

The Practical Herbalist -- Wild Cherries

Herbs are popular, and the addition of herbs into a product has become a marketing ploy. We have all seen the “energy” drinks, and vitamins that have herbs. This may seem to be a new trend, but it has been around for a long time. One particular thing I remember from my childhood was the Wild Cherry cough drop.

It was never just.. Cherry flavor, it was always *Wild Cherry* flavor. The bright red cough drops tasted like cherry flavored candy. They even listed cherry flavor in the ingredients, along with red dye. But why *Wild Cherry*? why not wild apple, or wild lemon? Oh sure there were other flavors, but you could always find Wild cherry cough drops. The candy store always had Cherry candy, but never *Wild Cherry* candy. What was so special about wild cherry and cough drops?

The answer is found in the history of European herb use. Long ago there were many foods and spices that were mixed together to help people feel better when they had a cold or a cough. Every local wise woman or herbalist had medicine based on local plants. Some things were found to work better than others. In the case of a cough, it was found that the type of cherry tree that grew wild, often called a Choke Cherry or Black Cherry was very helpful. It was found that soaking the dried bark of the tree made a medicine that helped suppress a cough. I am sure many a parent mixed the medicine with a little honey to make a syrup that a child might actually take.

The cough syrup made of the bark of the tree, did not taste like the bitter Choke Cherry, or even less likely taste like the modern cultivated sweet cherries we now use. The traditional cough syrup, made of bark, was probably called wild cherry tree cough syrup, or some such thing, and the concept of cough syrups being associated with the words “Wild Cherry”, was born. Eventually the knowledge that it was the bark not the fruit that was important, was lost to the common man. Parents with a sick child heard from grandparents that wild cherry cough syrup was the best, and their kids in turn would grow up and remember that their mom would give them a cherry flavored cough syrup, and since mom knew best, that misinformation was passed on to our modern age.

Which brings us back to the modern additions of herbs to various products. The question becomes, did a company add a herb to a product because it has a specific benefit to the consumer, or was the herb added because the name of the herb is popular. Basically cough drops come in cherry flavor not because it makes the cough medicine better, but because at one time wild cherry bark was the popular herb for coughs.

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