

# Bush Medicine on St. Martin



## an Amuseum Companion

Learn about native plants in bush medicine, African plants and traditions in Caribbean bush medicine and bush medicine in calypso music.



## CARIBBEAN HEALING

*Local plants in bush medicine*

Many local plants are used in bush medicine. How did people learn about them and how to use them? Different groups discovered and shared this knowledge, passing it on through oral tradition.

Amerindians lived in the Caribbean for thousands of years. They knew local plants and how to use them for medicine. Sadly, most of these people were killed by disease or genocide when Europeans arrived. Luckily, they shared what they knew with Africans, who continued to pass it on through the years.



Africans came here with a rich plant medicine tradition. They knew tropical plants and illnesses, but many of the plants here were new to them. They had to develop or adapt plant cures for the Caribbean. By testing plants and techniques, they found treatments. These were passed on orally and refined over time.

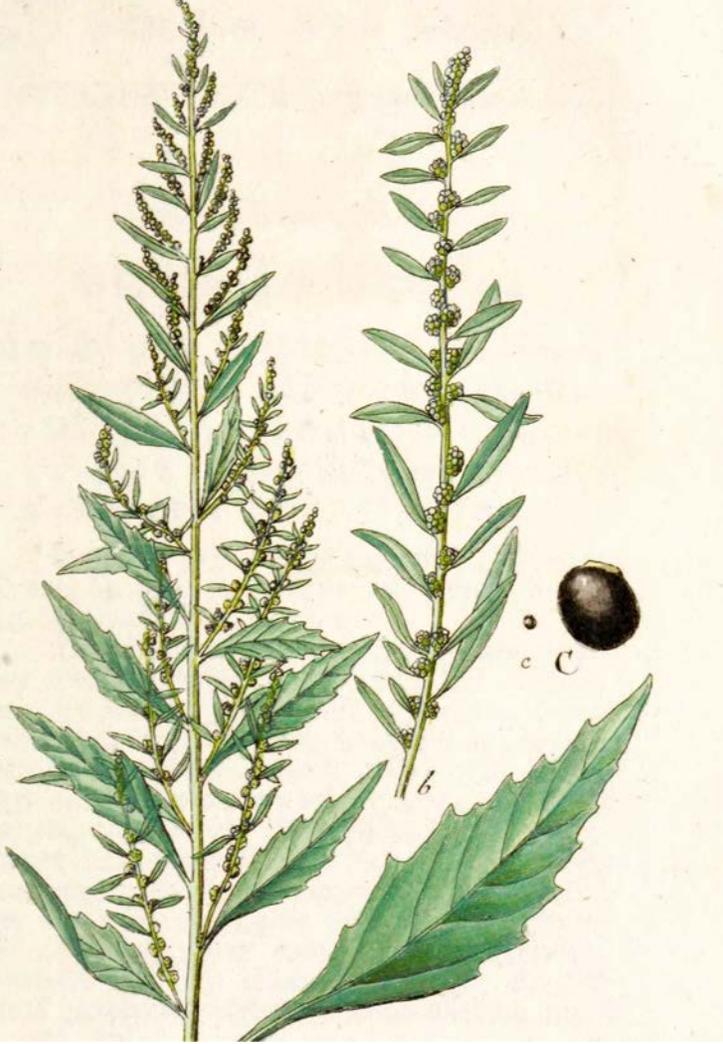
Europeans were also interested in plant medicines, especially ones that could be sold to Europe. They mostly relied on Amerindian or Black experts to find plants and explain their use.

Caribbean people continued to refine and share plant cures. A journal found in The Old House recorded the recipe for a plant-based cough remedy from a Pastor Hodge of Anguilla. It noted both the recipe, and that it was effective.

*Rat Ears (Peperomia pellucida) is also known as Shining Bush, Inflammation Bush, Information Bush and Watercress. It's used to treat cold, flu and high blood pressure. The leaves are also eaten as salad greens. (Illustration: Jean-Théodore Descourtilz, 1827)*

*Physic Nut (Jatropha gossypifolia) is used to clean sores and boils, and to treat constipation. It's also used to treat stomach problems and is called Bellyache Bush in many places. Like many medicinal plants, this plant also contains poisons. Plant healers must know how to avoid poisoning by knowing what parts of a plant to use, how much to use, or how to neutralize or extract poisons. (Illustration: M. Hart, 1823)*

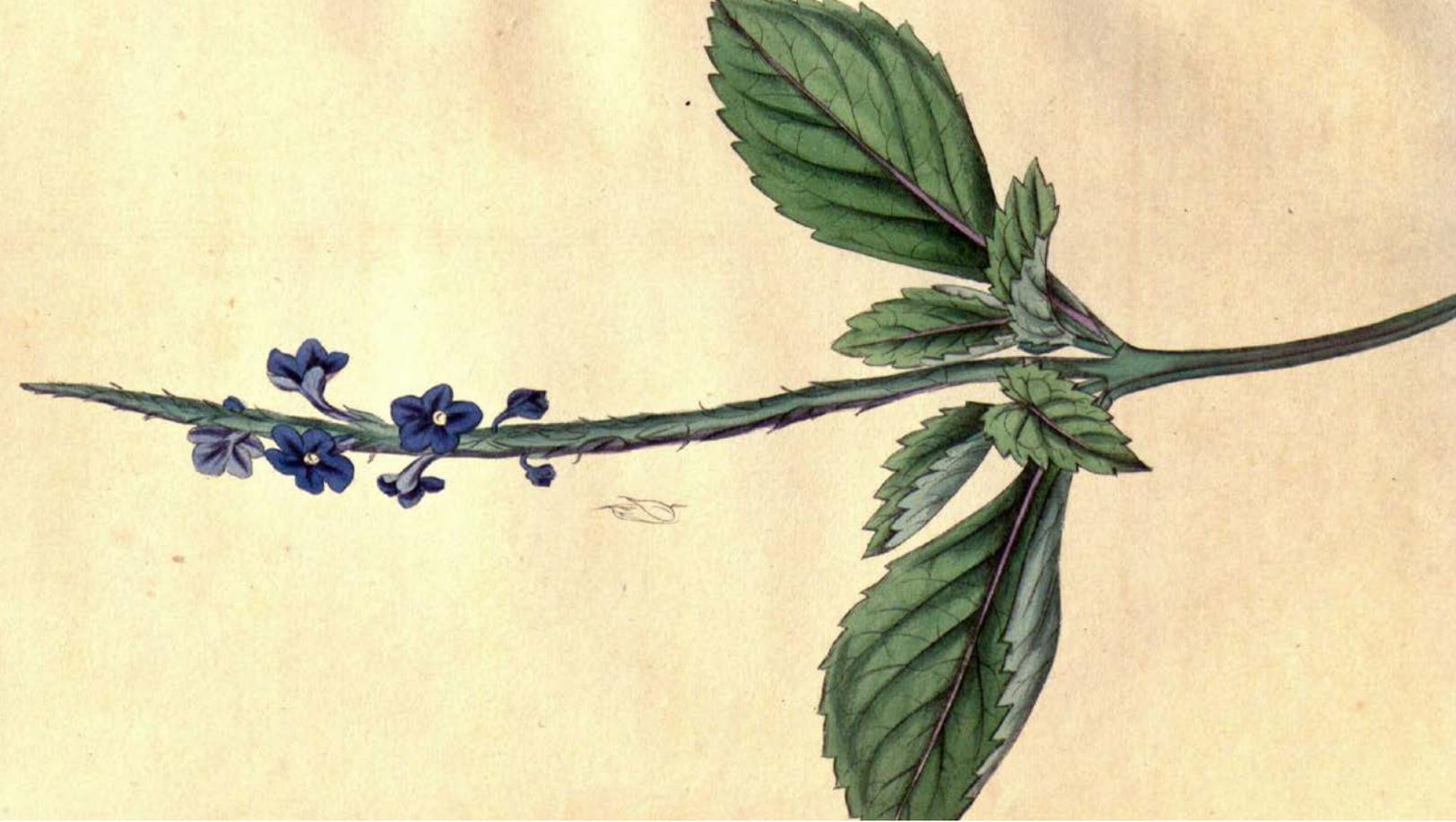




Wormgrass (*Dysphania ambrosioides*) is used to get rid of worms and other parasites. It's used this way in most of the American tropics. This knowledge may have passed through many Amerindian cultures during ancient times.



Canker Berry (*Solanum bahamense*) is used to treat thrush and sore throat. This plant is closely related to potatoes and tomatoes.



*Vervain (Stachytarpheta jamaicensis) is used to relieve menstrual cramps and to treat flu and infection. It's also used to calm nerves. Another name for this plant, Worryvine, may come from this use. Worryvine could also come from the name vervain, which itself comes from the French verveine. Plant names and uses can show that information was shared between islands and cultures.*

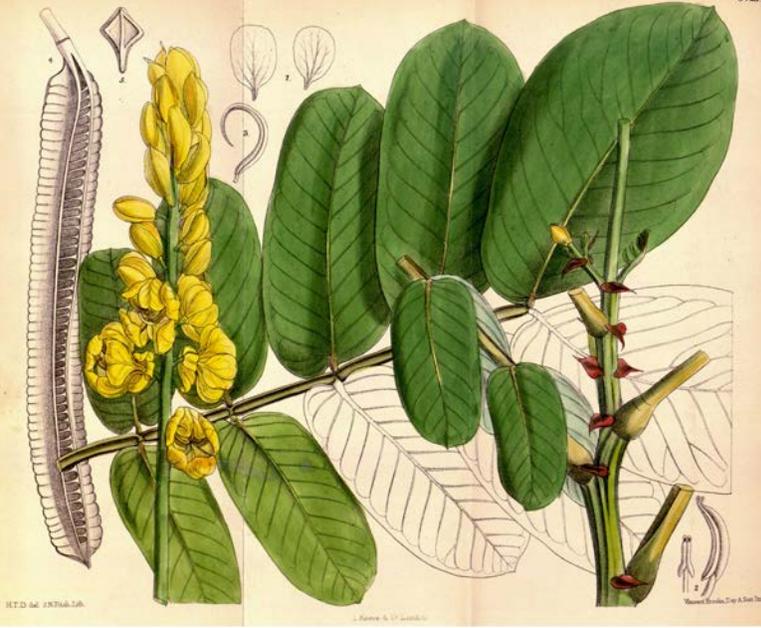


## CURES ACROSS AN OCEAN

*A living link to African traditions*

Caribbean bush tea and bush medicine traditions have strong African roots. Medicinal and plant skills were carried across an ocean and passed on for hundreds of years. They even survived slavery, which cut ties to African knowledge, cultures and languages.

Africa has one of the world's longest and strongest plant medicine traditions, reaching far back into prehistory. Africans brought plant knowledge, traditions, and plants themselves to the



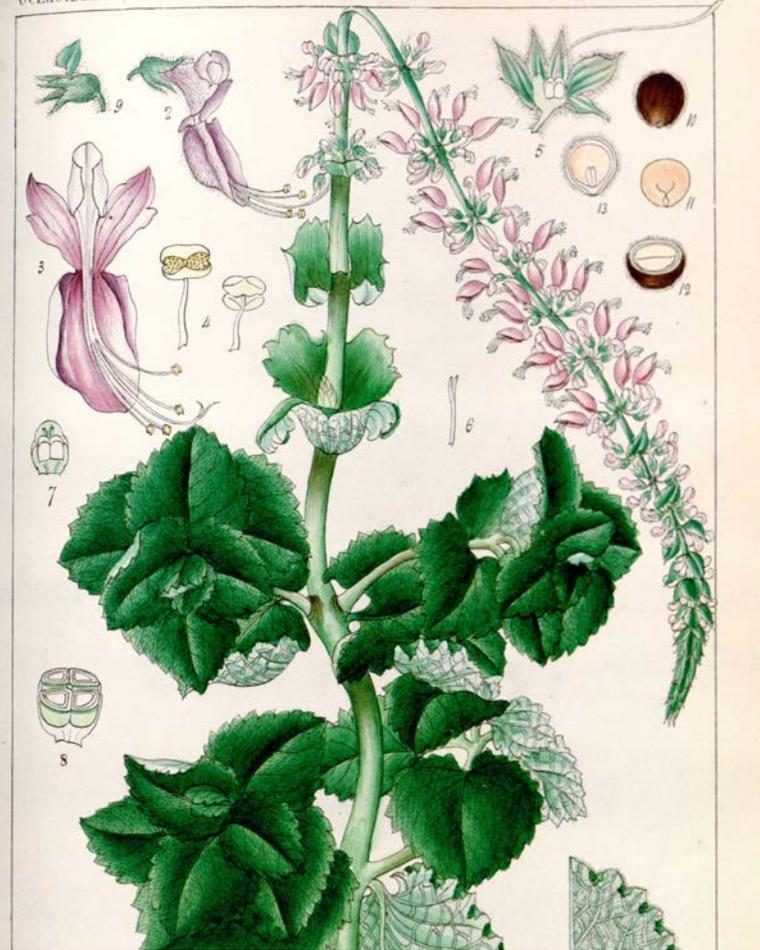
*Caribbean Candlebush (Senna alata) looks like African Candelabra Tree. They have similar uses in both places. They are both used to treat fungal skin infections like ringworm, and candlebush is also called Ringworm Bush. On St. Martin, it is also used to soothe rashes from cement powder and other skin irritations.*

*(Illustration: Harriet Thiselton-Dyer, 1879)*

Caribbean. Dozens of healing plant species were brought from Africa to the Caribbean during the slave trade. Researchers believe Africans brought these plants because they were the only ones who knew their use.

Africans in the Caribbean also found local plants that were related to ones they used in Africa. Some Caribbean plants are still used here in the same way similar plants are used in Africa today. Some Caribbean plant names seem to come from African plant names.

For most of St. Martin's history, the plant healing based in African and Amerindian traditions was the most effective care around. Even when Western medicine improved on the island, it was out of reach for many because of cost and access. Bush medicine was often still the main care available. Through nonstop use, bush medicine traditions are still alive today on St. Martin and in the region.



Stingy Thyme (*Plectranthus amboinicus*) and Paracetamol (*Plectranthus caninus*) are African plants in the mint family. Both of these plants are found in almost every kitchen garden on the island. They thrive in the local climate and can easily be grown from cuttings. Stingy thyme is often used as a cooking herb, particularly to season fish. It's common in bush tea, often to treat a cough or upset stomach. It's also used to ease morning sickness, to help overdue mothers go into labor, and to boost milk production after childbirth. It's also used on the skin to soothe insect bites. Paracetamol is usually used as a pain reliever. Its local name in both French and English is the name of a commercial pain-relief medicine.



The Jumbie Bead (*Abrus precatorius*) is deadly. Every part of the plant contains the poison abrin, and a single seed can kill. But it was also used as a medicine and to induce abortion.



*Seed Under Leaf (Phyllanthus amarus) is a Caribbean plant that is now widely used in Africa. It also has relatives in Africa that are used as medicine. On St. Martin, it's used for diabetes, fever, high blood pressure, to flush gall stones, and for many other things.*



*The Maiden Apple (Momordica charantia) was brought to the Caribbean from Africa. It has many uses as food and medicine in both places.*



*Woman Piaba (Leonurus sibiricus)*

## WEST INDIAN WEED WOMAN

*Plant medicine in calypso music*

Calypso music began in Trinidad and became popular throughout the Caribbean. Calypso songs are often funny, and many deal with current events, cultural traditions or everyday life in creative and amusing ways. The song “West Indian Weed Woman” draws humor from the huge assortment of herbal medicines the woman is selling. Over 60 plants and cures are mentioned by name in the version made popular by Guyanese singer Bill Rogers in the 1930s.



This song both draws from and helps preserve Caribbean traditions. The medical knowledge and plant names are Caribbean, making the song topical for Caribbean listeners. It describes a female plant medicine expert. Historically, many skilled healers in the Caribbean were women. The recording itself is a way of documenting important herbal medicine traditions.

Recent analysis of this song found that about 80% of the plants that could be identified are native to the Caribbean. This shows it is likely that Amerindian plant knowledge was adopted by Afro-Caribbean healers, becoming a key part of Caribbean culture to this day.

For more information, read *West Indian Weed Woman: Indigenous Origins of West Indian Folk Medicine* by Erneslyn Velasco and Lawrence Waldron, published in the proceedings of the 27th International Association for Caribbean Archaeology Congress.

Top: Cockshun (*Smilax schomburgkiana*),  
illustration by F.G. Kohle

Bottom: Wild Daisy (*Sphagneticola trilobata*),  
illustration by F.W. Horne



# West Indian Weed Woman

Recorded by Bill Rogers in 1934

One day I met an old woman selling,  
And I wanted something to eat.  
I say I was going to put a bit in she way,  
But I turn back when I meet.  
I thought she had bananas, orange or pear,  
But was nothing that I need.  
For when I asked the old woman what she was  
selling, She said she was selling weed.

She had she coat tie up over she waist,  
And was stepping along with grace.  
She had on an old pair of clogs on her feet,  
And was wriggling down the street.  
Just then she started to name the different  
weeds, And I really was more than glad.  
But I can't remember all that she call,  
But these were a few she had.

Man Piaba, Woman Piaba,  
Tantan Fall Back and Lemon Grass,  
Minnie Root, Gully Root, Granny-Backbone,  
Bitter Tally, Lime Leaf, and Toro,  
Coolie Bitters, Karile Bush, Flat o' the Earth,  
and Iron Weed,  
Sweet Broom, Fowl Tongue, Wild Daisy, Sweet  
Sage and even Toyo.

*Top: Toyo (Justicia pectoralis), illustration by L. Bevalet*

*Bottom: Minnie Root (Ruellia tuberosa), illustration by F.W. Horne*





She had Cassava Mumma, Coocoo Piaba,  
Jacob's Ladder, and Piti Guano,  
Fingle Bush, Job's Tear, Piti Payi, a Jumbie  
Bottle, and White Cleary,  
Bile Bush, Wild Cane, Duck Weed, Aniseed,  
Wara Bitters, and Wild Gray Root.  
She even had down to a certain bush Barbajans  
does call Puss in Boot.

When I hear how much bush she had,  
I left dumb till I couldn't even talk.  
She started to call from Camp Street corner,  
And never stop 'til she reached Orange Walk.  
The woman had me so surprised  
that I didn't know what to do,  
That a girl come and gimme a cuff in meh eye,  
And I didn't even know was who.



Sweet Broom, Sweet Sage, and Lemon Grass, I  
hear them good for making tea.  
Oh well, I hear Zèb Grass and Wild Daisy  
is good to cool the body.  
The woman tongue was even lisped,  
And she was calling out all the time.  
She even had a little kanwa eye,  
And the other that left was blind.

*Top: Fingle Bush (Clethra alnifolia), illustration by  
Mark Catesby*

*Bottom: Sweet Sage (Lantana camara), illustration  
by D. Bois*

She had Bitter Guma, Portugee Bumboh,  
Congo Lana, and Twelve o' Clock Broom,  
Sarsparilla, Wild Tomato, Soursop Leaf, and  
Half-a-bit Weed,  
Yura Bally, Sweet Pinpota Bush, White Fleary,  
and Christmas Bush,  
Cockshun and Sand Bitters, and even Monkey  
Ladder, and all the rest you may need.

She had Fat Bush, Elder Bush, Black Pepper  
Bush, French Toyo, Qupera, and Capadulla,  
Tamarind Leaf, Money Bush, Soldier Fork  
Leaf, Pumpkin Blossom, and even Devil Dua,  
Leeman, Congo Pom, Pingalor, Physic Nut,  
and Lily Root.  
In fact, the only bush that she didn't got  
was Bush in he everyday suit!

*Lyrics transcription by Erneslyn Velasco  
and Lawrence Waldron*

*Top: Fat Bush (Eryngium aquaticum), illustration by  
S. Edwards*

*Bottom: Devil Dua (Strychnos sp.)*





Top Left: Yura Bally (*Chelonanthus alatus*),  
illustration by L. Bevalet

Bottom Left: Wild Tomato (*Physalis angulata*),  
illustration by M. Blanco

Above: Sweet Broom (*Scoparia dulcis*), illustration  
by M. Blanco



This book was developed as a companion to Amuseum Naturalis, St. Martin's free museum of nature, heritage and culture. The Amuseum, and this book, were created by Les Fruits de Mer.

Les Fruits de Mer is a non-profit association based in St. Martin whose core mission is to raise awareness about nature, culture, and heritage. The organization carries out this mission through a free museum, publications, films, and public events. Learn more at [lesfruitsdemer.com](http://lesfruitsdemer.com) and [amuseumnaturalis.com](http://amuseumnaturalis.com).

