

CONSUMER EDUCATION Series

ALOE VERA

By TIMOTHY R. FOX
Assistant Editor

Revered, Mysterious Healer

The history of aloe vera is practically as old as human civilization, with references to the "healing plant" going as far back as Biblical days, when aloe was included in the list of herbs and plants that grew in King Solomon's gardens. Aloe's reputation as a medicinal plant with a thousand uses followed it to other lands around the globe—anywhere one of the 275 species of Aloe grew.

Modern manufacturers of aloe products still receive numerous reports and testimonials from consumers who said the plant healed their varied illnesses, such as arthritic joints and hemorrhoids, as well as their cuts and burns.

However, the mainstream medical field still turns a deaf ear to the healing benefits of aloe vera, relegating the plant to the shadowland of "folk remedies." Aloe will likely remain in this category until its active healing ingredients can be isolated, analyzed and identified. This knowledge has so far proven too elusive.

Like most botanical items, a lack of financial incentive discourages any single company from investing the necessary millions of dollars in research.

Much of the current work on the aloe plant has been undertaken by university researchers acting on limited budgets or in cooperation with aloe manufacturers. While they have made some progress, their findings are still inconclusive.

For many years the only chemical in aloe vera that could be identified



Photos Courtesy of Vera Products, Inc.

and analyzed was aloin. "Therefore, aloin became the only part of the aloe vera plant that was accepted for medical use by the FDA," according to Diane Gage, author of *Aloe Vera* (1988, Healing Arts Press).

In the last two decades a stabilization process for aloe vera gel—the fluid found inside the soft, pulpy leaves—enables researchers to perform more in-depth research into the gel and its healing attributes.

Some speculation exists that the plant's natural healing powers may have developed from a botanical struggle to survive in hot, dry climates. The plant's lifeblood is its gel, which is held within the soft, thick leaves.

The clear aloe gel is rich in nutrition and moisture, composed of some 96 percent water. This high water content is what may be

responsible for aloe's healing and moisturizing powers, Gage wrote. "When aloe vera is used on human tissue, the water is carried to the injured area without closing off the air necessary to repair tissue."

Still A Mystery

"Exactly how aloe gel works externally in healing wounds or maintaining healthy skin has not yet been proven," Gage pointed out. Two schools of thought exist on this subject, though.

One group of researchers believes that aloe vera somehow increases cell regeneration at a very rapid rate, while the other group believes that the extract contains enzymes that effect chemical changes which in turn intensify healing.

"The burgeoning of the aloe market has naturally caught the attention of the FDA, and has caused a greater need for establishment of standards in the industry," Gage wrote. "The FDA is concerned about exaggerated and unsubstantiated claims that lead consumers to believe aloe vera products can cure a variety of conditions when there is as yet no scientific evidence to support these claims."

Currently the International Aloe Science Council (IASC) is trying to unify the aloe industry under a set of self-regulating standards. The Austin, TX-based organization was formed in 1981, and has on its roster 27 American aloe corporations and 17 international firms.

In 1989 the group established a standard for aloe as a raw material,