

STRAIGHT FROM THE GARDEN



Tony Harrison

are serious about a commercial project, then you should consider joining the National Herb Centre and obtain expert advice.

So I will leave this scenario and move on to the more realistic small scale back garden where the aim is a small Chinese herb garden. This will of course depend on your land, but I have selected some possible plants which grow easily in most situations excepting perhaps dense shade. All these plants are also quite easy to obtain and should be able to produce a reasonable quality herb if you give them the right conditions. The name of the herb or herbs are given after the Latin name. The best candidates, such as *Morus alba* can produce up to 4 different herbs from the same plant.

We have decided to resurrect 'Straight from the Garden' as a regular feature of the Journal. It is open to suggestions and I would like to see it become more of a question and answer section for any queries you have regarding the cultivation of Chinese herbs or the Chinese Herb Garden itself.

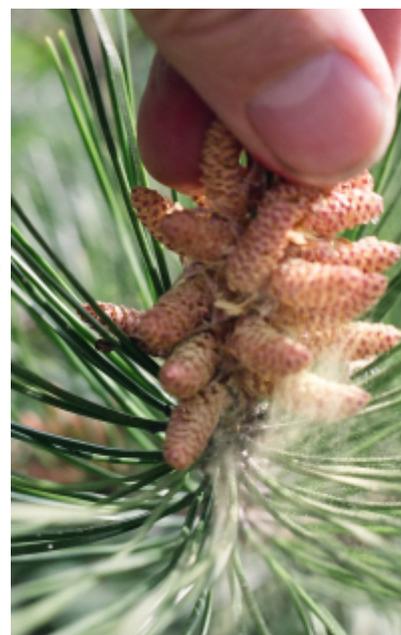
As I have no questions yet, I will begin with one which has been asked ever since the garden was started. It runs through variations of the following:

I have some land at the back of my house and want to grow Chinese herbs. What should I grow and where do I get them from?

Firstly, if your land is large and you want to grow herbs commercially, then this article will not suffice. All I would say is that being able to grow the plant is only a small part of the problems to be solved. You also need to look at the drying and market for your product. I know of one farmer in Norfolk, who grows *Panax quinquefolium* (xi yang shen) on a large scale. Quite apart from the difficulty and expense of erecting shade cover and keeping pests at bay, he still needs to send his entire product to Holland to be dried in a large computer controlled oven. The resultant dried herb is excellent in quality but, despite the high value of the herb, it is simply not competitive in price with Chinese imported xi yang shen. He needs to take it to the next stage and make a skin cream to make any real profit. Every stage in processing gives potential profit but added investment. If you

Trees

If you live in the south and want a tropical feel, then *Trachycarpus fortunei* (zong lu pi), *Tamarisk chinensis* (xi he liu) and *Eriobotrya japonica* (pi pa ye) are evergreen trees which yield Chinese herbs in the UK. Another more hardy evergreen would be *Pinus* species. The resin (song xian) tends to be sourced from



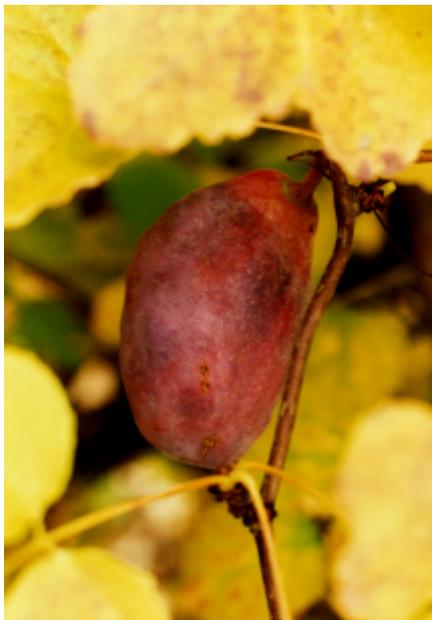
Collecting pollen herb (song jie) from Pinus tabulaeformis

Pinus massoniana whilst the pollen (song jie) comes from *Pinus tabulaeformis*. The pine nuts (song zi) used in cooking come from *Pinus armandii*.

Other deciduous trees include *Albizia julibrissin* (he huan pi, he huan mi), *Eucomia ulmoides* (du zhong), *Magnolia liliflora* (xin yi hua). One of the most attractive is *Cornus officinalis* (shan zhu yu) with its yellow flowers in early spring and shiny red fruits in the autumn. This tree and *Morus alba* would be my first choices if I had to choose only two. The *Morus* comes in two forms as a small tree and a weeping form if you have limited space. The joy of *Morus* is that you get four herbs from the same tree. In spring you can harvest the twigs (sang zhi), in summer you have the fruit (sang shen). The leaves (sang ye) appear in autumn and the root bark (sang bai pi) can be harvested in the winter.

Climbers

There are many good climbing herbs in Chinese medicine to cover a wall or even be grown on a pyramid support. You have the fragrant but vigorous *Lonicera japonica* (jin yin hua). *Lonicera* will test your skill in drying



Two herbs for one. The fruit of the 'restricted' mu tong herb (*Akebia trifoliata*)

lowers as it must be dried slowly in shade to prevent it turning brown. *Clematis chinensis* (wei ling xian) must be carefully chosen or

you may end up with the large flower cultivars. Make sure it has small white flowers and is a true species and not a cultivar. One of the most dramatic to harvest is the root of *Polygonum multiflorum* (he shou wu, ye jiao teng) This is very closely related to *Polygonum aubertii* (Russian vine) but unlike this pest of a plant, it does not flower and is easier to control. If you want to grow your own mu tong, then the official source plant is *Akebia trifoliata* (mu tong, yu zhizi) although you can also use the more easily obtained *Akebia quinata*. This fruit (yu zhi zi) is used in Chinese medicine to move the liver qi but it is not for sale in the UK. When you grow the Chinese herbs you often find new herbs like this.

Shrubs

There are too many shrubs which you can grow to list in this article. You could try *Lycium barbarum* (gou qi zi). This is easy to



The fresh berries of *Lycium barbarum* (gou qi zi) have a dynamic taste compared to the dried herb

grow, but now in short supply due to a recent importation of a fungus which led to its withdrawal. But you should still be able to obtain old stock. *Chaenomeles speciosa* (mu gua) is one of the first to flower in the garden and gives the larger fruit compared to *C.japonica*, although I still prefer the more fragrant small japonica fruit for mu gua. You

Chinese Herb Garden

can also obtain *Forsythia suspensa* (lian qiao) and *Ligustrum lucidum* (nu zhen zi), but they do not produce useful fruit in the UK in my experience. You could also enjoy *Rosa chinensis* (yue ji hua) and *Rosa rugosa* (mei gui hua). The former is picked when the flower is open and is used to move the blood whilst the latter moves the qi and is picked just before the flower bud opens.

Herbaceous Perennials

There are even more of these to choose from. A few of these are evergreen and make good ground cover. The easiest is *Ophiopogon*



Can you spot the bulbils at the base of the leaves in *Lilium lancifolium*? They can be used for propagation

japonica (mai men dong), although you get a better quality herb from its closely related but larger *Liriope platyphylla*. It is also possible if the ground is damp to use *Acorus gramineus* (shi chang pu) to good effect. Of course, you can always use bamboo. The official species used in medicine is the black bamboo *Phyllostachys nigra var henonis* (zhu ye) which is readily available and not too vigorous.

Of the deciduous perennials you can easily cut your teeth on *Polygonatum odoratum* (yu zhu), *Agrimony pilosa* (xian he cao), *Aconitum carmichaelii* (fu zi) and *Chrysanthemum*

morifolium (ju hua). You could also consider a peony bed using cultivars of *Peony suffruticosa* (mu dan) and *Peony lactiflora* (bai shao) and, if you can get it, the harder to grow mountain peony, *Peony veitchii* (chi shao). Of the bulbs you can use *Lilium lancifolium* or *L. pumillum* (bai he). *Bletilla striata* (bai ji) makes a fantastic addition, being a hardy orchid. There is a white and pink cultivar on the market.

Water plants

These are a very good first choice as you can grow them in a large tub in the sun if possible and never need to bother about watering when you are away. You can make a very attractive tub using *Houttuynia cordata* (yu xing cao) with *Alisma plantago aquatica* (ze xie) and *Acorus* species including our native *Acorus calamus* (shi chang pu). *Houttuynia* is one plant which is best used fresh. The name *yu xing cao* translates as 'fish smelling herb' and it lives up to its name. The aromatic oils are very easily lost on drying. It makes a good wash for damp heat skin conditions when fresh and is one more example of why we should be growing the plants.

Other water plants are the UK natives



An attractive combination of *Houttuynia cordata* (yu xing cao) and *Alisma plantago aquatica* (ze xie)

Phragmites communis (lu gen) and *Juncus effusus* (deng xin cao), but they are quite vigorous compared to the others and should have their own pots.

Annuals

Annual plants can be quite laborious, but many interesting herbs fall into this category. Herbs in this group include *Carthamus tinctorum* (hong hua) , *Kochia scoparia* (di fu zi), *Artemisia annua* (qing hao) and *Perilla frutescens*(zi su ye, su zi,zi su gen)) . Annuals are worth trying at some point when you want to branch out. Seeds can also be obtained for the annuals *Astragalus complanatus* (sha yuan zi) and *Eclipta prostrata* (han lian cao),



Carthamus tinctorius (hong hua) is one herb which repays the effort of annual sowing

So now you have some possible plants which are easy to grow and will produce usable herbs to harvest, we need to answer the second part of the question. Where to get the plants?

We are very fortunate in this country to be a nation of gardeners. This has led in turn to the Royal Horticultural Society (RHS), who produce several vital books for your research. The first is the **RHS Plantfinder**, which lists

around 70.000 species and cultivars and where to obtain them from 650 nurseries across the UK. They also produce the **RHS Encyclopedia of plants and flowers** illustrating 8000 plants in colour which are suitable for temperate gardens. This gives information also on how to grow and propagate the plants and should be suitable for the common plants given above, but for those of you who want to delve deeper into Chinese herbs cultivation, you will need the more advanced 4 volume **RHS Dictionary**. Although not in colour, this is perhaps the most informative book available without moving into more specialised books devoted to a single genus. The dictionary is quite expensive but it is present in most public libraries in the reference section.

You can get the more common plants from a general nursery. There are also several specialist herb nurseries. One of the largest ranges I know, and the closest to me, is at Limeburn Nurseries in Somerset. I regret that the Chinese Herb Garden cannot at present supply plants or seeds, other than the limited plants sold for the Dispensary weekend. But armed with the Plantfinder, you should be able to source most of you need to start you own garden. Perhaps this will prompt a few questions for the next episode of 'straight from the garden'.

The RHS Plantfinder

Dorling Kindersley ISBN 0-7513-0512-X

The RHS Gardeners Encyclopedia of plants and flowers

Dorling Kindersley ISBN 0-86318-386-7

The RSH Dictionary of Gardening

Macmillan Reference Ltd ISBN 1-56159-240-4

Colour Atlas of Traditional Chinese Medicines with Text on Techniques of their Cultivation

Xu Fengxun: Hu Tingsong Beijing Botanic Garden/ Guangxi Botanic Garden
ISBN: 7-80022-854-1

Limeburn Nursery: Limeburn Hill, Chew Magna Somerset

See website or phone 01275 333399