

TRADITIONAL THAI HERBAL HEALING

Thailand has a longstanding tradition of herbal medicine that, like many aspects of Thai culture, derives its origins from ancient India. Thai herbal medicine has its roots in ancient Indian Ayurvedic practices, and arrived in Thailand along with Buddhist missionary monks, who were trained as healers. This medical knowledge was passed on to Thai monks along with the Buddhist teachings, thus temples became the centers of learning and healing – and remain so in Thai culture today.

Aside from the Ayurvedic influences, there was an existing tradition of local folk medicine and herbal lore that involved animism, spirituality and astrology. Since monks themselves were folk people, some of the folk medicine practices were absorbed into the temple teachings. A specialized midwife tradition developed, in which women were trained in post-natal care using herbal medicine, because the monk hood prohibited contact with women.

Each village had a traditional healer who practiced using a combination of herbal knowledge and shamanism. Traditional herbal practice was combined with elements of spirituality, such as the performance of rites and rituals when picking certain plants and flowers. Traditional practitioners believed that herbal healing is based on the healer's belief in the power of nature and earth, and the ability to harness the power of plants and minerals for energy. The practice was kept within families, with knowledge passed down orally from generation to generation, thus certain families in some provinces gained fame for their particular skills.

There were many beliefs governing traditional herbal practice, such as the regulation of the times and places for collecting herbal ingredients. For example, it's known that evening flowers such as jasmine and ylang ylang are best collected at night, when their powers are most potent. It's also known among herbal specialists that the best plants come from certain locations, due to the varying qualities of soil. The time and date of picking herbs is also crucial – the full moon time is best, when the energies of the earth, moon and sun are at their most powerful.

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Though traditional herbal medicine went out of fashion in Thailand in the 20th century with the advent of western allopathic medicine, it is currently enjoying a spectacular revival, thanks to the current international spa boom and holistic wellness trends that eschew chemical and surgical solutions in favor of natural remedies. In recent years, the Thai Ministry of Public Health has added degree courses in traditional herbal medicine to its curriculum, while traditional medicine hospitals like Chao Phraya Abhaibhubejhr Hospital in Prachinburi are thriving in the light of unprecedented public attention and sales of in-house branded herbal health products.

While Thai massage is the most famed of the ancient healing traditions, a number of treatments that have become popularized in modern day Thai spas and are now becoming as familiar to foreigner visitors as they are to local Thais. The use of heat therapies combined with herbal ingredients is a distinguishing trait of traditional Thai healing practices. One of most popular of these is the Thai herbal steam or sauna, whose healing secret lies in the ingredients; among them the key ingredients are indigenous Thai herbs turmeric, prai, lemongrass, camphor and kaffir lime. Aside from providing an overall health and complexion booster, Thai herbal steam is one of the most effective methods of weight loss if done consistently over an extended period of time.

Another ancient Thai healing therapy is the use of *prakob*, or hot herbal compresses made of medicinal herbs wrapped in a bundle of cloth, steamed, and then kneaded on the trouble areas of the body, like tense shoulders or rheumatic joints. The key to healing lies in the combination of medicinal herbs and heat.

There's also a revival in traditional midwife practices, with even a handful of Bangkok spas offering the painstaking program once practiced by every new mother in Thailand. Thai midwife practices focus on post-natal therapies that help detoxify and rebalance after the rigors of childbirth.

There aren't any particular therapies during the pregnancy itself, except guidelines on what foods to avoid that might harm the fetus. For example, it was folk belief that pregnant mothers should avoid eating bamboo, drink alcohol or fermented foods after the first trimester, while herbal soups and especially ivy gourd leaf was believed to be nourishing for pregnant mothers. During pregnancy, there are certain massage techniques for the lower back and legs specifically to give relief to muscle ache from carrying the extra weight.

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A post-natal therapy called *Yuu Fai*, meaning "staying by the fire" in Thai, is well known to generations of Thai women. The famed treatment involves ensconcing the new mother in a herbal sauna of excruciating heat from a charcoal burner containing a blend of herbs that help heal the stitches, sterilize the childbirth wounds and get the womb back into shape. For best results, the new mother does the whole program of hot compresses, massage, herbal steam and herbal sauna daily for a week immediately after birth. Professional midwives say that continuing the herbal steam treatment for six months up to two years after the birth can help rebalance the body and help weight loss.

One heat treatment particular to Thai post-natal care is the Hot Salt Pot treatment, an ancient technique rarely used today because few people know the proper technique. Fortunately, the Ministry of Public Health is attempting to revive this technique by adding it to their traditional healing curriculum.

Despite its name, it's not the pot, but the special herbs that produce the healing effects in this treatment. The key ingredient is a bulb called *Waan Chak Mod Luuk* that helps heal the womb. Some of the other ingredients are prai, turmeric, and naad leaf, though different practitioners have their own recipes using other herbs.

Thai herbal healing was up till only recent years the domain of simple country folk, mainly practiced in rural temples and villages. Thankfully for this rich cultural tradition and for modern day wellness seekers, current holistic wellness and lifestyle trends have helped revive what was once the country's dying herbal heritage, so that now Thai herbal healing can be found and appreciated in modern day spas and traditional medicine hospitals, and natural herbal products are sold in shops in both city and country.

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