LEXANDRIA — Although 25 percent of the prescription drugs in this country contain at least one active ingredient that originated in plants, most Americans think of herbal medicine as a passe form of folk medicine, a plant expert said here.

More than 600 plants in Louisiana alone have been documented for having medicinal qualities. Steven Foster, author of “Field Guide to Medicinal Plants: Eastern and Central States,” told participants of a recent conference sponsored by the Louisiana Native Plant Society.

However, while 80 percent of the world’s population relies on traditional forms of medicine, including herbal medicines, herbs are generally considered by U.S. authorities to be food additives rather than drug compounds.

As a result of this “gray zone,” medicinal plants are most often found in health food stores in this country and are not subject to the same quality control measures that other medications must live up to, such as proof of safety and efficacy, Foster said. That is not the case in other countries, he said. Scientists in Germany, France, Italy and the Netherlands have published extensive research findings on plant pharmacology. And in China, more than 500 plant species are listed as drugs.

Japanese honeysuckle, which can be found growing in the wild in Louisiana, is harvested in the United States and exported to China, where it is used to treat colds and flu.

Part of the reason that medicinal plants have not been marketed in this country is economical, the plant expert said. U.S. Food and Drug Administration regulations for approving new substances are very expensive and time consuming and plant compounds cannot be patented; therefore, they are not considered marketable, he said.

Still, the science of plant pharmacology is very promising, Foster said. One of the most exciting plants under study today is Echinacea, or the purple coneflower, which can be found in Caldwell Parish.