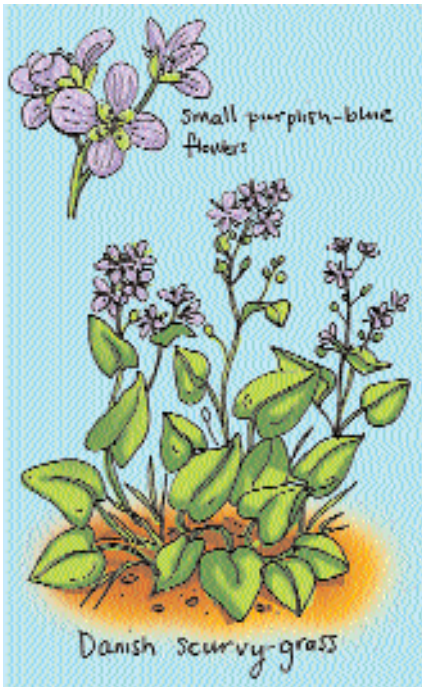
Spoon-leaved herb

During a recent walk on local cliff tops I was surprised to see what I first thought was a patch of thyme. Now thyme in February is not a reasonable phenomenon, even allowing for climate changes, and I investigated more closely.

The plant turned out to be not thyme but a diminutive Danish scurvy-grass (*Cochlearia danica*), which is not unusual shortly after the turn of the seasons. What was disconcerting was its prominent purplish-blue petals, for as a rule these are only faintly tinged, and more often than not just white. I am at a loss to account for this deviation, which no doubt has some connection with climate. The other cochlearias — common scurvy-grass (*C officinalis*) and English scurvy-grass (*C anglica*) — are almost invariably white-flowered, and considerably larger.



Scurvy-grass of one of these species was peddled on the streets of London in the 17th century with the cry "Will you buy my scurvy-grass?" About 1650 it was fashionable to drink its infusion every morning to confer good health, and in the 19th century it was consumed in sandwiches for the same purpose. John Brand in his 'Brief description of Orkney' of 1701 commented that islanders of Shetland "have much scurvey-Grass; God so ordering it in his wise Providence that Juxta venenum nascitur Antidotum, that seeing the Scurvy is a common Disease of the Countrey, they should have the Remedy at hand". The generic name *Cochlearia*, meaning a spoon, arose from the spoonlike shape of the leaves, and the herb was called in the vernacular spoonwort.

Danish scurvy-grass has a rather strange history, being confined originally to coastal habitats and then appearing on a few railway embankments, a spread attributed to the use of ballast derived from the seashore. In the late 1980s the plant appeared on the central reservation of some major roads and thereafter extended into the motorways. Two factors may have operated here. The turbulence produced by traffic probably shifted the seeds when ripe, and the salting of frozen roads in winter encouraged growth of the coast-loving herb. But these factors are unlikely to have influenced the strange coloration of the petals in some places.

Misleading the ignorant

Dietary supplements are widely accepted, often without good evidence, as offering advantages for maintaining health and postponing old age. They are often difficult to assess with any real accuracy and objectivity. Their real position in the food habits of the population in general is doubtful: when they offer essential mineral elements and vitamins that increase the immune response to infections they have obvious merit, whereas otherwise they may mislead. The advertising of such supplements is directed mainly to selling them indiscriminately in the market place to people who rarely have the ability to judge their merits and defects, and are unlikely to consult their pharmacist before they purchase.

In the *New England Journal of Medicine* for 27 February, Jeffrey Drazen, its editor-in-chief, discusses an aspect of dietary supplementation. "Sadly," he comments, "caution and balance are not universal characteristics in advertising about health." Moreover, public access to much marketing information is available on the internet to anyone who seeks it. He cites a number of advertisements for human growth hormone and for dietary supplements described as "human growth hormone releasers" in which the *NEJM* is named as evidence for their efficacy. Advertisers quote a study of otherwise healthy men aged 60 to 80 who increased their body mass and bone mineral when given injections of human growth hormone thrice weekly for six months.

Some of these advertised products are in fact not human growth hormone but a mixture of compounds claimed to stimulate the ageing body to release its own growth hormone. The advertisements carry no clinical reports to substantiate the claim or to show that the product in question has no harmful side effects. And, according to a paper by Mary Lee Vance in the same issue of the *NEJM*, the general use of alleged hormone release products cannot be justified since body composition and function have in fact not been improved and no beneficial effect on ageing has in fact been observed in serious research reports. "Advertising is advertising and nothing more" is an appropriate comment.

Science and unity

An editorial in *Science* for 7 March, by the UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, throws new light upon the role of scientists in contributing to a better world. He stresses that science has contributed immensely to human progress and to the development of modern society. Scientific knowledge, properly applied, furnishes powerful means for solving many challenges which humans have to face, including food security, diseases such as AIDS, pollution and the proliferation of weapons throughout the world.

Nevertheless, comments Kofi Annan, there are clear inequalities in the pursuit of scientific endeavours in different countries. In developing countries less than 1 per cent of the gross domestic product is devoted to research, while rich countries spend two or three times as much. The number of scientists in comparison with population in developing countries is 10 to 30 times smaller than in developed ones, and 95 per cent of the new science in the world is concentrated in the countries sustaining one fifth of the world population. And much of it impinging upon health matters is neglecting the wider problems faced by the world.

Serious problems are generated by the imbalance of scientific activity. The increasing disparity between advanced and developing countries creates social and economic difficulties at both national and international levels. Somehow scientists and their institutions must bring the benefits of research to all. Unhappily, no bridge that shared research can build to link rich and poor is capable of withstanding the onslaught of violence and war. To enable progress to take place conflict must be prevented, and this is where the United Nations comes in. Scientists should remember that peace-making is not the exclusive preserve of diplomats and politicians. The ethos of science and that of international organisations are deeply similar, both being engaged in a struggle against the forces of unreason which sometimes seek to use scientists for destructive purposes. Both strive to express universal truths.

The United Nations tries to preach the dignity and worth of the human person and insists that, despite divisions within the world, in some particulars we are united as a human community. The basic concern of science with human welfare makes it an indispensable partner of the UN. "The agenda is broad and the needs immense," writes Kofi Annan, "but together we are equal to these challenges."

Reaching the peak

To be able to fill leisure intelligently is the last product of civilisation. — Bertrand Russell: 'The conquest of happiness', 1930.