots?

An end to flatulence?

The alliums are hardy, easy to grow and add spice to bland foods such as tofu and rice cakes. Of all the herbs I investigated this summer, the alliums, specifically garlic, have the most solid claim to medicinal worth. Garlic has been extensively tested and found to have anitmicrobial, antibacterial and antifungal properties, and to be good for the cardiovascular system. However, I challenge claims that garlic soothes the stomach. After consuming large quantities of it with steak, pasta and beer, I observed the opposite effect.

With dyspepsia in mind, let's move to the savories. Two of them are mentioned in folklore — summer savory (*Satureja hortensis*) and winter savory (*S. montana*). Both are members of the mint family.

David Square

The summer variety is most highly prized for its medicinal properties: enhanced sex drive and relief from flatulence. (The former may result from the latter's impact upon the partner, but this has not been proved.) Summer savory is also considered an asthma therapy, but as a long-suffering asthmatic I found that I sneezed when the vapours of crushed leaves were inhaled, which forced me to reach for my inhaler.

Perennial or winter savory has gained a reputation as an anaphrodisiac, mostly prescribed for high-ranking American politicians. Summer and winter savory are easy to grow from seeds or cuttings. I grew the summer variety and found that it imparted a delightful flavour to beans, and it can be used with impunity to spice up sausages.

Herbalists say that people who want to live forever should take a little sage with their daily meal. *Salvia of-*

ficinalis, a member of the mint family, should not be confused with Greek sage (*Salvia triloba*), a pathetic pretender to the throne of medicinal virtue. *S. officinalis* is reputed to be useful in treating more than 60 ailments as diverse as congealed blood, venereal disease and baldness. Proponents of the medicinal qualities of sage say that teas, syrups and tinctures prepared with it will relieve inflammations of the oral cavity and throat when used as a mouthwash or gargle.

Shaken, not stirred

I found that a tincture containing 600 ml of 200-proof vodka to 40 g of crushed sage proved an effective soporific if gargled and swallowed (in moderation, of course) at bedtime. I have also applied the tincture to my receding hairline, but the people who make Propecia needn't worry — so far I haven't noticed any decrease in recidivism.

Sage is easy to grow from seed and makes any poultry dressing smell and taste great. Let's face it — the Christmas turkey wouldn't be the same without it.

Speaking of smells that titillate, herbalists say that lavender (*Lavandula angustifolia*) is renowned as a natural cover-up for body odour. The Romans, apparently a smelly lot, produced lavender perfume in vast quantities, and although it is known that Napoleon preferred Josephine when she was ripe, the emperor himself poured lavender water over his body during his monthly bath. The medicinal properties of lavender are not well documented, possibly because there are none.

However, personal research leads me to conclude that lavender made a tremendous contribution to the advancement of modern medicine. After being naughty and rubbing the flowers and leaves over my entire body — I was inside when I did this — I found my olfactory tract overpowered. This made my eyes water, my bronchial tubes constrict and my head ache. I had to throw myself into a bathtub to wash away the lavender before the powerful stench asphyxiated me. I concluded that if enough people had similar experiences in the past, then perhaps the herb is responsible for the daily bath. And we all know that attention to personal hygiene did more to cure the ills of the world than all the herbal remedies concocted by man.

The pretentious herb

So much has been written about the medicinal value of echinacea, or the coneflower — this is not to be confused with *The Coneheads*, an underappreciated classic of the American cinema — that I was tempted to skip this pretentious herb in favour of a more modest plant such as *Cannabis sativa*, which for some reason is found growing wild in many of Canada's rural areas even though it is not indigenous to them. However, the editor warned me to "just say no" to this particular herb. He was worried that the prying eyes of the local constabulary might fail to appreciate our legitimate scientific endeavour.

So I'll stick to echinacea. Three of 9 species of this herb are prescribed by today's herbalists: *Echinacea angustifolia*, *E. purpurea* and *E. pallida*.

Numerous immunostimulatory and anti-inflammatory polysaccharides have been isolated from echinacea, and it has been suggested that these compounds possess immune-enhancing properties. Echinacea has been prescribed for everything from the common cold to cancer, and natives used it to heal wounds, burns, abscesses and insect bites. The dried root was eaten to cure infections, toothache and joint pains, and as an antidote for rattlesnake bites. Although I grew coneflower quite successfully this summer I did not experiment with it, preferring instead to enjoy the light purple blossoms.

In a pickle?

This summer, whenever I felt anxious about meeting an editor's deadline, I strolled to the garden and gathered a handful of dill seeds to chew. The name of this common garden herb comes from a Norse word, *dilla*, which means to lull or quiet. *Anethum graveolens* is not only a mild sedative but is also reputed to aid digestion and relieve flatulence. The ancients used it to ward off witches, warlocks and other evil doers. Roman and Greek heroes were crowned with yellow dill flowers and, in some countries, brides wore dill on their wedding dresses as good-luck charms to ensure happy marriages. Today, the seeds and leaves are used for pickling and to impart a zesty licorice taste to salads, vegetables and fish.

This wonderful plant is easy to grow from seed and will reseed itself year after year. Its mild sedative properties are probably due to the presence of essential oils and a host of miscellaneous compounds, including sterols, minerals and fatty acids.

When I'm really depressed because a deadline has passed but the article hasn't been written, I rush to the garden to harvest the flowering tops of St. John's wort (*Hypericum perforatum*), which is reputed to be the best natural cure for depression since the people of Oceania invented kava liquor. (Because the kava plant [*Piper methysticum*] is difficult to cultivate in Canada, we must content ourselves with the ubiquitous St. John's wort, which grows in many parts of North America.)

This shrubby perennial is named for St. John the Baptist, whose blood is symbolized by the red spots that magically appeared on the herb's leaves after he was be-

headed. All sorts of claims have been made about its pharmacologic efficacy, but the primary use today is to treat depression. Caveat emptor: if you take St. John's wort during the summer you may have to limit your beach time to a few minutes a day. It can cause severe photosensitivity in animals that eat it, and herbalists recommend that those with fair skin avoid exposure to strong sources of ultraviolet light when taking the herb.

About those lice . . .

If you're stuck indoors for an extended period, there's a slim chance you will develop rheumatism and jaundice and become a home for head lice. Not to worry. Hyssop (*Hyssopus officinalis*) was used by the Elizabethans to treat all 3 afflictions. I know from personal experience that it is particulary effective in the delousing department because our child brought some of these unwelcome guests home from school and they spread to the entire family. (We're a very clean family, honest.) My wife then prepared a steaming infusion of chopped hyssop plants and poured the warm mixture over each lousy head in turn. After several treatments and a little hand picking, those lice made like bugs at a purple martin convention. This isn't surprising because in the Bible King David said to "purge me with hyssop and I shall be clean." But do not confuse hyssop with anise hyssop — these are 2 very different plants.

Lemon balm (*Melissa officinalis*) is one of my favourite herbs because it is reputed to attract bees, which cross-pollinate many flowers and plants. The Greeks believed that rubbing the leaves of lemon balm on bee hives calmed the insects and, as a bonus, would attract new swarms of colonizers.

A honey of a herb

Medically, lemon balm tea is still prescribed by herbalists as a mild sedative and Arabs have used it to treat heat stress. The crushed leaves were also used to dress wounds and make poultices.

A hardy perennial even on the prairies, lemon balm is easy to grow from seeds or cuttings, and tolerates both full sun and partial shade. This summer, a beekeeping neighbour asked to borrow a few leaves of lemon balm from my garden whenever he tended his hives. He rubbed the leaves on his hands, and claimed that the scent made even the most aggressive bees docile and easy to handle.

Space prevents me from mentioning many other herbs I cultivated over the summer, but I must squeeze in a few more notables. The leaves of marjoram (*Origanum marjorana*) in infusion make a mouthwash to relieve sore throat, and the leaves of calendula (*Calendula officinalis*) can be made into a soothing hand lotion. Sprigs of parsley (*Petroselinum crispum*) in infusion provide a tonic rich in vitamin C, which eases rheumatic pain and relieves piles. Finally, an infusion of fresh basil (*Ocimum basilicum*) is a mild laxative that helps users avoid travel sickness. The dried leaves, when used as snuff, help clear up nose colds and headaches.

Sadly, the first snow has landed on my once-vibrant garden. But that's the best thing about a Manitoba garden: memories of summer last you through the long winter. Besides, the seed catalogues start arriving in another 2 months.

David Square, an avid gardener from Tyndall, Man., is Prairie columnist for *Canadian Gardening*.