

Cleopatra knew beauty benefits of aloe vera.(Features)

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ONE of the most popular natural plan remedies, aloe vera, is renowned for its soothing qualities.

There are more than 300 varieties of this cactus-like plant and though aloe vera is native to the hot, dry climates of Africa, some types will grow quite happily on your window sill at home.

The two parts of the aloe vera plant used in healing are the juice, which is extracted from the base of the leaf and usually taken taken internally (this can be dried to a powder), and the gel, which comes from inside the leaves and is used externally.

Aloe vera is a vital ingredient in many products from shampoos and body lotions to dietary supplements.

Here's why:

ANCIENT CURE

DRAWINGS of aloe vera found on the walls of ancient Egyptian temples show the plant was used externally in the treatment of burns, ulcers and skin diseases.

And its healing powers did not go unnoticed by Alexander the Great, who conquered an island off Somalia for the sole purpose of harvesting the plant to help his injured soldiers.

The use of aloe vera in skincare was regarded so highly by native Americans that they referred to it as 'the wand of heaven'. The plant is also thought to have been used by Cleopatra as part of her beauty treatments.

SKIN REVITALISER

ALTHOUGH aloe vera gel is ideal for all skin types, it is particularly beneficial for mature dryness, as it encourages the skin to retain moisture.

The plant is also rich in enzymes that help regenerate skin cells and tighten up facial tissues.

Sufferers of skin conditions such as eczema and rosacea can also benefit from aloe vera.

Susan Curtis, the training director of Neal's Yard remedies, explains: "Aloe vera's proven anti-inflammatory properties are the main reason it's so effective in treating skin problems .

"And, because it helps to speed up cell regeneration, it can heal the skin and reduce the risk of scarring."

INTERNAL HEALER

ASIDE from its skin-soothing properties, aloe vera has a range of other therapeutic uses.

Packed with nutrients such as amino acids, which help produce muscle tissue, the plant is also a rich source of enzymes that aid digestion, and so is commonly used for treating disorders such as irritable bowel syndrome.

Scientists believe a polysaccharide (a complex carbohydrate) in aloe vera increases the activity of the immune cells, making it a powerful tonic to strengthen the immune system.

So for beautiful, young-looking skin and a healthy body, keep a supply of aloe vera in your bathroom cabinet.