

3/21/2006 Aloe marlothii: A Soothing, Medicinal Plant in the Arid Dome - ARID DOME

As the end of winter approaches, many of us are thankful for the various lotions available to care for our dry skin. Ancient people also looked for soothing ingredients in the plants that grew around them. The medicinal uses of *Aloe* species have been known since the days of the ancient Egyptians. It is said that Cleopatra used "aloe" in her quest for beauty. Aloe comes from plants in the genus *Aloe*, especially the species *Aloe vera*. It is common in sunscreens, aftershave lotions, and ointments for burns, insect bites, and poison ivy. See if there is aloe in any of your personal care products.

Aloe vera leaves exude compounds that help protect skin from ultraviolet rays, so they are useful in sunscreens. The leaves also exude a soothing, anti-inflammatory mucilage or gel when cut. Some people grow a pot of *A. vera* in their kitchens, and simply cut off a leaf when they need relief from a minor cooking burn. Aloe extracts are sometimes prepared for internal uses, but most have not been proven scientifically, tested for safety, nor approved by the Food and Drug Administration.

There are more than 350 species of *Aloe* plants. They flourish in hot, dry regions of the world and originated in sub-Saharan Africa. *Aloe* species are succulents, mostly with leathery or fleshy sword-like leaves, each lined with teeth or spines. Although often mistaken for cactus species, they belong to the lily family. Some are only a few inches in size; others produce leaves that creep across the ground as they grow; others grow into trees with single, sturdy trunks.

A prominent example of this group can be found in the Arid Dome. *Aloe marlothii* is a tree aloe that may grow 30 feet tall. The blue-gray leaves are fleshy and can be three feet long with black, thick, tooth-like spines. It is a perennial succulent with leaves that grow in a rosette (spiral) with a single trunk. When it flowers, the spectacular flower stalk produces horizontal branches covered with red to yellow flowers. In its native home in southern Africa, this plant flowers in the winter, and the nectar of the flowers attracts small birds for pollination. Look for this plant on your next visit to the Domes.

