Drug Plant Production Is Promising Industry

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This is the ninth of a series of articles about Wisconsin institutions, resources, industries and people.

Many important drug plants are grown in Wisconsin. As the fur hunter gave way to the drug hunter, so the latter has given way to the farmer. The woods and prairies abounding in native medicinal plants have been replaced by fields of grain and pastures for cattle.

Golden seal, seventy-five years ago "a drug on the Cincinnati market" at two and one-half cents per pound, has in recent years, been sold at two and one-half dollars. Ginseng is now raised under artificial shade, guarded by watch dog, tin shot gun, and electrical contrivances.

Pioneers Often Hunted Herbs

The crude drugs of the past were often crude, indeed, as they passed from the hands of the drug hunter to those of the cross road general store in exchange for powder and shot, not to mention whiskey. It cannot be said that they were improved as the store keeper passed them along.

If in the early part of the seventeenth century the ginseng trade with China was all but ruined because of improper curing, history has many a time repeated itself in this respect. Since stramonium, of low alkaloidal content, was practically the only drug of its kind in the early part of this century, the United States Pharmacopoeia changed its standard in order to protect the pharmaceutical manufacturer. Ginseng roots loaded with shot and beles of senna loaded with stones are some of the crudest methods employed by the drug hunter and dealer, but museums are not devoid of even such specimens. Truly, "crude drugs" were often very crude, indeed.
Plants Still Supply Medicines

Today scientific medicine demands better remedial agents. In spite of synthetic new remedies turned out almost every day of the year, medicinal plants still supply some of the most important remedies. Morphine is, today, prepared from the opium poppy, quinine from cinchona bark, and strychnine from nux vomica. True, Wisconsin does not produce any of the medicinal plants yielding these drugs. But only last winter a physician, in distress, telegraphed to the Wisconsin Pharmaceutical Experiment Station for digitalis raised in the Pharmaceutical Garden. He had tried all kinds of digitalis and its preparations, but had failed to get results. The Wisconsin digitalis "did the work" as he wrote later. But digitalis should be pharmacologically tested before it is used as such or converted into other remedial forms of administration.

Might Produce Costly Drug

Before the war, thymol, an important antiseptic produced from a plant raised in India, sold for about $2.50 a pound. During the war its price went up to $15.00 and even $20.00. Yet there grows in this state a plant so abundantly that, if harvested, possibly the entire United States might be supplied with thymol. Now it is a weed avoided even by cattle and sheep because of its antiseptic constituent.

The rational cultivation of the plant should be made a phase of the reclamation of sandy waste land of which our state has more than enough. It should be coupled with reforestation, with the extension of dairying, with apiculture. It could be made to supplement the production of potato alcohol as an agricultural industry.

Not a Get-Rich-Quick Scheme

Enough has possibly been said to make it clear that the cultivation of medicinal plants is not a get-rich-quick scheme, neither does it follow that the farmer who has successfully raised wheat or corn will make a success with medicinal plants. To raise a crop, for the most part, does not suffice. The Michigan farmer who does not know how to distill his peppermint after he has harvested the crop will scarcely make a success financially. The farmer's wife who knows of "acres on acres" of wintergreen will not rejoice over the prospective pin money when she offers the cured leaf to the drug miller. The conversion of wintergreen into oil of wintergreen requires even more knowledge and skill than the distillation of oil of peppermint.

Yet aside from the benefit to suffering humanity that comes from the scientific cultivation of medicinal plants and the proper treatment of the crop when harvested, financial returns may likewise be expected if the problem is attacked in the right spirit and in the right way. For the present, however, these problems are such as call for the cooperation of the state with private enterprise. Is Wisconsin going to wait for another world war to boost prices before we can learn the lesson of preparedness?

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