Pedanius Dioscorides (born about AD40, died about AD90)

Little is known of Dioscorides’ life except that he served as a surgeon and military doctor for the Emperor Nero. On expeditions he gained a knowledge of botany and wrote a five volume book on pharmacology, De Materia Medica.

More than 600 plants and 1000 drugs were described in this pharmacopea, which remained the standard medical text until the 17th century. His notes on the plants include their habitats, methods of preparation, and medicinal use of the drugs they contained. Many of the common and scientific plant names in use today originate from Dioscorides. The yam family Dioscoreaceae is named after him. Preparations from the boiled root of the wild yam Dioscorea villosa were taken by Indian women to relieve the pains of childbirth and were recommended as a diuretic, emetic, expectorant, and remedy for colic and muscle spasms. Southern black people esteemed it especially as a treatment for rheumatism. Steroid-like substances have been found in Dioscorea villosa and related species. Various Dioscorea species were an important source of diosgenin used in the manufacture of birth control pills and certain other steroid drugs. The steroid-like properties of wild yam may account for its effectiveness in treating rheumatism and similar inflammatory diseases.

Dioscorides was probably the first to use willow to reduce fever and pain—the bark and leaves are rich in salicin, a glucoside closely related to acetylsalicylic acid. He prescribed mandragora wine as an anaesthetic agent and a remedy for insomnia and pain.

Dioscorides is honoured on an Algerian stamp published in 1963 (Stanley Gibbons 416, Scott 306) to commemorate the second Arab Medical Congress. A 13th century painting is reproduced showing Dioscorides delivering a lecture on medical plants. He is holding a mandrake (Mandragora). The original picture is preserved at the Topkapu Sarayl Muzeesi of Istanbul.