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The worst of this Millennium

I still get inspiration from a book published during World War II: "Technique for Beauty" by Jane Gordon. "When the first white hair appears, do not weep for your passing youth and give everything up for lost. Go out and buy a stiffer hair-brush with whalebone bristles and brush your hair until your scalp tingles". She also gives practical help, and you would find her advice on brine or pine baths and the 'all-over body friction with a rubber sponge' particularly intriguing. Her book is typical for the period, namely courage in times of adversity.

Advertising claptrap is also annoying, when the 'new', 'new improved', 'now contains' on your product is another way of saying cheaper and less effective. As you would expect, I am not enamoured with the manufacturers who claim their product is natural and contains a plant extract, but employ a quantity that would be barely detectable to a forensic scientist.

In this high-tech, computer driven society, I get the distinct feeling that more of us are being dictated to by marketing people who have little experience of the real world. Recently, there was an article (advertorial) that referred to the loofah as a sponge. To that ignoramus I would say, it is *Luffa cylindrica* (a cucumber-like plant) from the family of Cucurbitaceae. The nearest it comes to seawater is when the flesh is rotted off in brine to leave the reticulated vascular system of the fruit (which is then cleaned, bleached and dried).

The search for new and innovative ideas has introduced some strange products. Why anyone in a 'regular' state of health could conceive and accept Aloe Vera (*Aloe barbadensis*) as a tonic drink just beggars belief. One only has to look at the British Pharmacopoeia to see that the only entry is for dried aloes, which is described as a potent purgative. The World Health organisation in a draft monograph states that the gel has not been shown to exert any consistent therapeutic effect. The Lawrence Review of Natural Products (April 1992) goes so far as to say that "the aloe emodin and anthraquinones present may cause severe gastric cramping and its use is contraindicated in pregnant women and children". Enjoy!

My blood boils when I see plant extracts used in ways that are totally inappropriate, why put aloe vera or ginseng into a shampoo when they would have no effect (even if they were used at high levels)? The poor consumer is already confused and bamboozled by a plethora of new botanical ingredients; we might at least pay her the compliment of using them consistently and competently.

The tampering with plant's genetic DNA has been one of the most irresponsible and irrational scientific malpractices ever. Even the so-called 'experimentally controlled' trials have been shown to release pollen over a vast area that would be capable of interfering with an innocent organically grown crop. To then launch material into the food chain, without any long-term studies, no clinical trials, and no thoughts of the consequences (in these days of a "nanny" bureaucratic state) is totally incongruent.

It is sad to see that plants like valerian (*Valeriana officinalis*), hops (*Humulus lupulus*) and passion flower (*Passiflora incarnata*) have become the big sellers, because it is a reflection of the stress that modern day life now is causing us. This new era is not the Utopia that was to be expected (so we are told). The advent of detoxifying, anti-pollution and de-stressing products with free-radical scavengers, antioxidants and anti-UV materials from a host of materials ranging from green tea (*Thea viridis*), to phytosaccharides from various species of seaweed, and a host of calming, relaxing aromatherapy oils shows that all is not well. For some reason we would be encouraged to believe that times are bad, when in fact they have never been better.

Today, we do not trust our food suppliers, we have lost faith with conventional tried and tested medicine, and we cannot even depend on our employer to provide us with a lifetime of security. The obsession with reishi, reflexology, feng shui, ayurveda, and every branch of complementary medicine is a mirror of today's unsettled, disgruntled and easily bored society, which will take more than a whale bristled hair brush or rubber sponge to put straight. On reflection the rubber sponge might work for some of us, if only it were still available!

Perhaps this drive for increasing profits is turning us into a nation of moaning, mediocre, mundane miseries. We continue to be manipulated by the media, made to endure everything that is wrong with the world but hear very little about what is positive, innovative, clever, right or just plain funny. So I have decided to leave the last word with Jane Gordon, writing during the height of the most terrible war ever seen by man, who nonetheless managed to find some helpful advice for our fighting ladies. A few words that put life into perspective and demonstrated a mentality and strength of character that could do us all some good.

"Do remember that obvious make up looks out of place with uniform. Scarlet lipstick does not look so bad with the navy blue and red piped A.F.S. uniform but it does look silly with khaki."