

Reconnecting the UK with its Historically Used Plants, Rooted in History, Health and Science: A proposal for including our heritage of plant use knowledge within the Natural History GCSE

Background

Including the historical use of plants within the Natural History GCSE is fundamentally about education and cultural understanding, while also aligning with wider global trends in wellbeing research, preventive health and environmental awareness.

Historically used plants sit naturally at the intersection of health, science, conservation and culture. Teaching about them within a Natural History GCSE would provide students with a richer understanding of the living world, while strengthening ecological literacy and practical wellbeing knowledge. It can open up future careers for young people – for example in ecology, botany, conservation, nutrition, pharmacology, biomedicine or medicine, as well as craft, art, literature and industry – as well as providing practical tools for lifelong wellbeing and connection with the natural world.

Parents also value the mental health benefits, health perspectives, outdoor learning opportunities, life skills, environmental awareness and inspiring scientific thought that this subject encourages. In a recent survey of 120 respondents, 98 percent supported the inclusion of historical plants uses within the Natural History GCSE.

Respondents most strongly associated this topic with:

- wellbeing and mental health (77%)
- self-care and resilience (76%)
- environmental awareness, conservation and sustainability (72%)
- cultural, heritage and scientific literacy (69%)

- children's health (47%)

Key recommendations for a Natural History GCSE

To support this opportunity, we propose the Natural History GCSE include:

- Basic knowledge of the historical use medicinal plants found within UK ecosystems
- Understanding of these species role in ecology and biodiversity connection
- Introduction to nature's plant compounds and their use in both plants and people
- Opportunities for practical learning through cultivation and observation
- Links between plant knowledge, wellbeing and environmental stewardship

Indicative GCSE content areas (informed by the National Institute of Medical Herbalists Junior Herbalist Club framework)

Core themes may include:

- Historical and cross-cultural historical plant use
- Medicinal plant identification, safety and taxonomy
- Plant habitats, ecology and seasonal cycles
- Sustainable growing and ethical harvesting
- Reflection on wellbeing and nature connection

Potential extended topics:

- Historically used plants as part of preventive nutrition

- Introduction to phytochemistry and human physiology
- Simple preparations and first aid awareness