

Plant Family Analysis

Plant family analysis has improved the accuracy of prescriptions in homeopathy since its introduction in the last decade (Moskowitz 2000; Reichenberg-Ullman & Ullman 2002; Sankaran 2002; Innes 2005) but has only been attempted in herbal medicine on a small scale (Uyldert 1996; Pelikan 2000; Innes 2005).

There is evidence, however, that plant family analysis has been used historically e.g. by Native Americans to assist in the choice of medicinal plants (Moerman & Estabrook 2003).

The assumption is that - as there are shared genetic, morphological, phytochemical, growth characteristics and environmental adaptations- there will be shared therapeutic characteristics.

Plant family analysis enables herbalists and other practitioners to make more accurate prescriptions. For example, if a practitioner understood the family characteristics of the *Asteraceae*, *Rosaceae*, *Geraniaceae* and *Boraginaceae* and needed to choose an astringent or vulnerary medicine for a patient, they would be able to more accurately match plant to patient by taking into account the family from which the plant comes. Instead of choosing a favourite, well known or random alternative from a list of 30 possible alternative medicines, the herbalist could determine which plant family best suited the patient and then select an alternative from that family. This more highly individualised and holistic prescription may be more effective.

If plants within a family share many characteristics, practitioners may be able to extrapolate information from other species in the family and find novel uses for plants, particularly for local plants from their area. It is hoped that interest in the family characteristics will stimulate practitioners to use neglected species from the family in question, to 'rediscover' plants that have fallen from favour.

According to the work of Mumbai homeopath, Rajan Sankaran and others, people who respond best to minerals, plants or animal medicines have some general characteristics in common.

My understanding of patients who respond best to plant medicines is as follows:

- They are particularly sensitive - often morbidly so - to many external stimuli, including weather, temperature, barometric pressure, humidity, sunshine / light (or lack thereof) and sensory impressions. However, they are often extremely resilient and bounce back after the disturbing influence is removed. [cf. sensitive vs. lack of sensitivity - *Silicea*]
- They are easily affected on many levels by many things - physically or emotionally - and tend to be very reactive
- They have a tendency to fluctuating, variable, changeable, alternating or contradictory symptoms
- Internal sensations may be mirrored in the external environment or the external environment may be mirrored in their internal environment (inside -out; outside - in)
- They can have a tendency to disorganisation - both mentally and in the physiology. Plant medicines are excellent at returning disordered physiology to normal. Plants are usually very ordered and organised in their own growth.
- There is a tendency for disease processes to settle in specific organs or tissues - so called 'organ diseases'. Many plants are used as 'organ specifics' or have 'elective

affinities' to certain organs or tissues, or are said to be appropriated by certain organs

- Patients frequently display the 'Janus principle' in their symptoms. That is, they may have an axis of opposite or contradictory symptoms – e.g. high vs. low; hard vs. soft; wet vs. dry; feeling forced out – must hold on. Equal but opposite effects. Action – reaction. Sensation – function.
- They have a tendency to have symptoms or themes reminiscent of *Silicea*
- They may have strong mental or physical reactions (aversion, desire, aggravation) to plants. People who are strongly allergic to plant from a particular family often respond positively to plant medicines from that family in appropriate dose.
- There is often a strong vertical axis to their symptomatology e.g. 'How've you been?' 'Oh, up and down!'
 - For example, in the *Boraginaceae*, there is a strong *vertical axis* theme i.e. there is a tendency for symptoms, indications and qualities of species to be **up-down, high-low, heavy-light, uplifting-dragging down** and/or **stimulating-depressing**. The movement, dynamis, effects or energetics of this family are arranged on a vertical axis. For example, *Borago officinalis* is "For those with a **heavy heart**...It helps to **lift the spirits**, give courage and restore enthusiasm" (MacIntyre 1996:251).

Onosmodium virginianum treats

"a constant dull headache...always **worse** in the dark and when **lying down**. Here we have a contradictory symptom- (headache) always **worse lying down** (but) the general symptoms are **ameliorated by lying down**. (Anshutz 1998:365-370)

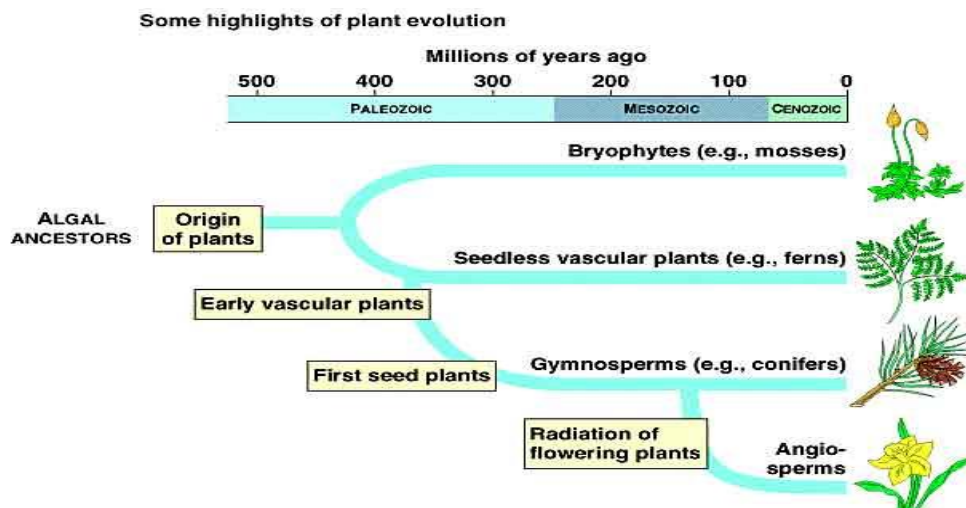
and *Borago officinalis* "**revives the fainting spirits**" (Salmon 1710 in Buhner 1998) and

"... **quieteth the phrenticke or lunaticke person ... good against swooning**...and the **falling sickness**" (Gerard 1998:186),

while Culpeper (1995:139) uses *Cynoglossum officinale*

"to stay all... **defluxions of rheum from the head into the eyes or nose or upon the stomach or lungs as also for coughs**...".

"Herbs are so darn peculiar! I have long enjoyed the homeopathic model. By placing the emphasis on the single remedy, it helps us to get exact concrete information about the materia medica. However, the homeopathic concept of provings, case-taking and use of the single remedy in single doses is also wooden and stiff compared to the wild strange world of the herbs themselves. They like to do all sorts of things. They really do have a magical level of action and this goes far beyond the artificial constructs of the human mind. They are multidimensional." M.Wood. *The Book of Herbal Wisdom*.



The more primitive a plant, the more **water** and **earth** elements are represented in their makeup and consequently in the pathology for which they are curative. The older and more primitive a plant, the more mineral-like (or Silica-like) it appears to be in its pathogenesis. The more advance and evolved a plant becomes, the more it starts to approach the animal kingdom and take on animal characteristics and therefore reflect animal-like symptomatology.