Human beings have to depend on Nature for sustenance and survival. The traditional system of medicine in India dates back to the age of the Rigveda (2500 to 1600 B.C.).

Ayurveda is the Indian indigenous system of medicine dating back to the Vedic period. The term Ayurveda means Science of Life (Ayur = life, veda = knowledge). The entire system of ancient Indian medicine is based on the relationship between man and Nature.

With the development of science, many new drugs of synthetic origin have come into existence and with the rapid growth of the pharmaceutical industry the value and use of the herbal medicines has come down in the recent past.

In the colonial period, Ayurveda sunk in India to the status of the poor man's medicine. Though the knowledge survived it had no prestige. Those who had money preferred western medicine and the immediate cure for isolated symptoms appealed to people. At the present moment Ayurveda is enjoying yet another revival, because of the side effects or long term health hazards of Allopathic medicine.

In 1978, the World Health Organisation (WHO) drew up a list of 240 absolutely essential medications. All these medications can be obtained only from plants. Every year, nearly two hundred Indian medicinal plants are being tested in the research departments of several prestigious drug companies all over the world.

Apart from practitioners of Ayurveda most women know the properties of certain plants which they come across in their daily life, until synthetic products took over and herbal medicine became old fashioned.

Times have changed and we are back to the herbs and herbal products that our ancestors used. During the past, rainwater was used as a skin toner and honey as a moisturiser. Dead skin can be removed by using papaya and skin blemishes can be cleared using potatoes. Even beauty parlours are now advertising "looking good the natural way". Seeing the demand for herbal products, many organisations have developed and are marketing herbal products.

Because of the over-exploitation of several herbs, they have become endangered or threatened. In order to overcome this situation, these important herbs must be cultured either in the laboratory or outside in nurseries and gardens.

Conservation of medicinal plants

The propagation of plants has been a fundamental operation of mankind. When new kinds of plants have to be conserved or propagated, we need to develop knowledge and techniques to propagate them. An appropriate propagation technology can be selected for each kind of medicinal plant depending upon plant growth.

Apart from propagating medicinal plants, villagers can be encouraged to set up kitchen gardens of medicinal plants for their domestic use as shown below :

Organic farming with medicinal plants as botanical pesticides can be encouraged as a practice to replace chemical pesticides among farmers. A gene pool of herbal and medicinal plants can be established. Conservation strategies based on present demands and immediate future needs to be prioritized.

The conservation of medicinal plants does not end here. The community should also play a major role to conserve medicinal plants. People should be taught to identify the locally available species which are over-exploited and whose exploitation should be checked and regulated.

A separate package for community development/conservation can also be taken up by setting up a small community garden by distributing 50 to 100 useful plants for a primary health centre which the local community could maintain. Seed banks and nurseries can also be developed by the community to generate income. Medicinal plant species can be planted under the wasteland development programme.

If all this has to be done, an awareness programme should be conducted stressing the importance of medicinal herbs and their identification and utilisation for treating diseases in human beings and animals. The message of identification, utilisation and conservation of medicinal plants can be spread through local, traditional folk media, distribution of booklets and handouts.

There are more than 100 commonly used medicinal plants in our life. Some of the plants with usage are listed below:

COMMON MEDICINAL PLANTS USED IN OUR DAILY LIVES
PLANTS WHICH CAN BE GROWN IN THE PLAINS AND THEIR USES

No	Common Name	Botanical Name	Application
1	Agathi	Sesbania grandiflora	fever, kills intestinal worms
2	Amukkira	Withania somnifera	fever
3	Avuri	Indiagofera tinctoria	kills intestinal worms
4	Adu theenda palai	Aristolochia bractiata	kills intestinal worms
5	Annasi	Ananas comosus	stimulant for hunger, for constipation, promotes digestion
6	Adatodai	Adhatoda vasica	diseases of
7	Echchu	Phoenix sylvestris	diabetes, fever
8	Ell	Sesamum indicum	increases milk secretion
9	Garlic	Alium sativum	stimulant, expectorant
10	Inji	Zingiber officinale	promotes digestion
11	Kaliyana murungai	Erythrina indica	increases milk secretion
12	Karuvel	Acacia nilotica	diseases of respiratory tract
13	Karisalankanni	Eclipta alba	for constipation
14	Kuppaimeni	Acalypha indica	cold and cough, kills intestinal worms
15	Karisalankanni	Eclipta prostrata	strengthens liver
16	Mavilingu	Crataeva religiosa	fever
17	Malai vembu	Melia azadirach	kills intestinal worms
18	Mathulai	Punica granatum	kills intestinal worms
19	Ma	Mangifera indica	kills intestinal worms
20	Milagu	Piper nigrum	cold and cough
21	Manjal	Curcuma longa	cold and cough
22	Nelli	Phyllanthus emblica	decreases body temperature
23	Naval	Eugenia jambusa	diabetes
24	Nuna	Morinda tinctoria	fever
25	Nochchi	Vitex negundo	fever
26	Nanthiyavattam	Tabernaemontana divaricata	kills intestinal worms
27	Pagarkai	Memordica charntia	kills intestinal worms
28	Seetha	Annona squamoza	wounds / ulcers
29	Seiyakkai	Acacia concina	cold and cough wounds / ulcers
30	Sundai	Solanum torvum	cold and cough
31	Sarakkonrai	Cassia fistula	fever
32	Musumusukhai	Mukia maderaspatana	vertigo, asthma, ulcer
33	Thumbai	Leucus aspera	cold and cough
34	Thoothuvalai	Solanum trilobatum	cold and cough
35	Thulasi	Ocimum sanctum	diseases of the respiratory tract
36	Sirukurinjan	Gymnema sylvestris	stimulant for hunger
37	Vilvam	Aegle marmelos	fever, digestion
38	Vishnukrandi	Evolvulus alsinoides	fever
39	Vembu	Azadirachta indica	intestinal worms malerial fever skin diseases
40	Vellarikkai	Cucumis sativus	descreases body temperature
41	Vengayam	Allium cepa	cold and cough
42	Vengai	Pterocarpus marsupium	wounds / ulcers
43	Vendayam	Trigonella feenugracum	increases milk secretion
44	Alari	Nerium odoratum	for constipation
45	Amman pachcharisi	Euphorbia hirta	decreases body temperature
46	Illuppai	Bassia longifolia	decreases body temperature
47	Karunjchirakam	Nigella sativa	induces labour pain during delivery
48	Mulmoongil	Bambusa arundinacea	for leprosy, skin diseases, astringent, laxative, cooling
49	Vaagai, Siridam	Albizzia lebbeck	astringent, asthma, expectorant, leprosy
50	Thekku	Tectona grandis	astringent, cooling, constipation, bronchitis, hyper- acidity
51	Kattuchirakam, cittilai	Vernonia anthelmintica	astringent, anti-inflammatory, fever, expectorant
52	Karpuram	Cinnamomum camphora	aphrodisiac, anti- inflammatory, asthma, expectorant, diarhoea
53	Elumitchai	Citrus limon	aids digestion, for constipation, cough, laxative, antiseptic, bronchitis
54	Korai	Cyperus rotundus	cooling, astringent, anti inflammatory, scabies, skin disease
55	Sooriyakanthi	Helianthus annus	strengthening teeth, leprosy, ulcer, skin diseases, bronchitis
56	Pushkaramoolam	Inula racemosa	antiseptic, digestion ulcer, cough, asthma, bronchitis
57	Vellaikadambu	Neolamarckia cadamba	astringent, ulcer, digestive, diarrhoea, expectorant, fever, vomiting
58	Perichangai	Phoenix dactylifera	expectorant, cooling, bronchitis, cough, burning sensation
59	Vettiver	Vetiveria zizanioides	water purifier
60	Marudhani	Lawsonia inermis	leprosy, skin diseases, premature falling & greying of hair

PLANTS WHICH CAN BE GROWN IN THE HILLS AND THEIR USES

No	Common Name	Botanical Name	Application
1	Sadhapilai	Ruta graveolens	Ruta graveolens
2	Elakkai Elettaria	cardamomum	stimulant,expectorant
3	Pirandai	Cissus quadrangularis	Chronic Ulcers
4	Pudhina	Mentha arvensis	digestion, cough
5	Lemon grass	Cymbopogon caesius	insect bites
6	Karumilagu	Piper nigrum	cold and cough
7	Thippili	Piper longum	cold and cough, fever
8	Sukku	Zingiber officianale	headache, dry cough
9	Krishna thulasi	Ocimum americanum	bronchitis
10	Lavangam	Eugenia caryophyllata	aphrodisiac, expectorant, toothache
11	Jathikkai	Myristica fragrans	constipation
12	Vasambu	Acorus calamus	stimulant, decongestant