

Herbs / Soap

Objectives

- To find out how the nuns spent their day when they weren't engaged in prayer
- To find out why the garden and the plants they grew were so important for the nuns
- To explore ways in which the Abbey was able to help the ordinary people of Shaftesbury by healing their ailments.

Activities

- To make simple herb bags for the children to take home.
- To make simply scented soap to show how important herbs were for cleanliness.

Background Information

Shaftesbury Abbey was the most important Benedictine Nunnery in Saxon England (AD410 - 1066). The Benedictine Order emphasised the care of the sick.

“Work in the gardens was an integral part of the nuns’ spiritual and working life. They followed the Rule of St Benedict by offering hospitality to travellers and pilgrims and healing for the sick. Their disciplined practices promoted the idea of self-sufficiency and manual labour.

“In Medieval times the word for health was ‘healu’, meaning wholeness of body, mind and importantly spirit. Healing always involved both the plants and spiritual practices; prayers and chants were said whilst applying the herbal remedies. The nuns at Shaftesbury Abbey would have been in the forefront of knowledge about useful herbs for healing, and also herbs for so many other practical and culinary uses.”

Julie Wood, Medical Herbalist

Shaftesbury Abbey would originally have had many gardens and orchards. The herb gardens on site today represent aspects of typical monastic herb gardens.

- Herbs were grown for healing, and also as useful plants for cooking, dyeing, decoration and religious purposes. Maryan plants - plants associated with the Virgin Mary to whom the Abbey was first dedicated - would also have been grown.

Examples of how plants were used by the nuns:

- Macerated in wines and mead to be drunk in medicinal doses.
- Infused as teas, boiled in milk and strong vinegar, to be drunk or applied as a muslin compress.
- Stewed in animal fats to make oils and salves
- Herbal steam baths to using hot stones.
- Added to food such as pottage (a thick stew or soup)
- Strewn over the floor of the infirmary and the Abbey to keep the air fragrant and clean. (We now know they contain oils which fight germs.)



Examples of herbs

Chamomile

Used for soreness and pain. It was mixed with other herbs as a cure for poison. Chamomile tea is still drunk today and said to be relaxing and sleep inducing. It has a very distinctive smell.

Rosemary

Ancient people believed that the Virgin Mary spread her blue cloak over a white blossomed rosemary bush and turned the flowers blue. Hence the name 'the Rose of Mary'. It was used to help with digestion and also to treat arthritis, sore skin and even baldness! It is very aromatic.

Lavender

This was a sweet smelling strewing herb, useful against infection and as an insect repellent probably used in the infirmary to lift mood and fight infections



Sage

Sage was used to treat different illnesses. It was also chewed to whiten people's teeth and used in cooking as we still do today. The second part of its Latin name '*officinalis*' comes from the name of the 'officina', the special nunnery storeroom where herbs and medicines were kept. It means 'useful'.



Lemon Balm

This was macerated (softened) in wines and used for digestive complaints to settle the stomach and to cleanse sores. It has a strong citrus scent so was good for strewing.



Hyssop

This was also a strewing herb. It is very aromatic and also believed to be cleansing.



Rose Petals

Roses were important Christian symbols linked to the Virgin Mary. The petals were relaxing and antiseptic, useful for treating wounds and rashes as well as a tonic for the heart.

Their scent and beauty were much appreciated and used in decorative displays and gardens

