The Artemisia story

The journey of Ge Hong & Tu Youyou

A series of plant comics by Anna Backhaus and Isotta Reichenbach
Along time ago, there was a great medicine man called Ge Hong. He lived in China where he treated hundreds of patients throughout his life.

Oh, hello! I am collecting Artemisia leaves. I have new patients in my hospital who need medicine made from these leaves.

Good morning great Medicine Man Ge Hong. What are you doing?
Ge Hong stored all his recipes in his many books. His recipe for using Artemisia leaves was:

- Collect a handful of Artemisia leaves
- Soak in two litres of cold water
- After, squeeze out the liquid
- Give the liquid to the patient
HE ALSO WROTE...

GIVE ARTEMISIA DRINK TO PATIENTS WITH:
- A FEVER
- A HEADACHE
- VOMMITING
- CHILLS
- MUSCLE PAIN
My dear patient, drink this artemisia mixture, it will heal your pain quickly. If you do not drink it soon, your organs could fail and your life will be in danger.

As we know today, it was the malaria parasite that artemisia leaves cured.
When Ge Hong was at the end of his life, he decided to store all of his books safely. He hoped that his discoveries would not get lost and that future generations would use them...

However, his books were left undiscovered for a very, very long time...
In the late 20th century, a young scientist named Tu Youyou rediscovered his books!

Tu Youyou was employed by the Chinese government to look through the old, traditional medicine books for a malaria cure.
YOU AND THE OTHER SCIENTIST STUDIED THE RECIPE AND ARTEMISIA PLANT. THEY NEEDED TO KNOW IF THE LEAVES REALLY CURED MALARIA BY KILLING THE VIRUS. AND IN THE BEGINNING IT LOOKED LIKE GE HONGS' RECIPES WERE NOT TRUE! WAS THE ARTEMISIA DRINK ONLY ALLEVIATING THE SYMPTOMS?
Even though scientists tried many times, they weren't able to brew the correct, medical Artemisia juice. YouYou decided to read Ge Hong's recipe one more time and she discovered something that others had missed: 'The leaves have to be soaked in cold water'. So far, the scientists had only tried hot water! Had this been their mistake..?
After testing the new recipe in the laboratory, it was time to see if it worked. The scientists had no other choice but to drink it themselves!

And the drink wasn’t poisonous! But would it really cure malaria?

To answer this question, they gave the drink to malaria patients...and it worked! The scientists went happily back to the laboratory and continued to study the chemistry of the 'wonder-plant' artemisia. Out of thousands, they were able to isolate the one chemical in artemisia that had killed the malaria virus. They then built a similar chemical in the laboratory and sold it as a pill...

Why? Because pills are easier to produce and much cheaper than collecting juice from plants!
In 2015 Youyou was awarded the Nobel Prize for her discovery. Today the Artemisia pills are used all around the world to cure malaria.