

FIRST LADY



There's always a focus on our health in the New Year and what better place to start than our own gardens? Club President **Julia Bradbury** explores plant medicine this month and she explains more about how she came to create her own gin

Happy new year one and all. I think we can all say we're happy to see the back of 2020. As is customary at this time of the year, it's best to bid farewell to the excesses of the festive period and think about the new slimline you. Hands up if you ate more than three mince pies in one sitting? Hands up if you had thirds of bubble and squeak? Hands up if you picked all the caramel swirls out of the Quality Street tin and stashed them away from the kids? Just me then.

2020 might have been a loser but in 2019 a chance meeting with the team from Derbyshire Distillery at the Chatsworth Country Show got me thinking. They showed me the effort, thought and skill that goes into making their smooth and gorgeous beverages, and we got talking about producing our very own gin for The Outdoor Guide. My walking adventures started in the Peak District so this is landscape I know well, and love.

The process is absorbing and the result is an especially lively gin, infused with hints of lavender, nettle and ripened fruit. And just because I love you and you all deserve it after the year we've all had, Club members can get a healthy discount on a bottle.

I'm not here to shamelessly plug the gin (well, okay, I am... check myccc.co.uk/discounts) but I do want to share the highlights of this experience and how this heady mix of readily available local botanicals got me thinking about our collective health and why it's so important to recognise what nature's bounty provides for us.

Clearly, mixing them with a load of alcohol is one thing, but take them on their own and you start to learn just how beneficial some of these natural ingredients are to the body and mind.

And what's more they're all readily available in the wild, so not only is there no shortage of them in the UK but there are bundles of uses for them, whether for food and drink, or natural cosmetic products.

Let's start with nettles. Everyone knows how irritating their sting is, but how many more know that nettles, if consumed, provide a huge dose of vitamin C and iron and can stimulate red blood cell production? They also contain boron, a mineral that's good for your bones' strength. The anti-inflammatory and diuretic properties of nettle leaf have long been used in treating arthritic pain and urinary infections. That's why nettles have been used in natural remedies for literally thousands



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of years, and there's barely a footpath or verge anywhere in our country without them!

Juniper berries are the key ingredient for gin, but scientists are interested in the high level of antioxidants and, like nettles, the decent dose of vitamin C that juniper berries appear to contain.

They've also been touted as having a profound effect on reducing blood sugars, cholesterol and heart disease risk. That's not to say you should go and grab a handful - they're usually quite bitter and not all varieties are edible, so do your research first.

Lavender, which I'm sure we all know well from various handwashes, soaps and cleansers by now, is favoured for its fragrance (the very name lavender is from the Latin 'to wash') but the plant has plenty more sophisticated uses than that.

It's rich in iron and vitamin A, which helps with eye health. It also provides calcium and has been used to keep the symptoms of osteoporosis at bay. As well as this, lavender oils are associated with pain relief. My little lad Zeph gets a lavender foot rub most nights to help him sleep.

Blackberries, another of our gin's ingredients, have huge nutritional benefits, containing vitamins A, C, E and B as well as potassium, magnesium and calcium and there are plenty of ways to include blackberries in your cooking.

Lastly mint, which aside from its flavour is good for relaxation and as a mild relief for cold and flu symptoms. As a natural stimulant it can relieve stress, alleviate headaches and has been shown to aid digestive health. Even if you can't find any in the wild, pick up a small plant from a nursery or garden centre and in no time at all you'll be making mint tea as a pleasing alternative to your regular brew.

In these days of information overload, we're often told about the next big thing or magic ingredient when it comes to our health. It can be easy to forget that what we see more commonly can also have profound positive effects on us. Vitamin N I call it.

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If you're keen to learn a bit more I recommend a little book called *Bloom & Thrive* by Brigit Anna McNeill. I interviewed Anna recently for my new television series, but that's news for another column.

Happy 2021!