Traditional Medicinal Plant Use Among Virginia’s Powhatan Indians

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ABSTRACT

The goal of this study was to identify native Virginian plants used by the indigenous Powhatan Indians for medicine prior to English colonization. We compiled a database of traditional Powhatan medicinal plants by conducting literature surveys, assessing species nativity, and interviewing two members of the Pamunkey tribe. Plants were placed into broad treatment categories based on the area of body or symptoms treated by specific remedies. We identified 89 plants, representing 49 families, used for medicinal purposes by the Powhatan. Woody and herbaceous species were employed almost equally and most (89%) were perennial. Nearly half (49.3%) of all remedies involving woody species utilized the roots or bark alone. More than half of remedies involving herbaceous species used either the whole plant (22.0%), its leaves (18.6%) or the roots (33.9%). Only 15 remedies employed multiple parts of one plant while six called for multiple species.

Key words: Ethnobotany, Powhatan Indian medicine, Pamunkey Indians, native plants, plant remedies.

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