

Noni Needn't Taste Nasty

Barbara Fahs, M.A.

Hi'iaka's Healing Herb Garden, Kea'au, Hawai'i

Cultures around the world have used plants as medicine since before humans evolved from their ancestor species. One of the interesting things about the way that traditional cultures use plants for medicine is that cultures in very distant locations use the same plant for the same ailment. For example, plantain (*Plantago major* and other species) grows everywhere in the world, and it is used for the same ailments by the people in whose homeland it grows. That is, they use it primarily for skin problems—eruptions, boils, burns, cuts, insect bites, and so forth. Primitive peoples didn't need laboratory studies and analyses to know which healing properties the plants around them contained or how to use them. All of our ancestors were herbalists! What does differ from culture to culture are the methods of preparing various plants as medicine—there are many methods of preparing plant medicine: some of them are teas, oils, poultices, enemas, liniments, syrups and tinctures, to name a few.

But the practice of fermenting fruit in a jar and drinking the resulting liquid is a method of plant medicine preparation that I have never heard about or read about in my thirty years of studying and practicing traditional Western herbalism. I have heard it suggested that the Chinese developed this method, and I hope to learn more about the history and source of this practice at today's conference. It has become almost a religion here in Hawai'i among noni devotees to support and promote the fermentation method of preparation. But where does it originate? And have any analyses been done to compare the active ingredients and effectiveness of the fermented liquid with other methods of preparation, such as tinctures? And why is the fermented liquid so popular when there are other, far more palatable ways of preparing plant medicine from this fruit? I believe it is only because the majority of people are not familiar with other long-standing, tried-and-true methods of making plant medicine, such as tincturing, and that's why I'm here today.

Noni was one of the most widely used medicinal plants in Polynesia prior to European contact, and continues its popularity among modern populations. And it serves as an interesting example of the different ways

that people from different cultures prepare plant medicine. But it was not always eaten by humans or made into medicine that was taken internally: in ancient Polynesia, the fruit was given to pigs as food and was eaten by humans only in times of famine. This concurs with information from the "Physician's Desk Reference for Herbal Medicines," which states that the noni fruit is "inedible." And in many parts of Polynesia, noni has been used as a "ghost medicine" in rituals meant to heal spiritual illnesses, in the belief that ghosts are repelled by the fruit's odor.

According to Dr. Arthur Whistler in his book "Polynesian Herbal Medicine," in both Polynesia and the Philippines noni leaves were valuable as a poultice for boils, which I have used and can enthusiastically attest to. Simply passing a noni leaf over a fire briefly, and then applying it to the affected area, boils, cuts cure abscesses and inflammations of various types cured in very short order.

In Samoa, Tonga and Futuna, the crushed or chewed fruit and occasionally other parts of the plant are commonly used for treating infections of the mouth and gums, and for sore throats and toothaches as well. In Samoa, the flowers are employed in treating styes, while in Tonga, vapor from the broken leaves is used for the same purpose. Also in Tonga, a tea or infusion of the leaves or bark is sometimes used for stomach aches, while in Samoa juice from the crushed leaves is sometimes dripped into the eyes, nose or mouth as a part of the ghost medicine ritual.

Ancient Tahitians and Marquesans used the fruit as a tonic for many ailments, such as diabetes, fish poisoning, stings from reef fish, tonsillitis, abdominal swelling, burns, and many other ailments. Noni is truly a remarkable plant!

In ancient Hawai'i, noni was used for boils, wounds and fractures, and a tonic was prepared from the fruit for ailments such as diabetes, high blood pressure and loss of appetite, but according to Whistler, this practice may have developed after European contact.

Michael Tierra is a well-respected herbalist who practices both western European and Chinese herbal

medicine. In his book, "The Way of Herbs," he lists the healing properties that are contained in the biochemical constituents of noni. This list of noni's properties clearly illustrates that it is "pro" everything good and "anti" everything bad. A partial list includes these properties: antibacterial, antimicrobial, alterative (blood purifier), antiparasitic, stomachic, anticancer, anti-inflammatory, antiarthritic, antioxidant, analgesic and antihypertensive. Tierra documents noni's uses around the world, including the treatment of chronic respiratory conditions such as tuberculosis, influenza, asthma, coughs, colds, sinusitis and sore throat. He states that it is also effective for digestive disorders such as diarrhea, constipation, indigestion, gastric ulcers and intestinal parasites. Again, it is truly a miraculous healing plant and one about which I am extremely enthusiastic.

In the herbalism classes that I teach, the first lesson is called "Properties and Preparations." In it, students learn plant property terminology, such as diuretic, anti-inflammatory, and many more, including the list I mentioned earlier that are present in Noni. The preparations form a shorter list—traditional Western herbalism uses the following methods of preparing plant material as medicine:

- Infusion or tea: boiling water is poured over plant material, usually leaves, and allowed to steep for a short time;
- Decoction: plant material is simmered in water for 20 minutes or longer. This method is applicable for roots and woody stems. The cooked plant material can then be used as a poultice for skin problems of many kinds.
- Herbal oil: chopped plant material is placed in a jar of olive oil or other oil and allowed to steep in a warm place for several hours. I make herbal oil from noni fruit and when it is ready, strain it and combine the oil with beeswax to form another preparation, a salve. Be sure to try a sample of my Holy Noni healing hand salve at my table. It's yet another traditional herbalism method for preparing plant material as medicine!
- Tincture: this is where plant material is placed in a jar with alcohol such as vodka or brandy (or glycerin or cider vinegar) and allowed to steep for four weeks or longer. I make several different noni tinctures and will demonstrate this method in just a moment.
- Other preparations include douches, enemas, fomentations, liniments, pills, and syrups. See me afterward if you're interested in more information about these methods.

Tinctures

I'm very enthusiastic about tinctures and will now demonstrate how to make them using the healing noni fruit. Making tinctures is so easy I could do it in my sleep. I make a simple noni and vodka tincture, which is a common way of making a tincture.

Here's how to make a simple tincture with vodka. This method of preparing noni as plant medicine is not a much better tasting potion than the fermented liquid, but it's a start.

1. Chop your noni fruit and fill a clean glass jar about 1/2 full.
2. Then fill the jar with vodka, cover it tightly, store it out of direct sunlight and shake it once every day for four weeks.
3. At the end of this time, strain your mixture and label it.
4. You may transfer the resulting liquid into small brown dropper bottles for ease of use. I'll talk about dosages in just a minute.

Let's get right to the delicious tinctures. They're called elixirs or cordials and are a little bit fancier way of making a tincture. Elixirs include other fruits, spices and flavorings and they combine to make a delicious tasting medicine. The process is basically the same as making a simple tincture, but you'll wind up with a truly delicious medicine.

1. Chop your noni fruit and put the pieces in a clean jar, about 1/3 full.
2. Add other ingredients, such as cinnamon sticks, cloves, and other fruit such as mango, dried apricots, lilikoi—whatever you have handy.
3. Cover the ingredients with brandy. For a non-alcoholic elixir, you can use vegetable glycerin and/or cider vinegar in place of the brandy. If you use vinegar, you can include it in a delicious healthful salad dressing by mixing it with olive oil and other ingredients.
4. Close the jar tightly and store out of direct sunlight.
5. Shake your elixir every day for 4 weeks. Then strain it and mix in molasses, maple syrup or honey to suit your taste.
6. Bottle your concoction, preferably in dark glass, and store it in a cool, dark place at room temperature. Don't forget to label what's inside! For long-term storage, it's best to refrigerate elixirs.

Dosage

Normally, tinctures come in a small brown bottle with a dropper. For many herbs, take a fairly large amount 2 to 3 times each day until your symptoms are gone. For example, take 2 to 4 FULL droppers 2 to 3 times each day. Taking a couple of drops comes from homeopathy and is not correct.

Do not use this herb if you are pregnant or nursing: Noni is also an emmenagogue: that's a property name that means this plant can promote menstruation.

Please feel free to stop by my table to sample my simple noni tincture and my two noni elixirs: one is made with brandy and the other is made with vinegar. And I've brought a salad dressing made with a vinegar-based noni elixir for you all to sample with celery sticks.

Table 1. Noni caesar salad dressing recipe.

If you make a Noni elixir with apple cider or Balsamic vinegar, you can include it in a delicious healthful salad dressing by mixing it with olive oil and other ingredients.

- 6 tablespoons Noni elixir made with apple cider or Balsamic vinegar
 - 2/3 cup Olive Oil
 - 2-3 large cloves of garlic, pressed or crushed
 - Freshly-squeezed juice of 1 lemon
 - 2 3-minute eggs
1. Combine the first four ingredients in a jar or cruet.
 2. After the eggs have boiled for 3 minutes, run them under cold water, then crack with a knife over your container, allowing the juicy yolk to run into other liquids. With a teaspoon, scoop out the partly-cooked

egg white in small chunks and add it to ingredients in cruet.

3. Shake dressing and serve over greens.

Note: If you make the dressing ahead of time, the garlic flavor will blend. Refrigerated, it will keep for about one week.

Table 2. Purported healing properties of noni.

- Alterative: Purifies the blood.
- Analgesic: Relieves pain without loss of consciousness.
- Anti-Inflammatory: Reduces inflammations, both external and internal.
- Antiarthritic: Reduces the pain and swelling of arthritis.
- Antibacterial: Fights bacteria and disinfects.
- Anticancer: Helps to prevent the onset of certain cancers and can help to retard tumor growth.
- Antihypertensive: Can lower blood pressure and fight atherosclerosis.
- Antimicrobial: Works against microbes of many types.
- Antioxidant: Inhibits oxidation.
- Antiparasitic: Can kill or expel parasites.
- Stomachic: Promotes the functions of the stomach.
- Vulnerary: Encourages the healing of wounds by promoting cell growth and repair.

Bibliography

- PDR for herbal medicine (2000). Montvale, NJ.
- Tierra, Michael. 1998. The way of herbs. NY.
- Whistler, Arthur W. 1992. Polynesian herbal medicine. Hong Kong.