

Abbie White presented this at the HCOCM meeting on February 9th, 2014.

As the newly appointed HCOCM Endangered Herb watchdog, my first herb to profile is the gorgeous Pink Lady's Slipper, *Cypripedium acaule*. At an early age I learned that this was a plant to admired and respected from a distance. Picking and touching was forbidden and unlawful since this act could kill the plant. I listened to Mario DiGregorio in 1999 discuss his book *A Vanishing Heritage Wildflowers of Cape Cod* and was stunned and grieved to learn that wild harvested *Cypripedium* roots has been a medicinal commodity for many decades.

My focus has been to examine the history of medicinal use of *Cypripedium acaule* as related to endangered status. There are many informative historical resources available in Google Scholar. Shown is a price list from an industry catalog for distribution in the United States published in 1859 in Philadelphia.

Common names.	Botanic names.	Per lb.
Horsemint,	<i>Monarda punctata</i> ,	50
Horseradish leaves,	<i>Cochlearia armoracia</i> ,	30
Horseradish root,	“ “	50
Hyoscyamus.	See <i>Henbane</i> .	
Powdered.		
Hyssop,	<i>Hyssopus officinalis</i> ,	50
Indian Arrow-wood.	See <i>Wa-a-hoo</i> .	1 00
Indian Elm.	See <i>Slippery Elm</i> .	30
Indian hemp, Black.	<i>Apocynum cannabinum</i> ,	75
Powdered.		
Indian hemp, White,	<i>Asclepias incarnata</i> ,	75
Indian Physic,	<i>Gillenia trifoliata</i> ,	1 00
Indian tobacco.	See <i>Lobelia</i> .	40
Powdered.		
Indian turnip.	See <i>Wild turnip</i> .	50
Powdered.		
Indigo, Wild,	<i>Baptisia tinctoria</i> ,	50
Ipecac, Milk.	See <i>Bitter Root</i> .	75
Powdered.		
Ipecac, Wild.	See <i>Fever root</i> .	50
Ink root.	See <i>Marsh Rosemary</i> .	50
Ipecacuanha Am.	<i>Euphorbia ipecacuanha</i> ,	1 50
Itch Weed.	See <i>White Hellebore</i> .	75
Powdered.		
Ivy, Ground,	<i>Glechoma hederacea</i> ,	50
Jacob's ladder,	<i>Smilax peduncularis</i> ,	50
Jamestown, or Jimson weed.	See <i>Thorn Apple</i> .	40
Joe-pye.	See <i>Boneset</i> .	30
Johuswort,	<i>Hypericum perforatum</i> ,	30
King's clover.	See <i>Melilot</i> .	50
Knob-root.	See <i>Stone root</i> .	50
Knot grass,	<i>Polygonum aviculare</i> ,	50
Labrador tea,	<i>Ledum latifolium</i> ,	40
Ladies' slipper,	<i>Cypripedium flavum</i> ,	75

To explain the Latin name listed, I researched the literature of the era and came to the conclusion that the preferred species for medicine was the Yellow Lady's Slipper, *Cypripedium pubescens*. However, the roots of all species *Cypripedium* were harvested for commerce and sold mixed together. I have never seen a yellow blossom in the wild and attribute the scarcity to over zealous root harvesting for many centuries.

Interestingly, the price of a pound of *Cypripedium* roots was equivalent to the price of root bark of bittersweet and dried borage implying that the plant once had a widespread presence.

Common names.	Botanic names.	Per lb.
Bittersweet, bark of the root,	<i>Celastrus scandens,</i>	75
Bittersweet herb,	<i>Solanum dulcamara,</i>	50
Bitterworm.	See <i>Buckbean.</i>	1 00
Blackberry root,	<i>Rubus occidentalis,</i>	30
Blackberry, bark of the root,	“ “	50
Black root.	See <i>Culver's Root.</i>	1 00
Powdered.		
Black snake root.	* See <i>Black Cohosh,</i>	50
Powdered.		
Blazing star root,	<i>Aletris farinosa,</i>	1 00
Powdered.		
Blood root,	<i>Sanguinaria canadensis,</i>	50
Powdered.		
Blue-bells.	See <i>Abscess Root.</i>	1 00
Blue-berry.	See <i>Pappoose root.</i>	50
Blue-flag,	<i>Iris versicolor,</i>	50
Powdered.		
Boneset,	<i>Eupatorium perfoliatum,</i>	30
Powdered.		
Boneset, purple.	See <i>Queen of the Meadow.</i>	50
Powdered.		
Borage,	<i>Borago officinalis,</i>	75
Bouncing-Bet.	See <i>Soapwort.</i>	50

The medicine from *Cypripedium* was widely used for many conditions. I equate the many routine everyday applications to our modern day Ibuprofen. Here is a typical medical description from the era. There are many that can be read on Google Scholar by using the search term *Cypripedin* that is described as the active principle of the plant genus *Cypripedium*. This medical textbook was published in 1854.

CYPRIPEDIUM PUBESCENS.

(*Large Yellow Ladies' Slipper*).

There are eight varieties of *Cypripedium* indigenous to this country, but the *C. pubescens* from some cause appears to have been selected as *the* variety to be the most used in medicine. It is known by the common names of American Valerian, (this name is Smith's, applied to the *Scutellaria*,) Nerve-root, Yellow moccasin flower, etc. For minute description of this and other varieties see King's Dispensatory. The *root* is the officinal portion. The roots of all these varieties are undoubtedly collected, sold, and used, with the officinal article indiscriminately. Homœopathic pharmacutists should therefore be very careful in the selection of the root. This plant has always been a favorite remedy in domestic and "botanic" practice. As a "true *nervine*," it meets a great many indications in the treatment of females and children, and its harmlessness commends it to general use. It is an analogue of Valerian, Coffea, Thea, Chamomilla, *Scutellaria*, *Senecio gracilis*,

Both the destruction of habitat and unsustainable harvesting led to the endangered status of all *Cypripediums*. However, from reading and personal observation, *Cypripedium acaule* appears to be doing well at the present day. I have enjoyed seeing this plant at Tower Hill Botanic Garden and at many of my neighbor's properties in Central Massachusetts. My personal relationship with Pink Lady's Slipper intensified with my relocation to Hardwick in 1988 to a rural area. Close to my house is a wooded area where I discovered in amazement in May 1989 two patches of lady's Slipper in bloom. I counted more than two dozen blossoms. Every year I looked forward to enjoying these showy flowers with my family. Sadly, in 1993 there was a terrible local drought in July. I watched with a sense of helplessness at many wilted oaks, dead grass, and dead weeds. In the spring of 1994 one of the patches of Pink Lady's Slipper did not grow at all and the other was diminished in size as a direct consequence of the drought. Ever since then, I have watered the plants during hot and dry weather. In further conversation with Mario DiGregorio, and other plant experts, my family began to manage the habitat for the Pink Lady's Slipper by thinning trees and hand weeding some of the choking ground cover. Unintentionally, in the process of clearing brush for a wheat field three years ago, we encouraged the growth of more than three dozen Pink Lady's Slipper at the edge of the forest. I have staked the plants so that the farm equipment leaves them unharmed.

In summary, as herbalists, we need to be connected to our plants in wholesome and intimate relationships. This spring I will overcome my fear and rigid law abiding childhood upbringing by touching the blooming pink lady slipper. I will handle her

gently with the intention of making medicine following Herbalist Sean Donahue's guidance. In an Herb Mentor discussion he posted the following message on April 22, 2012: "I have found that Lady Slipper will share much of her medicine in a flower essence made by gently bending the flower into a bowl of water with a twig heavy enough to bend it but not so heavy as to break the stem and letting it sit for 4 or 5 hours. Then adding a small amount of brandy to preserve the essence."

With my evolving relationship with the Pink Lady's Slipper, I do not think I will ever tire of taking photos. The shape of the bloom is a challenge for sharp focusing with macro photography and I have learned much through trial and error. The ideal time of day is near sunset with gentle backlighting. A few water drops of water sprinkled on the blossom add a beautiful glisten.



by Abbie White February 9, 2014