

## Dr. H.P. Lovewell: Traversing the woods, bogs and backwaters in search of *Materia Medica*

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**DR. HENRY P. LOVEWELL** (1866–1934) shared his studies of *Materia Medica* – the collected knowledge of the therapeutic properties of plants and other substances, in the May 1922 issue of the *Rhode Island Medical Journal* (RIMJ). At that time RIMJ was but a sprout, just five years into publication.

“We have found our State a very satisfactory hunting ground for the botanical collector,” wrote Dr. Lovewell, a graduate of Brown (AB, 1889) and Harvard (MD, 1894). “It has a varied topography and abounds in bogs, swamps and marshes, running streams and quiet ponds. It possesses a flora that is unique in many respects.”

Dr. Lovewell’s article is drawn from a lecture he gave several months prior at an exhibit of the Rhode Island Medical Society’s botanical specimens’ collection. He describes some of the more than 300 medicinal plants he collected in the Ocean State and neighboring Massachusetts, and refers to medical botanists such as **CHARLES F. MILLSPAUGH, MD**, who published a definitive guide on medicinal plants in 1887 and whose illustrations are reproduced on this page. In the Prospectus of his guide, “American Medicinal Plants,” Dr. Millspaugh described how he illustrated the plants. “The author has in every case drawn and colored the plants represented in this work by his own hand from the specimens as they stood in the soil; making mathematically accurate drawings, and avoiding the misrepresentations of wilted individuals, or too highly colored fancy pictures,” he wrote. (Figure 1)



**Figure 1.** *Aesculus Hippocastanum* – Horse Chestnut  
Illustration of medium-size leaf with flower, stamen, nut.  
Sources: American Medicinal Plants, pub. 1887,  
Charles F. Millspaugh, MD

The following are excerpts from Dr. Lovewell’s article with some accompanying illustrations by Dr. Millspaugh:

### ***Podophyllum peltatum* – Mandrake or May-Apple** (Figure 2)

When your walks lead in the direction of deserted farmhouses, if you explore the region of the old apple orchard, you may find a plant not native of the State, but set out years ago for its medical value; we allude to the Mandrake or *Podophyllum*. It has very large leaves and a single white flower about two inches in diameter upon a short, curved peduncle, blossoms in May and ripens its fruit in August and September. Parts used: the rhizome and rootlets. Over one hundred years ago

### ***Apocynum cannabinum* – Dogbane**

It was in common use among the Sioux Indians and the Cheyennes as a cure for the bite of the rattlesnake. The dose of the powdered root given internally was two pinches for a child and three pinches for an adult.



**Figure 2.** *Podophyllum peltatum* – Mandrake, May-Apple  
Sources: American Medicinal Plants, pub. 1887,  
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the Shakers of Lebanon, NY, extracted an active principle which was very much sought by physicians. Mandrake was used by the Eclectics as a substitute for mercury in the treatment of syphilis and has even been dominated “Vegetable calomel.”



**Figure 3.** *Cornaceae* – Flowering Dogwoods  
Sources: American Medicinal Plants, pub. 1887,  
Charles F. Millspaugh, MD

### ***Cornaceae* – Flowering Dogwoods** (Figure 3)

In our tramps in early spring the Cornels or Flowering Dogwoods are of much interest, and the more so when we learn they possess an active principle cornine analkaloid having properties similar to quinine and much used by the Southerners during the Civil War as a remedy in malaria.

### ***Geranium maculatum* – Cranesbill** (Figure 4)

...Schoepf recommended this as a remedy in the second stages of dysentery and cholera infantum. This has justly been considered as one of our best indigenous astringents. The rhizome has a considerable percentage of both tannic and gallic gases. Geranium root is official in the U.S.P. [United States Pharmacopeia] in the form of the fluid extract.

### ***Veratrum viride* – American Hellebore**

Found abundant in swamps and low grounds, associated with skunk-cabbage. Parts used: the rhizome and rootlets. Official US Pharmacopoeia; classed as a cardiac depressant; it is probably less likely to cause cardiac depression than is aconite, but is less efficient in the doses generally used.

### ***Apocynum cannabinum* – Dogbane**

...It was in common use among the Sioux Indians of Dakota and Montana and the Cheyennes in Indian Territory. It was one of their favorite remedies as a cure for the bite of the rattlesnake. The root was used freshly grated or dried. The dose of the powdered root given internally was two pinches for a child and three pinches for an adult.

### **Advice to botanical sleuths**

For those interested in taking up this pursuit of viewing and collecting medicinal plants of yore, Dr. Lovewell's advice from the article is applicable today as it was in 1922:

“In pursuit of the medicinal plants of this State, it is first necessary to find if the species sought are native to this region. We have found Bennett's *Flora of Rhode Island* of decided help. Provide yourself with topographical maps of the region you are to visit. A camera should add interest to these trips, but do not expect satisfactory pictures of plants taken when the wind is rated at sixty miles per hour.”

Today, the following resources at the University of Rhode Island's College of Pharmacy medicinal gardens, and the Brown University Herbarium are a wealth of information which so intrigued Drs. Lovewell, Millspaugh and many others referred to in the RIMJ article:

<https://web.uri.edu/youngken-garden/>

<https://www.brown.edu/research/projects/herbarium/links-and-resources>



**Figure 4.** *Geranium maculatum* – Cranesbill  
Sources: American Medicinal Plants, pub. 1887,  
Charles F. Millspaugh, MD