With the advent of modern western medicine, recent innovations in medical science and massive expansion of pharmaceutical industries globally, mankind has been distanced from the life and health giving properties of natural herbs. Today, it has become a common practice to pop pills and chemicals into the system to alleviate medical problems. In addition, they have also forgotten that herbs besides keeping sickness away are also capable of preventing many human illnesses. The world is in great need of a renewal of interest in the curative value of plants. This is very true for Sri Lanka, even though, fortunately a large proportion of people seek Ayurvedic remedies for their illness still. In Sri Lanka, four systems of traditional medicine have been adopted viz. Ayurveda, Siddha, Unani and Deshiya Chikitsa (Weragoda, 1980). In this paper, we have presented some medical properties of a few Sri Lankan medicinal plants used in the traditional medicine.

*Cocos nucifera* L. (coconut) is the most widely grown plantation crop occupying 21% of the total land under agriculture in Sri Lanka (Fernando *et al.*, 1995) Coconut is not only one of the three major plantation crops found on the island but also plays an important role in the Sri Lankan diet and social life (Perera *et al.*, 1998). An ethnobotanical survey carried by Ayyanar and Ignacimuthu (2005) among the Kani tribals of Tirunelveli Hills in Tamil Nadu (India) reveals the extensive use of coconut oil as folk medicine. For treatment of venereal diseases, the Kani prepares a paste from the leaves of *Biophytum candolleanum* along with the leaves of *Aristolochia tagala*, *Toddalia asiatica* and rhizome of *Cynodon dactylon* combined with castor, coconut and gingelly oils which is applied externally. To cure wounds, leaf paste from *Bridelia retusa* and *Carculigo orchoides* is prepared and the oils of castor, coconut and gingelly is mixed and applied externally. To enhance hair growth, the Kani prepares a decoction from unripe *Helicteres isora* fruits, *Cocculus hirsutus* leaves, *Aloe vera* and *Sansevieria roxburghiana*. The decoction...
is heated with castor and coconut oil and applied on hair. To treat wounds generated during delivery, paste of *Posthos scandens* leaves along with the fruits of *Capsicum annuum* and rhizome of *Allium sativum* are mixed with coconut oil and applied externally. For smoother skin, coconut oil is also applied externally, rubbed with grated coconut and then washed with warm water (Ong and Nordiana, 1999). Coconut milk facilitates bowel movement, while coconut water is used to treat measles and the ash from burnt coconut shells is applied on cuts and wounds as a cure (Ong and Nordiana 1999). A decoction of the roots of the coconut palm with bamboo shoots is taken for insomnia (Elliot and Brimacombe, 1987).

*Cucumis melo* L. (melon) or *Kekiri* in Singhalese is widely grown in Sri Lanka and is used as a cooked vegetable rather than raw consumption (Okubo 1990). The plant is used as a cooling diuretic. The pulp of the fruit is extremely refreshing, sweet to taste and possess a pleasant aroma (de Melo et al., 2000). It is used to treat patients that suffer from painful and frequent passing of urine and retention of urine. The seeds are not only a rich source of oil and protein (de Melo et al., 2000) but are also used as a remedy against renal diseases (Jouad et al., 2001) and as a laxative and digestive (Merzouki et al., 2000).

*Cucurbita pepo* L (Pumpkin) has been regarded as a useful source of provitamin A carotenoids (crucial for prevention of Vitamin A deficiency) in Southeast Asia (Seo et al., 2005). Vitamin A deficiency is a common cause of blindness and infant mortality (Sommer 1995). In Sri Lanka, juice from pumpkin or *wattakka* is used to treat jaundice and fever. Pumpkin also forms an essential part of traditional Korean food and is recommended for postpartum women in Korea (Seo et al., 2005). The Oil from pumpkin seed has been found to be beneficial in controlling and managing benign prostatic hyperplasia (Gossell-Williams et al., 2006). Studies carried out by Gossell-Williams et al. (2006) in sprague-dawley rats proved that pumpkin seed oil retains the potency to inhibit testosterone-induced hyperplasia of the prostate.

*Phyllanthus embilica* (Nelli) is small to medium sized deciduous tree and is amongst one of the three myrobalans used in medicine and the fruits are used as astringent, tonic, expectorant, laxative and diuretic according to the Unani system of medicine (Kirtikar and Basu, 1975). The fruits are used as an appetizer and have proved to be useful for treatment of diseases of the heart, liver and biliousness (Shanmugasundaram et al., 1983).

*Saraca Indica* L. (Asoka Aristha) bark has been used as the main ingredient in many medicinal preparations and the therapeutic properties of Asoka has been attributed mostly to the Asoka bark (Middelkoop and Labadie 1983). For Ayurvedic preparation, the bark is usually cleaned, crushed, boiled, concentrated, strained and cooled. It is mixed with jaggery followed by further straining to which crushed ingredients like Dhataki (*Woodfordia fruticosa* L), Kaladaru (*Cyperus rotundus* L), Nelli (*Phyllanthus emblica* L) etc are added in a vessel. Another vessel is inverted over it and both vessels are made air-tight with clay and kept in that position for a month followed by further straining (Middelkoop and Labadie, 1983). From studies concluded by Middelkoop and Labadie (1983) the possible mode of action of Asoka Aristha could be both oestrogenic and oxytocic by nature and possibly plays a role in prostaglandin synthetase inhibition. Therefore one of the applications would involve treatment of menstruation related problems in women. It is also used to treat uterine disorders (Arsecularatne et al., 1985).

*Tamarindus indica* L. belongs to the family Leguminosae and is native to many tropical and sub-tropical regions. Tamarind is regarded as an important plant resource for food materials as the flowers and the leaves can be eaten raw as vegetables
(Luengthanaphol et al., 2004) and the germ produced by the seeds can be processed to manufacture tamarind gum (Phakruschapan, 1982). Tamarinds are known to contain antioxidants (Tsuda et al., 1994) and are hence useful in the food, pharmaceutical and cosmetic industries (Luengthanaphol et al., 2004). Tamarind pulp has been used for many medicinal purposes in Africa, Asia and America (Gunasena and Hughes, 2000). The leaves of the plant are boiled and used as a mouthwash to heal lesions (Tapsoba and Deschamps, 2006). The pulp not only serves as an appetizer but is also used as a gargle for sore throats, dressing of wounds (Benthal, 1933; Dalziel, 1937) as well as in restoring sensation in cases of paralysis (Ahmed et al., 2007).

The Buddhist community from the northern part of India regard *Terminalia chebula* (Aralu) not only as an important medicine but as a sacred fruit as well (Kala et al., 2006). The ripe fruit of the plant is dried and used extensively in Ayurvedic practices (Rao and Nammi 2006). *Terminalia chebula* Retz. is widely distributed throughout India, Burma and Sri Lanka and the herbal formulation containing *T. chebula* usually bears the name ‘TRIPHALA’ (Rao and Nammi, 2006). The plant is used for the treatment of asthma, sore throat, vomiting, hiccup, diarrhoea, bleeding piles, gout as well as heart and bladder diseases (Cheng et al., 2003) and chronic disorders such as diabetes (http://www.drroopas.com/triphala.htm). In Myanmar, the fruit is used as a laxative and tonic, in China as a carminative, debribsent, astringent and expectorant agent and in Indo-China as a purgative agent (Cheng et al., 2003). *Terminalia* species have also used to treat cancer (Hartwell, 1982; Saleem, 2002) and in dermal wound healing (Jagtap and Karkera, 1999). In Sri Lanka the plant is known by the local Singhalese name ‘Aralu’ and the fruit is used as an astringent, laxative, for treating chronic ulcers and stomatitis (Arsecularatne et al., 1985).

Natural products are regarded as privileged structures in the modern pharmaceutical industry. We are hoping that Sri Lankan medicinal plants will contribute to the growing global pharmaceutical discovery and drug development.

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**References**


