

PEARL of AFRICA

SPECIAL TRAVEL SECTION

HERBAL WISDOM AT UWEC

If you have ever been to the Uganda Wildlife Education Centre (UWEC) in Entebbe and missed to tour the medicinal plants section, get back there and be ready to be intrigued by the healing power of the herbs propagated there, writes Titus Kakembo

Globally, herbal teas, tinctures, herbal infused oils and balms are gaining popularity, so it pays to know more about medicinal plants.

"This is the more reason we are multiplying and popularising holy basil and many other plants," UWEC's herbalist, Richard Othieno, said. "There are travelled and exposed people who consume the herbs as a status symbol, but there are those who need them for health benefits."

About 3,000 years ago, it was believed that consuming holy basil was the only way to go to heaven after death. Today, it is used for spicing tea. But healthwise, the herb is good for reducing gasses in the stomach as well as treating ulcers and other intestinal upsets.

According to Othieno, research found holy basil to have anti-inflammatory, anti-fungal, anti-bacteria and antioxidant properties. It also reduces stress and checks mood swings.

Other medicinal plants at UWEC are *Urtica dioica* (UD), stinging nettle and milk thistle. Milk thistle treats allergy symptoms without causing drowsiness and can be used on a regular basis. It is good for people suffering from Alzheimer's disease, arthritis and bladder infections.

"*Urtica dioica* has been studied extensively and has shown promise in treating asthma, bladder infections, bronchitis, bursitis, gingivitis, gout, hives, kidney stones, laryngitis, multiple sclerosis and prostate enlargement. There are women I know using it to improve the appearance of their hair and also get rid of dandruff," Othieno says.



PHOTOGRAPHY BY TITUS KAKEMBO

Herbalist Othieno tends to some of the herbs being propagated

There are other herbs here that are good for reducing bad cholesterol. Many people part with a fortune for similar concoctions imported from either India or China.

In the gardens, you find Aloe vera, lemon grass and a lengthy list of herbs with both local and tongue-twisting biological names. During the international Wildlife Day, the US ambassador to Uganda, Deborah Malac, visited with children of the US Embassy staff, and they added the sausage tree to the collection of herbs there.

The sausage fruit tree is used by different communities for different purposes, especially in communities where it grows naturally such as in Kasese and Karamoja.

Uganda Wildlife Authority guide Simon Kabet, who is based in Murchison Falls

National Park, says: "There are women who dry the fruit of the sausage tree fruits and mix it with their bath water to reduce labour pains and soften the pelvic bones to ease birth."

The garden has plants that act as beauty enhancers, libido boosters, weight loss and appetite boosters.

However, UWEC spokesman Isaac Mujaasi cautions that herbs may not give assurance of a cure, but they should not be abandoned either, because it is from them that researchers get syrups/tablets for western medicine.

"Unlike western medicines, with herbs, there is no payment of consultation fee, but you simply give what is called 'kikubansiko' (a token of appreciation to the dispenser)," Mujaasi says.

Dr Yahaya Sekajja from the Institute of

GETTING TO UWEC

- ◆ Commuter taxis shuttle between Kampala and Entebbe for sh2,500 to sh3,000 all day from the Old Taxi Park.
- ◆ UWEC is a short walk from the highway, or one can take a bodaboda for sh1,000.
- ◆ There are special hire and airport taxis that charge from sh40,000 to sh60,000.
- ◆ While at UWEC, you also get to see lots of animals and birds housed there.
- ◆ There are several upmarket hotels and budget-friendly lodges in Entebbe and tent camping within the UWEC grounds.



Cactus has been proved to have healing properties

Traditional Medicine recommends herbs when ailments fail to cure in hospital.

"Herbalists in Uganda continue to provide the basic health services for most communities. Our challenge is to promote the 320 medicinal plants that are found in Mpigi alone. The products can now be sweetened, packaged and regulated once prescribed," Sekajja says.

He adds that given a short supply of doctors in the country, the improvement in herbal service provision could be done by upgrading the skills, knowledge of practitioners and encouraging the sharing of medicines available.