

MONTHLY COLUMN FOR SOAP, PERFUMERY & COSMETICS

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Two is company, tree's a crowd

It is the first day of term. Outside the window of my office, children with school bags, pencil cases, gym shoes and Mickey Mouse lunch boxes wander about aimlessly. They stop for a moment, look around, then move on a few yards, shuffling and shifting their baggage as they go. These modern day nomads go into a huddle and decide to scuffle another two yards down the road. Today, the school bus with its built in smoke-cloaking device sails past in its acrid plume of burning oil, and through the blue haze, a wild-eyed driver is desperately peering. Last term's bus stop, *Acer pseudo-platanus*, the sycamore, was gone.

In August I had taken out a contract on the culprit that was killing the grass, cracking the drive and dumping dozens of bags of rubbish onto the garden each year. The end was sickeningly quick as the hit men with chain saws cut down my adversary at the tender age of 35 and turned it to an unrecognisable pulp with such savageness that even the most hardened horror movie buff would have gagged on his popcorn.

The bark with its mild astringent properties could have been used to make a wash for skin problems or used as an eyewash for sore eyes, while the inner bark of the tree, containing the sweet sap, could have been used as a dressing for wounds. In gangster parlance, I had had it 'wasted'.

As a mark of atonement, I decided to make trees my topic of the month.

The earliest use of trees was probably in their use as packaging, to provide stoppers and seals for bottles and jars in the form of corks.

Only when one starts to catalogue the large number of uses, does one begin to realise what a wonderful source of active materials they provide. The use of *Taxus baccata* (common yew) and *Taxus brevifolia* (Pacific yew) for its source of taxol in the treatment of ovarian and breast cancer is well known, as is the source of salicin from *Salix alba* (willow), which is a useful analgesic and treatment for rheumatism. *Vitex agnus-castus* is a highly respected remedy for what us men would call 'women's complaints' - those days in the month when everything you do is wrong (like breathing).

Hamamelis virginiana or witch hazel is a wonderful astringent with skin soothing properties that

have been pharmaceutically licensed for the treatment of haemorrhoids. Its use in toners and skin firming preparations is legendary.

Saps used to be used in Roman times as a source of fermentable sugar to prepare wine, and none was more prized than *Betula alba* or birch sap, which was tapped throughout the spring months when it was rising. This sap can be used for skin inflammations and as a soothing wash for sprains and bruises, and the tree is left none the worse for its donation. A source for this material is now commercially available.

As a child, my best friend in the autumn was a road sweeper, because he used to collect up the conkers and give them to me (I often wondered why most of the other kids got sweets from strange men). What fun we used to have, as we drilled a hole through the centre of the fruit and then through the palm of our hand with a rusty skewer begged from the butcher. How we used to laugh as we fell over, because our shoelaces were threaded through the conker. The humble horse chestnut fruit, source of such fun, as we shattered every bone in our hands (caused by "strings"), is scorned by the modern school children. Today the horse chestnut or *Aesculus hippocastanum*, provides a rich source of saponins and other materials that make the plant a useful additive in hair care products and anti-oedema (cellulite) preparations.

Tree blossoms are also very useful and none more so than *Tilia europaea*, *Tilia platyphyllos* Scop., or *Tilia cordata* Mill., the lime blossom or linden blossom. An infusion of these flowers will make an excellent application to skin rashes, spots, skin blemishes and irritations. It has been said to have anti-inflammatory and mildly antiseptic properties.

The infusion of elder flowers or *Sambucus nigra* are frequently recommended for their skin softening and whitening effects on the skin, while the berries (which are quite rich in tannins) are a useful astringent. Both the fruit and the flowers may be used in after-shave preparations.

The larch (*Larix* sp.) provides a source of arabinogalactan, a natural, mild, non-irritating water soluble polymer which enhances emulsion stability, provides moisture control, forms films, improves spreadability and delivers enriched skin feel.

Hawthorn or *Crataegus oxyacantha* (also *Crataegus monogyna*) is well known as a cardiac stimulant, where it is sedative, reduces blood pressure, and used for the treatment of arteriosclerosis, hypertension and circulatory disorders. However, it is also cited for a number of effects that are of relevance for its use in skin care products. A decoction of dried hawthorn flowers and berries can be used as a facial lotion for clearing the skin of acne and improving the colour. A poultice of the pulped leaves or fruit has strong drawing powers and country people have for ages used hawthorn for the treatment of embedded thorns, splinters and whitlows. Hawthorn provides considerable photo protective effects reducing UV induced erythema.

The school children no longer stand outside my house. The happy banter to do with homework, the prattle on the latest craze, or the gossip about friends and teachers is now lost to me, because they have migrated down the road and stand outside the tree next door. Last night I heard the roaring buzz of a chain saw coming from my neighbour's garage at No.10.