

## Flower Essences – “Potentized” Plants or Powerful Placebos?

The practice of flower essence therapy for behavioral disturbances has gained grassroots support from a sizeable segment of lay practitioners and animal caregivers. Do-it-yourself books and pamphlets make it easy to figure out which essences animals should take. Whether they work or not, flower essences provide clients and lay practitioners with a sense of empowerment by providing “something to do” when their animal is experiencing distress.

That said, however, the folkloric reputation flower essences enjoy far outstrips its evidential support. Study after study indicates that flower essences act as powerful placebos and nothing more.<sup>1</sup>

Although the term “flower essence” sounds much like “essential oils”, the two approaches lay at opposite ends of the botanical spectrum. Whereas essential oils contain highly concentrated plant extracts, flower essences more closely resemble dilute homeopathic remedies than herbs. One would be hard-pressed to detect signature substances in a flower essence product. Brandy or other ingestible alcohols constitute up to half of the essence. Water makes up the rest. Invisible, immaterial, so-called “vibrations” of flowers supposedly infuse this water with the healing power claimed to be the essence of the essence. These subtle properties hearken back to homeopathy, and inspired the creator of flower essence therapy, Dr. Edward Bach, to formulate the first line of flower essences in the 1930’s.

Dr. Bach, of Bach Flower Essence fame, first manufactured the essences by soaking freshly picked flower petals in sunlight. He posited that the rays of the sun would release the flowers’ healing energy to the spring water in which they bathed. Further, he hypothesized that by ingesting essences designed to undo specific, negative, emotional patterns, patients would become well. Dr. Bach believed that all illness, both physical and psychological, begins in the mind, as “errors in the personality”.<sup>2</sup> The errors Bach considered pertained to seven dimensions: power, love, balance, intellectual knowledge, service, wisdom, and spiritual perfection.<sup>3</sup> Left unchecked, he reasoned, these errors would lead to disturbances in psyche and soma, causing the individual to make unwise choices as their personality strays from the inspirations of the higher self.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ernst E. “Flower remedies”: A systematic review of the clinical evidence. *Wien Klin Wochenschr.* 2002;114(23-24):963-966.

<sup>2</sup> Richardson-Boedler C. The Doctrine of Signatures: a historical, philosophical, scientific view (II). *British Homeopathic Journal.* 2000;89:26-28.

<sup>3</sup> Bach E. Some fundamental considerations of disease and cure. *Hom World.* 1930;64:295-299. Cited in: Richardson-Boedler C. The Doctrine of Signatures: a historical, philosophical, scientific view (II). *British Homeopathic Journal.* 2000;89:26-28.

<sup>4</sup> Richardson-Boedler C. The Doctrine of Signatures: a historical, philosophical, scientific view (II). *British Homeopathic Journal.* 2000;89:26-28.

Bach postulated that the subtle healing power of flower essences would imbue individuals with the desired vibrational impact that could restore harmony in a disturbed personality. He saw patients as generally falling into a set number of personality categories and emotional states. Selecting the proper essence therefore merely depended on identifying that individual's personality type or emotional disturbance.

According to Bach, flower essences could act as preventive medicine. In a public lecture given in 1936, Bach stated: "We all know the same illness may take us quite differently: one child gets measles, he may be irritable, whilst another may be quiet and drowsy or want to be left alone. If the disease has such varied effects, it is better to treat each person individually as well as the illness. What is important to impress upon you is that it is not the measles which gives the guide to the cure, but the mood...And, just as moods guide us to the treatment in illness, so also they may warn us ahead of a complain approaching and enable us to stop the attack."<sup>5</sup>

Thus, if the founding principles of Bach flower essences hold true for animals, flower essences given at the outset of an emotional disturbance should be capable of averting future sickness and heartache. While some animal healthcare providers do attempt to treat physical problems with essences, most rely on their suggested benefits for psychological upset and problem behaviors.

The following list illustrates the emotional states or individual types purportedly treated by flower essence remedies.<sup>6</sup> Practitioners interested in trying the remedies on themselves or their animals can purchase the remedies at most health food stores. For more complex states, flower essence therapists advise mixing up to seven essences in one bottle, and further diluting each stock essence in an ounce or two of spring water. Some therapists advise placing a few drops of the final solution in an animal's water, or rubbing it on the fur or in the ear. They claim that since the essences supposedly work by vibrational energies, as long as the product contacts the animal's body, inside or out, they should do the trick.

1. Agrimony: Tending to hide one's true feelings behind a cheery exterior
2. Aspen: Fear of unknown things
3. Beech: Perfectionist, hypercritical
4. Centaury: Cannot say no; tends to be exploited
5. Cerato: Seeks reassurance from others
6. Cherry Plum: Uncontrollable rage
7. Chestnut Bud: Unable to learn from past experiences
8. Chicory: Overprotective

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<sup>5</sup> Howard J. *Bach Flower Remedies: a personal commentary on the work of Dr. Edward Bach. Complementary Therapies in Nursing and Midwifery.* 1998;4:148-149.

<sup>6</sup> Mantle F. Back flower remedies. *Complementary Therapies in Nursing and Midwifery.* 1997;3:142-144.

9. Clematis: Inattentive, easily distracted
10. Crab Apple: Low self-esteem
11. Elm: Overwhelmed with responsibility
12. Gentian: Despondent
13. Gorse: Discouraged
14. Heather: Self-obsessed
15. Holly: Suspicious and jealous
16. Honeysuckle: Cannot forget the past
17. Hornbeam: Emotionally weary at the thought of work
18. Impatiens: Impatient
19. Larch: Self-doubt, insecure
20. Mimulus: Fear of known things
21. Mustard: Depression of unknown cause
22. Oak: Fighter overwhelmed by exhaustion
23. Olive: Overworked
24. Pine: Self-blame, even without cause
25. Red Chestnut: Pervasive fear of impending doom
26. Rock Rose: Post-traumatic stress
27. Scleranthus: Indecisive
28. Star of Bethlehem: Grief from loss
29. Sweet Chestnut: Unbearable despair
30. Vervain: Strong principles gone too far
31. Vine: Dominant and ambitious
32. Walnut: Life transitions
33. Water Violet: Isolated
34. White Chestnut: Obsessive
35. Wild Oat: At a crossroads in life
36. Wild Rose: No ambition or direction
37. Willow: Resentful and bitter
38. Rescue Remedy®: Shock and trauma

The last flower essence, Rescue Remedy ®, stands apart from the rest. This composite formulation contains five essences: Rock Rose, Clematis, Star of Bethlehem, Impatiens, and Cherry Plum. As its name implies, the combination applies to circumstances where the animal needs to be rescuing, such as after shock, trauma, surgery, or anesthesia. The emotional states it combats include fear, shock, panic, and feelings of losing control.<sup>7</sup> Oftentimes, animal caregivers will take Rescue Remedy® themselves, as well as administer it to their animals, because when an animal is in shock, their loving human may well be feeling emotional shock simultaneously.

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<sup>7</sup> Mantle F. Back flower remedies. *Complementary Therapies in Nursing and Midwifery*. 1997;3:142-144.

Even though flower essences have failed to demonstrate any superiority over placebo for anxiety<sup>8 9 10</sup> and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder in children<sup>11</sup>, anecdotal claims that flower essences can deliver big benefits for animals fosters a loyal following. The essences themselves, especially in their diluted forms, pose no proven adverse effects. Thus, other than potentially delaying proper care, flower essences themselves are rather benign.

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<sup>8</sup> Walach H, Rilling Ch, and Engelke. Efficacy of Bach-flower remedies in test anxiety: A double-blind, placebo-controlled, randomized trial with partial crossover. *Anxiety Disorders*. 2001;15:359-366.

<sup>9</sup> Armstrong NC and Ernst E. A randomized, double-blind, placebo-controlled trial of a Bach Flower Remedy. *Complementary Therapies in Nursing Midwifery*. 2001;7:215-221.

<sup>10</sup> Muhlack S, Lemmer W, Klotz P, et al. Anxiolytic effect of Rescue Remedy for psychiatric patients. *Journal of Clinical Psychopharmacology*. 2006;26(5):541-542.

<sup>11</sup> Pintov S, Hochman M, Livne A, et al. Bach flower remedies used for attention deficit hyperactivity disorder in children – a prospective double blind controlled study. *European Journal of Paediatric Neurology*. 2005;9:395-398.