

A Century of Herbal Innovation: Indiana Botanic Gardens Celebrates 100 Years

By Deborah S. Ramstorf

The year was 1910. The first yellow cab rolled onto the street, a quart of milk cost only 8 cents, and the first live musical radio performance hit the airwaves. This was also the year that Joseph E. Meyer established Indiana Herb Gardens, now known as Indiana Botanic Gardens, Inc, in a small shed behind his home.

From Tragedy to Triumph

The seed that would later flower into the Indiana Botanic Gardens was planted early in Joseph's life. Born in Kenosha, Wisconsin, on September 5, 1878, Joseph used to accompany his father, a photographer, on excursions into the country. While his father took pictures, Joseph wandered the forests and fields, fascinated by the enormous variety of grasses, plants, trees, and flowers.

After a series of family tragedies, including the death of his father, Joseph landed in an orphanage. There he passed lonely hours reading and re-reading a single medical book, especially intrigued by the section on herbal remedies. He was surprised to learn that those plants that many people considered to be worthless weeds had been used throughout all of time for the treatment of various diseases. He soon dreamed of starting an herbal company. But it wasn't until decades later, after starting a family and spending years in the printing business, that the dream was able to come to fruition. Funding for the company was obtained through the sale of his first literary effort, *The Sealed Book*, an exposé on popular gambling schemes.

In time Joseph purchased land along the Little Calumet River in Hammond, Indiana. It was an herbalist's dream with a profusion of medicinal plants, native flowers, and virgin forests. It also appeared to have been an ancient Native American burial site, as several relics were found. This fact, coupled with Joseph's admiration of Native American natural remedies, directly influenced the company's early logos and artwork.



Joseph E. Meyer, Founder Indiana Botanic Gardens, 1878-1950. Image ©2009 Indiana Botanic Gardens

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The Early Herb Market

Until the early 20th century, major drug companies (companies that would eventually evolve into some of today's large pharmaceutical companies)

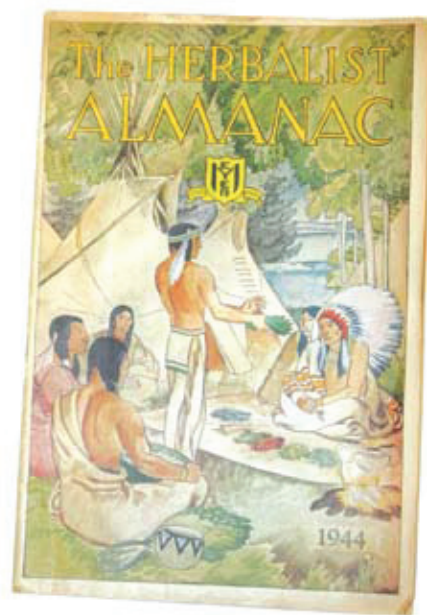
supplied roots, bark, flowers, or leaves of dried plants and trees, in cut or powdered forms, to be dispensed by doctors and pharmacists. After that point, many medicines from nature, once considered "official," began to be supplanted by drugs made with synthetic chemicals that could be produced under laboratory conditions and for increasingly specific uses and controlled dosages. Traditional botanical medicines, often more general in effect and taking longer to act, were steadily falling into disuse.

According to Tim Cleland, great-grandson of Joseph Meyer and current president of Indiana Botanic Gardens, from its very beginning the company carried over 400 different herbs—from alder (*Alnus serrulata*, Betulaceae) to yohimbe (*Pausinystalia johimbe*, Rubiaceae)—that were available in 25-cent boxes or sold in bulk. The herbs were listed according to their therapeutic properties under various general headings: "digestants, intestines, vermifuges, liver, tonics," etc. Recipes were included for making shampoos, lotions, pomades, liniments, creams, ointments and salves. Any requested mixtures could be provided to resellers for orders "of not less than 10 pounds of any kind desired."

At first, the business barely made living expenses. Meyer's 7 sons and 1 daughter helped gather herbs, pack boxes, fill orders, feed the printing press, and fold circulars. Many evenings the family put catalogs together with needle and thread. With the publication of the over 400-page book *The Herbalist and Herb Doctor* in 1918, the business expanded.

The First-Ever Herbalist and Almanac

The Herbalist and Herb Doctor, which is now in its 10th reprinting, details plants from *Aloe vera* (Liliaceae) to zedoary (*Curcuma zedoaria*, Zingiberaceae), explaining their common names, botanical descriptions, medicinal



Cover of *The Herbalist Almanac* first printed in 1925. Image ©2009 Indiana Botanic Gardens

Originally published in 1918, *The Herbalist* is now in its tenth reprinting. Image ©2009 Indiana Botanic Gardens

nal parts, and uses and doses. It contains illustrations and color plates for many of the described plants. This popular herb book is largely based on Dr. O. Phelps Brown's *The Complete Herbalist; or, the People Their Own Physicians*, published by the author in Jersey City, New Jersey, in 1865 (with editions continuing to at least 1907).

In 1925 Indiana Botanic Gardens began producing an annual publication, *The Herbalist Almanac*, a condensed and updated version of *The Herbalist and Herb Doctor*, which also served as the first-ever product catalog. By this time, retail customers, more than agents, had become the heart of the business and the leading force behind the company's growth. In an age where medical expertise was not always readily available or affordable, *The Herbalist Almanac* offered the public valuable medical information on most of the common ailments of the day—including malaria, tape worms, rheumatism and more—along with herb descriptions, remedies, recipes, and customer testimonials.

Over the next few years, Joseph traveled to all parts of Europe and North America gathering samples and information on many types of medicinal plants, many from Native Americans. The *Herbalist Almanac* gained in popularity and mail poured in from all over the world, including from universities, libraries, botanists, and people from all walks of life, both contributing to and seeking information. Today Indiana Botanic Gardens, Inc. is still a source of information on herbal matters for thousands of people.



A Tradition of Loyal Customers

In 1910 self-treatment with herbs was commonly practiced and often necessary due to economic conditions and the scarcity of professional medical help. Indiana Botanic Gardens' early customers included a variety of ethnic minorities, including newly-arrived European and South American immigrants as well as African Americans, Amish, rural inhabitants who did not have easy access to medical doctors or clinics, and those who sought traditional ways of self-medication used by earlier generations. Today, some of the company's current customer base includes the sons and grandsons, daughters and granddaughters of past customers. This is a significant reason why Indiana Botanic Gardens has reached the 100-year milestone.

The Legacy Continues

Very few businesses reach their 100-year anniversary. When asked about their key to success, Tim Cleland says, "Our family practices what we preach—we believe in a natural approach to health. We think this is the reason we have so many family members living actively and enjoying life well into their 80s and 90s."

The family's commitment to a natural lifestyle is one they share with the public as well. The Joseph E. Meyer Memorial Pavilion, located in the Taltree Arboretum & Gardens on the southern shores of Lake Michigan, was a gift from the Florence Melton family. Florence Melton was the sole daughter of Joseph E. Meyer. Dedicated in 2002, the Pavilion was the first building erected in Taltree. Its serene lakeside setting surrounded by native trees, plants, and herbs, is a popular site for summertime concerts, classroom field trips, seminars, retreats, weddings, and other events. The arboretum itself is a 300-acre preservation of wood plant collections, gardens, wetlands, woodlands, and prairies for education, research, and enjoyment.

While the herbal industry itself has changed in the past 100 years, some aspects of the business have not, nor does Tim Cleland expect them to change. He predicts, "Just like in 1910, we'll continue to focus developing state-of-the-art herbal remedies that improve the health and lives of those who seek a natural approach." HG

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Built in 1925 specifically for Indiana Botanic Gardens, this English-gabled structure known as the "Hammond building" was home to the company until 1990. Image ©2009 Indiana Botanic Gardens