

Elizabeth M. Williamson, **Potter's Herbal Cyclopaedia**

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Reviewed by Dr Andrea Pieroni, Lecturer in Pharmacognosy at the School of Pharmacy, University of Bradford, UK

The *Potter's Herbal Cyclopaedia* has represented an authority in the field of herbal drugs/phytotherapy/pharmacognosy since its first edition (*Potter's Cyclopaedia of Botanical Drugs and Preparations*), which was written by Richard Cranfield Wren, and published in 1907. This ninth edition of the Cyclopaedia has been edited by Dr Liz Williamson from the School of Pharmacy "at the square" in Central London.

After 15 years from the previous edition (edited in 1988 by Williamson and Evans), Liz took the monumental and impressive task to revise monographs of more than 600 botanical taxa of herbal/pharmaceutical interest and to include a further 70 plants.

The monographs are ordered alphabetically by the English name of the plant, and contain information about:

- synonyms of the Latin/scientific name of the taxon;
- habitat and origin of the plant;
- botanical description;
- part(s) used;
- constituents;
- medicinal use(s);
- preparations and doses;
- specific bibliographic references, mainly concerning the most recent pharmacological and clinical data.

In the case of medicinal plants of major interest, their regulatory status in the UK has been also included.

The standard works considered by the author as authoritative primary sources of information for the monographs include the all the most important and relevant pharmacognostic references, as the new "*Herbal Medicines*" (by Barnes, Anderson and Phillipson), the "*Principles and Practice of*

Phytotherapy" (by Mills and Bone), the "*Trease and Evans Pharmacognosy Textbook*" (by Evans), the "*Mayor Herbs in Ayurveda*" (by Williamson); the ultimate German authorities of this field (German literature in pharmacognosy and philosophy is a must!): "*Teedrogen*" of Wichtl, "*Herbal Remedies on CD-ROM*" (by Brendler, Gruenwald and Jaenecke), "*Rational Phytotherapy*" (by Schultz, Hansel and Tyler), "*Chinese Drugs of Plant Origin*" (by Tang and Eisenberg), as well as the *Martindale*, the *Merck Index*, and the *British Herbal Pharmacopoeia*.

For its incredible amount of information and broad spectrum of herbal drugs covered, the book has worldwide only one comparable work: the "*Lexikon der Arzneipflanzen und Drogen*", in two volumes, edited in 2000 by Hiller and Melzig in Berlin. Nevertheless, Williamson's book is much more clearly structured, and more exhaustive, and it does not go too far in reporting less useful phytochemical details/formulas of constituents.

As the author explains in the preface, scientific data sustaining each brief report about the medicinal use of each taxon are of variable quality, and it will be often necessary to look at the original cited papers, to validate or repudiate claims made.

It is remarkable that for the first time very important herbal drugs of the Ayurvedic medical system and of the TCM have been included in the Cyclopaedia: as an example I will quote the wonderful monographs of turmeric (*Curcuma longa*) and rehmannia (*Rehmannia glutinosa*), where the very last pharmacological findings have been all perfectly included.

As a pharmacognosist/ethnobotanist very much interested in the "cultural history of plants", the only very minor missing part I would have maybe appreciated to find in each monograph was a brief summary of the traditional uses of the plant and its "cultural" background, and maybe an illustration for *each* reported taxon. Could that maybe be a further challenge in the next edition of the Cyclopaedia?

But there is no doubt that the Williamson's Cyclopaedia remains a small jewel (and at £19.99 is excellent value).

The book represents a unique reference for all the pharmacognosists, pharmacists, physicians, herbalists, and ethnobotanists interested in herbal sciences and in modern evidence-based phytotherapy.