Herbal
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Black cohosh (*Actaea racemosa*)

In the 1870s the standard treatment for severe menstrual cramps was surgery to remove the ovaries. Forty percent of all patients died, and women, skeptical of male doctors, began concocting herbal remedies. In her Massachusetts home in 1873, Lydia Pinkham combined wild roots and herbs – black cohosh, a main ingredient – to help women control their reproductive health. Black cohosh promotes menstruation, soothes menstrual pain and eases menopause. The Haudenosaunee and Cherokee, having long known the benefits of this buttercup species, likely introduced it to European colonists. An Algonquian term, cohosh means “rough” for the herb’s dark, knotted rhizome. These underground stems contain compounds (triterpene glycosides and fukinolic acid) with estrogen-like effects. A few drops under the tongue relax uterine muscles and induce abortion.
Nicknamed bugbane, bugwort, black baneberry, black snakeroot and rheumatism weed, this herb is also lethal. Its analgesic salicylates cause everything from vomiting and tinnitus to hyperthermia and organ failure. Wild harvested, black cohosh is so popular it is considered “at-risk” across the United States and endangered in Illinois and Massachusetts. Though an age-old remedy for dangerous ailments and treatments, now the endangered plant itself needs protection.

Castor bean (*Ricinus communis*)
Rosary pea (*Abrus precatorius*)

In 2014, British woman Kuntal Patel laced her abusive mother’s Diet Coke with abrin, a lethal toxin that she bought on the dark web with Bitcoin. Abrin, from rosary pea, and a similar toxin ricin, from castor bean, are both considered bioterrorism agents. They assassinate by toxalbumin poisoning: multiorgan failure for which there is no antidote – at least none yet revealed to the public.
Both plants are native to the Eastern hemisphere: rosary pea from India and Asia, and castor bean from East Africa, India and the Mediterranean. Most rosary pea seeds are red and black like ladybugs and come from legume pods. The black and white ones are mistaken for castor bean seeds, which come from prickly pods. Both have been used for millennia in traditional medicine, from ancient Egyptian medical treatises in 1550 BCE up to the present day in parts of Africa, India and China.
Before scientists isolated the toxins in castor bean and rosary pea, women knew their uterine effects. Recommended by the 4th-century Greek midwife Aspasia and used in South Africa and by the Navajo, castor bean oil, roots and seeds (without the deadly hull) have prevented and ended pregnancies. Women in parts of Africa and India have used rosary pea roots and powdered seeds as an oral contraceptive and abortifacient. But today, ordering these toxic seeds might alarm the authorities.

Chaste tree (*Vitex agnus-castus*)

Chaste tree is an antidote to toxic masculinity. For thousands of years, priests and monks prevented erections by eating its leaves, flowers and berries, dubbing it the monk’s pepper. As chastisement for unrestrained teen hormones, Spartans flogged adolescent boys with chaste tree twigs. The shrub’s potency is in its volatile oils, which stimulate the pituitary gland to increase progesterone, thereby suppressing the male libido.
A member of the verbena family, chaste tree is called vitex, wild lavender, chasteberry, Abraham’s balm, cloister pepper and hemp tree. Originating in the Mediterranean and Asia, this herb is not only a libido inhibitor, but also stops sperm from implanting. By regulating estrogen, progesterone and prolactin, chaste tree inhibits conception and causes abortion. Women have long used the aromatic shrub to control fertility. In the ancient festival of Demeter, women lounged on chaste tree branches. How fitting that a symbol of female sexuality quells unrestrained virility.

Monkshood (*Aconitum*)

Rubbed on the vulva by riding a broomstick, aconite was a heart-racing ingredient in witches’ flying ointments. Women reclaimed the vulvic gesture from Roman men. They once rubbed aconite on the inner lips of their sleeping wives, who died within hours, dubbing it “women-killer.” Dosage is key. Women in 19th-century India escaped forced marriages by using aconite to murder their husbands. The women evaded prosecution by saying they used it as an aphrodisiac, which was common practice.
Also called monkshood for its hooded purple flowers, the genus Aconitum is a member of the buttercup family and includes over 200 species, all of which contain aconitine. The toxin causes arrhythmias, with symptoms mimicking those of a rabid dog. Death can occur in as little as two hours. From the Greek akoniton, for “dart” or “javelin,” aconite has been used for poisoning arrows and warfare. Natives of Nepal used Himalayan monkshood to stop the invading British army by poisoning their wells. In Jean Genet’s transgressive 1943 novel Our Lady of the Flowers, the queer Parisian boy Culafroy discovered that deadly aconite doubles as a hallucinogenic after sneaking into a moonlit garden to eat its leaves. By day he was a shy, outcast schoolboy, but using monkshood each night, the “Renaissance would take possession of him through the mouth.” Culafroy would escape into opulence. The dose determines if one meets death or takes flight.

Mugwort (*Artemisia vulgaris*)

In 21st-century America, drinking mugwort tea to terminate a pregnancy is grounds for jail time. Seven states have outlawed self-managed abortion, and 40 laws nationwide could criminalize it. In 2004, a South Carolinian migrant mother of three was sentenced to

jail for taking an abortifacient. Even an herbal abortion using mugwort – one of an estimated 525 abortifacient plants worldwide – could be a punishable crime. But the herb grows along roadsides and wastelands. Considered invasive, it spreads via rhizomes.

Mugwort, sometimes an umbrella term for similar Artemisia species, is native to Europe, Asia and North Africa. The pointed, sage-scented leaves contain eucalyptol, which targets umbilical cells and causes the uterine lining to shed. Ancient Greek, Anglo-Saxon and Indian medicine have used it for reproductive health. For over 10,000 years, the Chumash have used California mugwort, what they call molush, to promote menstruation and regulate hormonal flux in menopause. Mugwort is considered safer than traditional hormone replacement therapy. This bitter herb is popular in cooking (especially mugwort soup), though it contains thujone, a lethal psychoactive convulsant. Inhaling what Russians call zabytko, meaning "forgetfulness," induces lucid dreaming. Placing the stalks under a pillow while sleeping intoxicates the mind and memory. The herb also heals the body. In Chinese medicine, moxibustion – mugwort heat therapy – treats colds, inflammation and spasms. Still burned as incense in pagan rituals, mugwort was invoked in the 10th-century Anglo-Saxon Nine Herbs Charm: "Remember, Mugwort, what you revealed, / what you established at the mighty proclamation." Spreading head to toe and body to mind, mugwort's powers are rhizomatic, too.

Rue (*Ruta graveolens*)

On their wedding day, Lithuanian brides receive a pot of rue from their mothers because of the herb's contraceptive properties. European apothecaries once sold rue oil to "bringeth down the menses." After colonists brought the herb to America, enslaved women used it. Their refusal to bear children hindered the economy of human capital, which depended on forced procreation. The name rue – from the Greek reuo, meaning "to set free" – suggests the plant's power. Fern-like with yellow flowers, rue originates in the Balkan Peninsula. In gardens, the plant's bitter scent deters unwanted insects and animals, though the shrub is more commonly found along roadsides and fields. Rutin is the glycoside responsible for its aroma and uterine effects. Rue can also be lethal – it's all in the intention. As Ophelia proclaims, "There's rue for you, and here's some for me… O' you must wear your rue with a difference."
This herb of grace – or witchbane, herbygrass and mother of herbs – was a poison antidote and ingredient in Four Thieves Vinegar, which criminals used to stave off the black death while stealing from the sick. The European basilisk, the giant mythological serpent whose breath alone wilted plants and cracked stones, had no effect on rue – perhaps a hint at rue's effect on men. It immobilizes sperm and decreases libido. A contraceptive for all genders – freeing, but toxic to unrestrained masculinity.

Tansy (*Tanacetum vulgare*)

From the Greek word athanasia meaning immortality, tansy was one of the aromatic herbs gathered for use in Our Lady's Bedstraw [see cleavers], the medieval site of childbirth and postpartum confinement. The midwife was aware of the plant's powers concerning female reproduction. Tansy could stop heavy bleeding and drive out the afterbirth. Used to restore menstrual flow, it was also known for its ability to induce abortion. In later years, enslaved African women of the Antebellum South were familiar with tansy as a menstrual pain reliever.
Toxic to internal parasites, tansy tea has been prescribed for centuries to kill and expel worms. The plant's volatile oil is high in thujone, a substance found in absinthe as well as mugwort [see mugwort]. Used to treat jaundice, tansy was called "yellow medicine" by the northern Cheyenne of Montana. In the wilds of the American continent, white settler colonialists wrapped corpses in tansy to retard decay. In the 19th century the plant became so common as a funeral wreath that people began to shun its flowers because of the associations with death. It's a powerful insecticide though, and the leaves were used to ward off flies, ants and fleas from uncooked meat, keeping it fresh longer. Recent studies have found tansy's oils to be strong tick and mosquito repellants. Tansy has also been called bitter buttons, golden buttons, and cow bitter. Whatever you call it, it can be deadly. Half an ounce of its oil will kill in a couple hours.

Yarrow (*Achillea millefolium*)

Found in the "flower burial" at Shanidar Cave, a Neanderthal site in Kurdistan, (60,000 to 35,000 BCE), aromatic yarrow with its gentle essence of anise and licorice has long been a beneficial friend to hominids. At Shanidar, the plants at the site – from yarrow to ragwort and hollyhock– have long been known to have medicinal uses, suggesting that one of those buried was a medicine man, a doctor. If true, herbal plant medicine is older than homo sapiens. Today yarrow's tiny white or pink flowers and feathery leaves are found around the world, testimony to the plant's importance and reverence by many cultures. Reputedly, simply holding the energetic achillea millefolium grants psychic protection. Pressing it to the forehead cleanses the third eye and brings chakras into balance. Hebridean druids rubbed their eyes with a leaf of yarrow for second sight, clairvoyance. In the fen country of East Anglia, devil's nettle, as it's called, repelled evil spells. Sprinkling it at the door blocked the entrance of any witches. Dried heads and stalks are still integral to the Chinese divination ritual, I Ching, and in the American Southwest, Zuni peoples chewed blossoms and roots before fire-walking or fire-eating. The Ojibwe smoked its florets for ritual and ceremonial purposes. Considered "Life Medicine" by the Navajo, it was chewed for toothaches and made into infusions for earaches. For the Miwok and Pawnee it also served as a powerful painkiller.
Yarrow's effects on blood are evidenced even in its name– achillea, for Achilles who carried it to Troy to treat his troops. Soldiers have used it up through the First World War to stop blood loss, and it's also known as woundwort or staunchweed. Aided by anti-inflammatory and antiseptic oils, astringent tannins, resins, and silica, yarrow boosts tissue repair. Acting dually, it staunches the loss of blood and encourages blood flow to promote healing. The plant's sterols act as hormones to help harmonize the menstrual cycles whether the flow be scanty or excessive. Cows grazing in meadows and pastures where yarrow abounds are more docile. Though the plant flourishes in such idyllic landscapes, it thrives in wasteland locations where healing and balance are in desperate need.