The University of Washington Medicinal Herb Garden is located on the UW’s Seattle campus—along Stevens Way, between Benson Hall to the west and Rainier Vista to the east. Operated by the Biology Department, the two-and-a-half-acre garden contains approximately 1000 plant species from around the world, laid out in a network of formal beds and wooded borders. Not all of the plants are medicinal: The garden also features plants that are grown for food, fiber, dye and ceremonial purposes. (In recent years, for example, I’ve been growing a bed of South American food plants, including oca, yacon, jaborosa, tarwi, anyu and, most recently, tamarillo.) Along with being useful, many of the plants have wonderful ornamental characteristics.

Below is a small sampling of some of my favorite plants growing in the Herb Garden. Stop by to take a look. The garden is free and open to the public 365 days of the year!

Pomegranate (*Punica granatum*)—native to the southern parts of central Eurasia, from Iran to northern India—does well in Seattle. It’s a hardy, deciduous shrub or small tree that produces beautiful red flowers in summer, followed by fruits that persist through fall and winter, dangling from the branches like Christmas ornaments. I have several specimens growing in the garden’s borders. Visitors are generally surprised that we can grow pomegranate in Seattle, but the plant is hardy to about 10 degrees F and likes a dry growing season, such as ours. That said, our lack of intense summer.

**ABOVE:** Chinese peony (*Paeonia lactiflora*) blooming in the UW Medicinal Herb Garden in May.
heat keeps pomegranate from producing the sort of full-size, mature fruits you see at the produce stand. In traditional Chinese medicine and Ayurveda, the dried fruit rind of the pomegranate is used to treat an array of disorders, including diarrhea and dysentery.

Flannel bush (Fremontodendron californicum) is an evergreen shrub native to northwestern Mexico, Arizona and central to southern California. A versatile plant, it grows from the lowlands up to altitudes of 7000 feet in the mountains. I’ve planted it throughout the garden borders, where it has done well. A dry, rocky, south-facing slope would be an ideal home for it, but any spot I’ve tried with sun and good drainage in the Herb Garden has worked. Flannel bush gets its name from the fuzzy texture of the fibers on the plant’s leaves and bark. In spring it produces masses of large, showy, long-lasting, rich yellow flowers. These are followed by bristly, conical seed capsules, which are often barren on Herb Garden specimens, but sometimes produce a seed or two. Native Americans used the plant’s inner bark sap as a remedy for gastrointestinal upset; they also used the wood to make furniture and more.

A small- to medium-sized evergreen shrub, snowbush or mountain whitethorn (Ceanothus cordulatus) is native to the mountains of Oregon, Nevada, California and Baja California. It is growing in our xeriscape bed, close to a chaste tree (Vitex agnus-castus). In this bed, where it receives no supplemental summer water, it stays under five feet tall, much as it would in the thin, dry soils of its home territory. But in both our border areas, which receive regular watering and have deeper, richer soils, the snowbush has grown to at least 12 feet tall and just as wide. The smooth, silvery-white bark; large clusters
of fragrant white flowers in late spring and early summer; and sprawling habit help set snowbush apart from the usual nursery offerings of *Ceanothus*. I started ours from seed collected in the wild by the staff of the Santa Barbara Botanic Garden. Native Americans used the leaves of this and other *Ceanothus* species to make herbal tea.

The brilliant orange flowers of butterfly weed (*Asclepias tuberosa*)—also known as pleurisy root—attract butterflies and hummingbirds from midsummer to early fall. Best of all, this herbaceous perennial from eastern North America is drought tolerant, looking healthiest in our xeriscape bed. It does well enough in an irrigated bed in section C of the garden (there are seven sections altogether), but the plant seems to last longer in our region when grown in loose, well-drained soil in full sun. The xeriscape bed is mostly pumice mounded higher than the surrounding ground, and this—in my experience at the Medicinal Herb Garden—seems to be a good combination for growing plants like butterfly weed that aren’t well adapted to Seattle’s wet winters. Native Americans used the roots, flowers, seed pods and young shoots of butterfly weed for food; it was also used to treat ailments such as pleurisy, dysentery and rheumatism.

Always in search of low-maintenance plants to grow in the garden, I’ve been pleasantly surprised by narrow-leaved mule’s ears (*Wyethia angustifolia*), a perennial herb native from southwestern Washington through California. It is well-adapted to our area and has been doing fine in both a dry border area and an irrigated bed in the Herb Garden. It tends to spread and sprawl, so a wild, sunny border/meadow area would be ideal. The dense stands of bright-yellow, sunflower-like blossoms in late spring and early summer make an eye-catching display. The seeds and young leaves are edible for humans and good forage for birds and other small animals. The roots and leaves have also been used medicinally to treat sore throat, hay fever and hemorrhoids.

Sacred datura (*Datura inoxia*), hardy to USDA Zone 9, is functionally an annual in the Medicinal Herb Garden; I start it from seed in the greenhouse every spring. But across campus, at the well-drained edge of a stone wall, in a sheltered, sunny spot beneath the cover of a red cedar (*Thuja plicata*)—where it stays dry all

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**A Short History of the Herb Garden**

The University of Washington’s Medicinal Herb Garden was established by the Pharmacy Department for teaching purposes in 1911. In 1979, when many budgets were being cut, Pharmacy stopped funding staff positions for the garden. The Botany Department (now part of the Biology Department) stepped in and assumed control of the garden, though with no additional funding for support staff. For two decades, an all-volunteer, nonprofit group, Friends of the Medicinal Herb Garden, valiantly helped to keep the garden from succumbing to neglect. Since 2000, there has been one full-time staff person curating the garden. At two-and-a-half acres, the garden is one of the largest of its kind in the country. For more information, visit www.biology.washington.edu/mhg.
winter—it has grown as a perennial for many years. Microclimates are so important to tender perennials, especially plants from dry regions that are slightly out of their optimal climate zones here (ask my olive trees!). The large, fragrant white flowers of sacred datura appear from summer to fall and are pollinated by night-flying sphinx moths. The fruits are spiky and the size of golf balls, with flat brown seeds that drop directly beneath when the fruits dehisce. Ants, attracted to the nutritious elaisomes (fleshy structures, rich in protein and lipids) on the seeds, help to disperse them away from the parent plant. In very small doses, the seeds, leaves and roots are used by shamans and other traditional healers in Central and South America (where the plant is native) for a variety of healing purposes, but all parts of sacred datura are highly toxic.

Sichuan pepper or huan jiao (*Zanthoxylum simulans*) from China and Taiwan has won a rightful place in the Herb Garden as an excellent border plant that stays under 15 feet tall. I’ve planted it near shortcut paths that have needed decommissioning, and it does a good job of blocking foot traffic. It is an imposingly thorny, deciduous shrub with strongly aromatic foliage. In spring, tiny yellow flowers are borne on slender cymes and develop into green fruit about the size of a small pea. The fruits turn red as they ripen, and finally brown before splitting open and exposing the shiny black seeds within. The seed husks—which are used in Chinese cooking and are one of the ingredients in five-spice powder—contains hydroxy-alpha-sanshool, the compound that is believed to cause the tingling sensation we feel when we chew on them. The husks, seeds, bark and leaves are all used in traditional Chinese medicine for a variety of health conditions. The *Zanthoxylum* genus, part of the rue family, is widespread and includes both Old and New World plants. The rue family includes citrus trees, and there is a hint of citrus in the fragrant foliage and fruit of the many *Zanthoxylum* species.

The hedge of tea shrubs (*Camellia sinensis*) around section A in the Herb Garden often goes unnoticed. Tea flowers in late autumn and winter, when the garden sees fewer visitors and the plant is just one of many broad-leaved evergreen shrubs that thrive (yes, thrive) in the Pacific Northwest. When most people think of tea, they probably envision misty tropical highlands with lightly clothed people in conical straw hats methodically picking the tender new leaves. Luckily, many varieties of tea do well in Seattle. Even when we get our occasional spell of winter weather that gets below 20°F, when I have to cover my olive trees, manuka and lemon verbena, the tea hedge suffers no apparent damage. It produces the tender new growth used to make tea from late spring to early summer. I’ve processed both green and black tea from Medicinal Herb Garden plants, and I’d say the green tea has generally been of higher quality, often with a distinctive floral taste combined with a hint of green papaya. I’m still working on my technique. Tea plants are getting easier to find at nurseries and they should be more widely planted in Seattle. As a hedge or a specimen, they make excellent conversation pieces and dependable, trouble-free shrubs.

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