

Top 10 Beauty Botanicals

Ethnobotanist Chris Kilham travels to far-flung corners of the world in search of nature’s most powerful remedies

By Rona Berg

Known as the “kava guy” for his role in bringing the powerful stress-relieving plant to the mainstream, ethnobotanist Chris Kilham has also been called the Indiana Jones of herbal medicine.

A member of Medical Advisory Board of The Dr. Oz Show, the Fox News Medicine Hunter, and Explorer in Residence at Naturex of Avignon and the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, Kilham has no advanced degrees of his own, but he does have more field experience than most. He travels to the Peruvian Amazon six times each year, and if you ask him what to put on a scorpion sting to relieve the pain, he’ll tell you. When we spoke, he had just returned from New Zealand and was preparing to head out on an expedition to a remote village in Vanatu.

Kilham spends at least 60 percent of his time on the road. He conducts research to advise companies about investing in plants that have potential to benefit us medicinally, in supplements and skincare, and can be sourced ethically and sustainably while helping local indigenous communities around the world. Kilham wants Westerners to benefit from the powerful plant medicine

that indigenous peoples have relied on for thousands of years.

A trip to El Yunque rain forest in his teens fostered a strong desire to travel along with an interest in herbs. “I remember thinking, I want to go to cool places like this and study plants,” he says. Soon after, Kilham, an avid yogi, took ill on a trip to an Indian ashram and was cured by an ayurvedic herbal doctor in Katmandu. “That really galvanized my sense that herbs were actual medicine.”

What does it take to be a medicine hunter? “You need to understand plant chemistry, be inured to discomfort and awesomely flexible. When something breaks down—the plane, the boat, you just have to roll with it.”

Here are Chris Kilham’s top 10 beauty botanicals:



Cocoa Pod Solids

What it is The extract from the cocoa plant pod

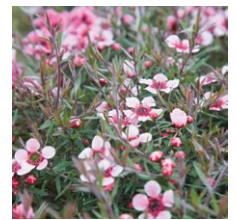
What it does “The cosmetic industry has long used cocoa butter (fat) in creams, but the treasure is in the solids, with profound antiaging benefits for skin. It has the highest antioxidant value of anything on earth, and also helps reduce the risk of heart attack, stroke, type 2 diabetes, and cancer, according to research from the Harvard University Medical Center.”



Manuka Oil

What it is It’s not manuka honey, though manuka oil is also from New Zealand. It’s extracted from the leaves and branches of the manuka tree.

What it does “Manuka is 15 times more powerful than tea tree oil, with a more pleasant aroma. It is everything tea tree oil wants to be. It’s antibacterial, antioxidant, and, in addition to the healing benefits, it may also play a role as a preservative.”



Hawthorn

What it is A plant grown in Morocco

What it does “Primarily used for heart health, it enhances the heart muscle.” But it also has a powerful effect on the skin. “Taken internally and topically, it rapidly increases the function of new collagen. Hawthorn is going to have its day as a significant cosmetic ingredient.”



Rosemary

What it is A hearty herb that grows in the United States and Europe

What it does “Nothing else works as well to make hair lustrous and improve the health of the hair follicles. The rosmarinic acid in rosemary is an antioxidant preservative, used in meats, yogurt and cosmetics.”



Tamanu Oil

What it is The oil extracted from the nut of the tropical tamanu tree, found in Hawaii, Micronesia and Tahiti

What it does "It is the single most beneficial skin-healing agent—period. It's an entire pharmacy for the skin. It heals cuts, burns, rough spots. It is antiaging, antibacterial, antiacne, and gets rid of herpes and shingles. The only thing it won't help: eczema and psoriasis."



Cat's Claw

What it is The interior bark of a vine from the Amazon.

What it does "It repairs skin by stimulating collagen. It's not really showing up in the U.S., yet, but it's coming. In South America, it's in practically every balm."



Maca

What it is A root vegetable, native to the Peruvian Highlands

What it does Known as "Peruvian ginseng," it improves energy, stamina and libido, and reduces the risk of prostate cancer, according to the *Journal Reproductive Biology and Endocrinology*. The root is dried and made into a powder that can be added to baked goods, smoothies and supplements.



Rhodiola

What it is A root from Siberia and China

What it does "The best antidepressant out there, with spectacular benefits for energy, stamina, endurance, mental clarity and libido. It is also a powerful antioxidant, and helps prevent oxidation of the lipid membrane to keep skin healthy."



Dragon's Blood

What it is The latex from a tree in the Amazon. You score the tree with a blade to access the dragon's blood.

What it does "If you apply it straight, it forms a kind of latex bandage on the skin and it will kill infections and help skin heal quickly. It heals cuts, burns, bites and abrasions, and stimulates collagen."



Witch Hazel

What it is From the bark of the witch hazel shrub native to North America

What it does "It is an astringent and it tightens, tones and cleanses the skin. It is ideal as a facial mister, or to splash on the face after shaving."

