

MEDICINAL FOODS

by Carolyn Swicegood

"Let your food be your medicine" said Hippocrates, the Father of Medicine, who compiled a list of over four hundred herbs and their uses. Herbs, spices and other nutritional substances are the oldest form of medicine known to man. While modern or "allopathic" medicine is barely a century old, the practice of natural medicine using nature as a pharmacy can be traced back through all of the ancient civilizations. Over many centuries, man's experiment with plants has yielded a vast stock of natural medicines to help us heal many ailments, and almost always without harmful side effects. Many pharmaceuticals are still derived from the extracts of wild plants, such as digitalis from the purple foxglove flower. Amazingly enough, less than one percent of the over two hundred and fifty thousand plant species on earth have even been studied for their medicinal properties!

Many of the herbs, spices and foods that our grandmothers used as preventative and curative measures can be used for the same purpose in the care of our parrots. Through the years, numerous aviculturists have quietly employed these natural means of keeping their birds healthy. Unfortunately, there are no avian books to guide us in this usage, and of course, dosages and amounts are always the key issue. Although I have studied the use of herbs for over twenty years, I am not a veterinarian and cannot recommend medical treatments for parrots. However, you can find many excellent books on this subject to guide you. Again, the proper dosage is of paramount importance even when using natural substances. One method of judging the correct amount of an herb for a parrot is to determine the appropriate dosage for a human infant and then calculate the dosage for the bird by percentage of weight. For example, a parrot weighing one pound would need approximately one tenth of the amount given a human infant weighing ten times that (ten pounds). Most herbs do not have the toxic side effects of pharmaceutical compounds, so even if the dosage administered is not precise, the consequences are not likely to be as serious.

The following list contains only a few of the herbs, spices and other nutritional substances most commonly used in the care of parrots. It is advisable to educate yourself on the properties of each and to be guided by a holistic veterinarian or a trained and knowledgeable herbalist.

ALFALFA - The leaves of the alfalfa plant are rich in minerals and nutrients, including calcium, magnesium, potassium, and carotene. It

alkalizes and detoxifies the body, especially the liver, and it contains an anti-fungal agent. It is an excellent appetite stimulant and overall tonic and an excellent source of chlorophyll and vitamins. Treating with alfalfa leaves is perfectly safe, but alfalfa seeds contain a slightly toxic amino acid unless used in sprouted form. I keep a shaker of chopped organic alfalfa leaves and use it on my parrots' soft food mix twice a week.

ALOE - Known as the medicine plant, aloe vera is excellent for the treatment of wounds, burns, bites, cuts, abrasions and rashes. It helps to prevent infection in injured skin and it is an exceptionally effective pain killer. Many cases of feather plucking in parrots have been treated successfully with a spray of water and aloe vera gel or powder. It also can be used internally as a powerful detoxifying agent. There are several documented cases of complete recoveries in parrots treated with an aloe concentrate and detoxifying herbs, even though the birds had been considered terminally ill!

CAYENNE - Also known as capsicum, it is an overall digestive aid containing liberal amounts of Vitamins A, C, B-complex, calcium, phosphorous and iron. It is also anti-inflammatory and helps arthritic conditions. Parrots love the fiery taste of cayenne and will try new and unfamiliar foods, such as sprouts, when you sprinkle on this healthful herb.

CHAMOMILE - A mild tea made of this popular herb can be substituted for the drinking water of parrots when they need a calming influence. It is a wonderful natural tranquilizer which soothes the nerves and the digestive tract. As an added bonus, it contains calcium in an easily-assimilated form. This is an excellent natural alternative to tranquilizers for a parrot that is upset by travelling. "Night thrashing" in cockatiels can be treated by offering a bedtime tea of chamomile.

DANDELION - We spend millions on herbicides to kill the dandelions in our lawns while we spend more millions to buy the vitamins and minerals contained in them! Dandelion leaves are full of Vitamin A, B1 and C plus blood purifying substances. Parrots love the taste of this bitter green plant which is a wonderful tonic for them. If you have older parrots in your care, be sure to include dandelion leaves in their diet as it is one of the most effective supplements for the prevention of arthritic conditions.

GARLIC - Currently being studied by the National Cancer Institute for its anti-tumour properties, garlic has been shown to contain eighteen anti-viral, anti-fungal, and anti-bacterial substances! It is a wonderful natural antibiotic which is safe for our parrots. It also stimulates the immune system and kills

parasites. It can help to eliminate lead, zinc, and other toxins from body tissues. When you give your feathered friends their garlic cloves, let them do the peeling; that's half the fun!

GINGER - Called the "wonder drug", the ginger root is actually a rhizome which is similar to several foods known to be consumed in the wild by parrots. It has been used for two thousand years by the Chinese to treat nausea and upset stomach. It is no coincidence that the Japanese serve fresh ginger slices with sushi as insurance against the parasites sometimes found in raw fish. Ginger is a wonderful remedy to use with baby parrots that go through brief periods of colic or throwing up their formula. I mix their formula in ginger tea instead of water and the problem is solved immediately. You can make the tea by steeping two or three slices of fresh ginger root in the water for ten or fifteen minutes. If your parrot must travel and is prone to motion sickness, ginger to the rescue! Add fresh ginger to the food and drinking water several hours before the trip and put a few slices in the carrier. Parrots seem to have an innate sense of what they need and will munch on the ginger to "quell their queasiness" during the trip.

There are many more natural substances which can aid us in our quest to maintain our parrots in a healthy state. Nature's time-honoured remedies can cure or help to cure many maladies, as well as bolster immunity. We are beginning to rediscover that a humble vegetable, fruit, weed, leaf, flower, bark, root, or seed can offer a solution. We need not wait until illness strikes but instead can introduce herbs into our parrots' diets as a preventative measure. Treating our birds' minor injuries and common ailments will give us a wonderful sense of empowerment and it connects us with a venerable tradition practiced for thousands of years all over the world. To quote Hippocrates once again, "Nature is the healer of all disease."

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