

# Signed, sealed, DELIVERED (by nature)

The doctrine of signatures is an ancient philosophy that believes everything we need for healing we can find in nature, MIRANDA LUBY writes.

Whether by some divine power or natural evolution, it's clear that nothing in nature happens by accident. There are reasons for the shape of a bird's beak, the colour of a certain flower or the sound of an animal's call. It's no coincidence that our earth and everything in it fits together like a perfect jigsaw in a million-piece puzzle.

And in ancient times, long before science could be used to decipher the ways humans could use natural foods, plants and herbs as medicine, it seems that nature was already pointing us in the right direction.

The doctrine of signatures is based on the belief that various features of plants, such as shape, colour, smell, taste and even growing locations, are directly linked to that plant's therapeutic effect of the human body.

It was believed that the healing properties of any fruit, vegetable or herb is revealed by its characteristics or 'signature', so healers would determine which food or plant would treat a specific disease by looking to the plants themselves for clues to how they should be used.

Originally this belief stemmed from a religious belief that God marked

his creations with a clear purpose and therefore their form tells of its uses. It was made popular in modern times by a Swiss physician, alchemist and philosopher named Paracelsus, who scholars consider to be the father of modern chemistry.

So, how exactly does it work? It's pretty simple, really.

Walnuts look like the brain and therefore help with brain function, celery resembles bones and so eating it assists with bone strength, and kidney beans – you guessed it – support your kidney function.

But it's not only what a fruit, vegetable or plant looks like that should guide us, the doctrine says. Colour, texture and odour help too.

It was believed that yellow foods would help with disorders of the liver, gall bladder and spleen while reddish foods can be blood purifiers. Plants with sharp thorns and prickles could be used to soothe acute pain. And diseases that produce foul body odours? Use sweet smelling plants and foods.

Even habitat can play a part. For example, plants growing in wet lowlands and swamps were said to be associated with diseases of wetness such as rheumatic disorders, feverish colds and coughs.

To go one step further, it was even thought that plants know to grow where they are most needed. Dock leaves were used to treat the sting from a nettle plant, and these two plants were often found growing close together.

And the doctrine of dignatures can be used not only to identify which foods help and how, but in a time when knowledge of medicinal plants was passed on by word of mouth, it proved a practical way of remembering a plant's properties.

It's a beautiful notion, that nature could help guide us in the best ways to use it without the need for scientific testing. But how does this ancient method stack up against the science of today? Actually, surprisingly well.

Research on certain herbs and foods show that, whether by coincidence or design, the doctrine may actually ring true.

Today, science can guide us on the beneficial applications for plants so while it would no longer be practical or safe to prescribe herbs based on their physical features alone, they still may give us clues to identifying their full spectrum of uses.

No matter what, it's clear that nature has a lot to teach us.

**Cranium**  
Skullcap: Skullcap flowers resemble small skulls and are believed to be beneficial in treating brain and nervous system disorders such as seizures and anxiety.

**Brain**  
Walnuts: These nuts resemble the brain and we now know they help develop brain function and are a good source of vitamin E, which protects against Alzheimer's and other cognitive brain disorders.

**Eyes**  
Carrots: The cross section of a carrot looks like the human eye: the pupil, iris and radiating lines. And science now shows that carrots, a good source of carotenoids, greatly enhance blood flow to the eyes and aid in the general function of the eyes.

**Ear**  
Mushrooms: When sliced in half, mushrooms resemble the human ear. Their vitamin D content protects tiny sound-transmitting bones in the inner ear, therefore improving hearing.

**Heart**  
Tomatoes: Has four distinct areas resembling the four chambers of the human heart. Tomatoes contain lycopene, a substance that research shows may help reduce the risk of heart disease, although more study is needed.

**Lungs**  
Grapes: The structure of grapes is similar to bronchioli and alveoli in the lungs. They have been shown to reduce risk of lung cancer and emphysema. Their seeds also contain a chemical called proanthocyanidin, which appears to reduce the severity of asthma triggered by allergy.

**Stomach**  
Ginger: Shaped like the stomach and has been used in traditional Chinese medicine for more than 2,000 years to promote digestion and cure nausea. It is also a popular remedy for motion sickness.

**Womb**  
Avocados: Resemble the womb and target the health and function of reproductive organs. They help balance hormones, shed unwanted baby weight and deter cervical cancers. They also take exactly nine months to grow from blossom to ripened fruit.

**Pancreas**  
Sweet Potatoes: Shaped like the human pancreas, and similarly, are known to help stabilise and maintain blood sugar levels.

**Kidneys**  
Kidney beans: Shaped like kidneys and contain soluble and insoluble fibre, which helps to stabilise blood sugar and minimise risk of diabetes. They are also low in fat, which keeps blood pressure low, reducing risk of kidney strain.

**Testicles**  
Figs: Figs are full of seeds and hang in twos when they grow, much like male testes. They are a great source of folate, which is vital for producing DNA and RNA – molecules that encode genetic information within sperm cells.

**Bones (feet in particular)**  
Celery: This green vegetable looks just like bones, and with 23 per cent sodium, has the same genetic DNA. If you lack sodium, the body pulls it from the bones, making them weak. Foods such as celery counteract this.

**Limbs**  
Horsetail: Resembles human limbs and nerve fibres, and is known for its bone- and tissue-strengthening benefits, likely due to its high silica content.

**Age**  
Ginseng: Slow-growing herbs such as ginseng are believed to promote longevity and reduce age-related dementia.

**Skin**  
Goldenrod: These yellow flowers were used by native Americans to treat jaundice.

**Blood**  
Beetroot: Beetroot's deep red color resembles human blood. Research shows its juice may lower blood pressure and decrease the risk of heart disease.