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De Agri Cultura
 by
Cato the Elder
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Chapters 158-162

Marcus Cato on Agriculture

 **156** ¹ Of the medicinal value of the cabbage: It is the cabbage which surpasses all other vegetables. It may be eaten either cooked or raw; if you eat it raw, dip it into vinegar. It promotes digestion marvellously and is an excellent laxative, and the urine is wholesome for everything.¹¹⁴ If you wish to drink deep at a banquet and to enjoy your dinner, eat as much raw cabbage as you wish, seasoned with vinegar, before dinner, and likewise after dinner eat some half a dozen leaves; it will make you feel as if you had not dined, and you can drink as much as you please.^a

² If you wish to clean out the upper digestive tract, take four pounds of very smooth cabbage leaves, make them into three equal bunches and tie them together. Set a pot of water on the fire, and when it begins to boil sink one bunch for a short time, which will stop the boiling; when it begins again sink the bunch briefly while you count five, and remove. ³ Do the same with the second and third bunches, then throw the three together and macerate. After macerating, squeeze through a cloth about a hemina of the juice into an earthen cup; add a lump of salt the size of a pea, and enough crushed cummin to give it an odour, and let the cup stand in the air through a calm night. Before taking a dose of this, one should take a hot bath, drink honey-water, and go to bed fasting. ⁴ Early the next morning he should drink the juice and walk about for four hours, attending to any business he has. When the desire comes on him and he is seized with nausea, he should lie down and purge himself; he will evacuate such a quantity of bile and mucus that he will wonder himself where it all came from. Afterwards, when he goes to stool, he should drink a hemina or a little more. If it acts too freely, if he will take two conchas of fine flour, sprinkle it into water, and drink a little, it will cease to act. ⁵ Those who are suffering from colic should macerate cabbage in water, then pour into hot water, and boil until it is quite soft. Pour off the water, add

salt, a bit of cummin, barley flour dust, and oil, and boil again; ⁶ turn into a dish and allow it to cool. You may break any food you wish into it and eat it; but if you can eat the cabbage alone, do so. If the patient has no fever, administer a very little strong, dark wine, diluted; but if he has fever give only water. The dose should be repeated every morning, but in small quantities, so that it may not pall but continue to be eaten with relish. The treatment is the same for man, woman, and child. ⁷ Now for those who pass urine with difficulty and suffer from strangury: take cabbage, place it in hot water and boil until it is half-done; pour off most of the water, add a quantity of oil, salt, and a bit of cummin, and boil for a short time. After that drink the broth of this and eat the cabbage itself, that it may be absorbed quickly. Repeat the treatment daily.

 **157** ¹ Of Pythagoras's cabbage, what virtue and health-giving qualities it has. The several varieties of cabbage and the quality of each should first be known; it has all the virtues necessary for health, and constantly changes its nature along with the heat, being moist and dry, sweet, bitter, and acid. The cabbage has naturally all the virtues of the so-called "Seven Blessings" mixture.¹¹⁵ To give, then, the several varieties: the first is the so-called smooth; it is large, with broad leaves and thick stem; it is hardy and has great potency. ² The second is the curly variety, called "parsley cabbage"; it has a good nature and appearance, and has stronger medicinal properties than the above-mentioned variety. So also has the third, the mild, with small stalk, tender, and the most pungent of all; and its juice, though scanty, has the most powerful effect. No other variety of cabbage approaches it in medicinal value. ³ It can be used as a poultice on all kinds of wounds and swellings; it will cleanse all sores and heal without pain; it will soften and open boils; it will cleanse suppurating wounds and tumours, and heal them, a thing which no other medicine can do. But before it is applied, the surface should be washed with plenty of warm water, and then the crushed cabbage should be applied as a poultice, and renewed twice a day; it will remove all putridity. The black ulcer has a foul odour and exudes putrid pus, the white is purulent but fistulous, and suppurates under the surface; ⁴ but if you macerate cabbage it will cure all such sores — it is the best remedy for sores of this kind. Dislocations will be healed quickly if they are bathed twice a day in warm water and a cabbage poultice is applied; if applied twice a day, the treatment will relieve the pain. A contusion will burst, and when bruised cabbage is applied, it will heal. ⁵ An ulcer on the breast and a cancer can be healed by the application of macerated cabbage; and if the spot is too tender to endure the astringency, the cabbage should be mixed with barley-flour and so applied. All sores of this kind it will heal, a thing which no other medicine can do or cleanse. When applied to a sore of this kind on a boy or girl the barley-meal should be added. If you eat it chopped, washed, dried, and seasoned with salt and vinegar, nothing will be more wholesome. ⁶ That you may eat it with better appetite, sprinkle it with grape vinegar, and you will like a little better when washed, dried, and seasoned with rue, chopped coriander and salt. This will benefit you, allow no ill to remain in the body, and promote digestion; and will heal any ill that may be inside. Headache and eyeache it heals alike. It should be eaten in the morning, on an empty stomach. ⁷ Also if you are bilious, if the spleen is swollen, if the heart is painful, or the liver, or the lungs, or the diaphragm — in a word, it will cure all the internal organs which are suffering. (If you grate silphium¹¹⁶ into it, it will be good.) For when all the veins are gorged with food they cannot breathe¹¹⁷ in the whole body, and hence a disease is caused; and when from excess of food the bowels

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do not act, if you eat cabbage proportionately, prepared as I direct above, you will have no ill effects from these. But as to disease of the joints, nothing so purges it as raw cabbage, if you eat it chopped, and rue, chopped dry coriander, grated asafetida, and cabbage out of vinegar and honey, and sprinkled with salt.¹¹⁸

⁸ After using this remedy you will have the use of all your joints. There is no expense involved; and even if there were, you should try it for your health's sake. It should be eaten in the morning, on an empty stomach. One who is sleepless or debilitated you can make well by this same treatment. But give the person, without food, simply warm cabbage, oiled, and a little salt. The more the patient eats the more quickly will he recover from the disease. ⁹ Those suffering from colic should be treated as follows: Macerate cabbage thoroughly, then put in a pot and boil well; when it is well done pour off the water, add plenty of oil, very little salt, cummin, and fine barley-flour, and let it boil very thoroughly again. After boiling turn it into a dish. The patient should eat it without bread, if possible; if not, plain bread may be soaked in it and if he has no fever he may have some dark wine. The cure will be prompt. ¹⁰ And further, whenever such occasion arises, if a person who is debilitated will eat cabbage prepared as I have described above, he will be cured. And still further, if you save the urine of a person who eats cabbage habitually, heat it, and bathe the patient in it, he will be healed quickly; this remedy has been tested. Also, if babies are bathed in this urine they will never be weakly; those whose eyes are not very clear will see better if they are bathed in this urine; and pain in the head or neck will be relieved if the heated urine is applied. ¹¹ If a woman will warm the privates with this urine, they will never become diseased. The method is as follows: when you have heated it in a pan, place under a chair whose seat has been pierced. Let the woman sit on it, cover her, and throw garments around her.

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¹² Wild cabbage has the greatest strength; it should be dried and macerated very fine. When it is used as a purge, let the patient refrain from food the previous night, and in the morning, still fasting, take macerated cabbage with four cyathi of water. Nothing will purge so well, neither hellebore, nor scammony; it is harmless, and highly beneficial; it will heal persons whom you despair of healing. ¹³ The following is the method of purging by this treatment: Administer it in a liquid form for seven days; if the patient has an appetite, feed him on roast meat, or, if he has not, on boiled cabbage and bread. He should drink diluted mild wine, bathe rarely, and rub with oil. One so purged will enjoy good health for a long time, and no sickness will attack him except by his own fault. If one has an ulcer, whether suppurated or new, sprinkle this wild cabbage with water and apply it; you will cure him. ¹⁴ If there is a fistula, insert a pellet; or if it will not admit a pellet, make a solution, pour into a bladder attached to a reed, and inject into the fistula by squeezing the bladder. It will heal quickly. An application of wild cabbage macerated with honey to any ulcer, old or new, will heal it. ¹⁵ If a nasal polypus appears, pour macerated dry wild cabbage into the palm of the hand; apply to the nostril and sniff with the breath as vigorously as possible. Within three days the polypus will fall out, but continue the same treatment for several days after it has fallen out, so that the roots of the polypus may be thoroughly cleaned. ¹⁶ In case of deafness, macerate cabbage with wine, press out the juice, and instil warm water into the ear, and you will soon know that your hearing is improved. An application of cabbage to a malignant scab will cause it to heal without ulcerating.

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The Editor's Notes:

¹¹⁴ Compare Chapter 157, 10.



¹¹⁵ The introduction to this chapter is not considered genuine. We are told by Plutarch and Diogenes Laertius^b that the philosophers, such as Solon and Pythagoras, made a point of eating uncooked food, in contrast with the luxury of others. Gesner suggests that the "Seven Blessings" were heat, cold, moisture, dryness, sweetness, bitterness, and sourness. Hörle, suggesting *vis* for *septem* (vii), would emend to *quae vocatur vis bona, in commixta natura*, at the beginning of the sentence.

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¹¹⁶ Greek σίλφιον, an umbelliferous plant, the juice of which was used in food and medicine. Bentley thinks it is the *asafetida*, still much eaten as a relish in the East. It is now thought that the Persian sort was the *asafetida*, and that the African sort was the *Ferula tingitana* or the *Thapsia gummifera*.

Thayer's Note: The matter is entirely unsettled, with no consensus at all as to the identification of the plant; but one thing is certain, the silphium (or laser) of Libya went extinct in Antiquity, and no plant known today can therefore be identified with it. For details and citations of the ancient authors, see [my note to Vehling's Apicius I.15](#).



¹¹⁷ This seems to refer to the theory of Erasistratus, that the arteries carry air, and the veins carry blood through the body.



¹¹⁸ The passage is very corrupt.

Thayer's Notes:

^a Cf. Athenaeus, 34C.







^b The passage on Pythagoras is Diog. Laërt. VIII.12-13. I've been unable to find any passage in Plutarch or anywhere else, in which Solon is associated with uncooked food. But since wiggle-room is

afforded to us by "philosophers, such as", here's Diogenes (of course!) eating a raw squid or octopus: [Diog. Laërt. VI.76](#) (and my note there).

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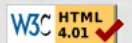
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