

THE HERBALIST IN EACH OF US

A HERBALISM PRIMER FOR BUILDING KNOWLEDGE 2017 IN FLIN FLON :: by Kjelti Katherine



bumblebee on giant hyssop – a valuable lung remedy

In another time, we would have all been herbalists. We would have all had the basic knowledge we needed to wander through the meadows and woods searching for those plants we could gather and use for the benefit of our minds, bodies, and spirits. As children we would have made friends with plants, and imagined them into playful companions. We would have been especially familiar with the sweet remedies and as we grew older and matured, we would have learned to appreciate the bitter ones. In our homes, there would have always been tea brewing on the stove, steeping medicines picked in and around where we lived. We would have a visceral memory of tree saps, roots, berries, barks, leaves, and flowers of many different plants, immediately recognizing them when they met our lips or skin. Sharing the land so closely with plants for generation after generation, we would have inherited the somatic wisdom for best receiving and integrating the healing activated by these medicine plants. All the experiences of our ancestors would have been handed down to us and we

would have all been medicine people. We would have been attuned to their cycles of growth and would have known when each plant was fully ready to offer their medicine to us, when they had reached full potency. We would have been so deeply connected with plants that we would be able to speak a common language with them. We would have lived with a deep knowing that the plants we live alongside are some of our greatest allies for wellness. And because we would know all of these things, intuitively in our hearts, we would have a high reverence for plants and we would know how to treat them with respect.

But in our society today, we may not often consider our deeply rooted and inherited connection to plants. We may have lost our natural childhood curiosity for wild plants because of a fearful or unknowing guardian warning us of the dangers growing in the woods. We may spray chemical pesticides on some of our regions most valuable medicines. We may delegitimize the plant knowledge of Elders and First Nations people. We may choose scientific rationalism over spiritualism and deny the energetic imprinting of plants and their magical connection to other worlds. We may see plants as simply a means to our own human ends, without recognizing their full potential. We may tread blindly through the woods, without being able to recognize or positively identify the plants that grow there. We may be trained to distrust wild plants and their ability to heal us. Or we may treat herbs like pharmaceutical drugs and give up too easily when immediate results are not noted. We may do many things that hinder our connection to plants... and in many ways we have been living at a loss because of this... But now more than ever, we are many who have this latent longing to return to rest in that deep connection to our relatives with roots, our earthy Elders; to learn from them, and ask them for help in our own healing journeys. It takes an investment of time, energy, and consideration to work meaningfully and effectively with plants, but we all have that primal connection to build upon. Plants are our ancestors and we can speak a common language with them. And our inner herbalist is ready to be brought forth to aid us through life's mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual challenges. But we must be willing to learn, to open up to receive the knowledge from the plant world.

We are being given an amazing opportunity to regain powerful connections with plants. We are especially blessed to live where we do here in Canada, in the prairies, parklands, and boreal forest, where we have an abundant diversity of valuable medicines growing around us,

medicines that can treat all sorts of ailments and afflictions. We must simply begin learning through our own senses and experiences how to pick medicines, prepare remedies, make teas, and heal ourselves with their help. Herbalism is the peoples' medicine, because we can all empower ourselves through learning about, and practicing herbalism for our own well-being.

HOLISTIC HERBALISM

"To heal, we must know ourselves and the ground upon which we stand."

Shantree Kacera



Harvesting plantain – a herbal favourite with a multitude of uses.

Holistic herbalism takes an approach to wellness which views each of us as a self-regulating system which is always moving towards balance and homeostasis. This steady movement towards healing is guided by our primary life force, which is known as prana in yoga and ayurveda. Prana is the creative life energy which manifests our physical reality and is present in all living things including humans and plants. Plants act primarily at the level of the pranic

body, assisting in the movement of prana through the energy channels to places which need healing in our systems. When we choose to use plants as medicine, we are choosing to integrate their life force - their unique pattern of being and composition of the five elements - in with our own. In so doing, we intend that their unique qualities will positively influence us as a catalyst or as an ongoing support for our systems to heal itself. To do this effectively, we must first know ourselves, our constitution and any current imbalances we are experiencing that may be manifesting as symptoms, illness, or disease.

I have found that herbalism in a western context is often practiced as a "natural" parallel to allopathic medicine. In this way, a disease or ailment is held as separate from the whole person and therefore treatable without an understanding of the whole person. Herbs are then used "in place" of pharmaceutical drugs to try to treat the disease or ailment itself, instead of the imbalance that is causing the disease to manifest. Although some success can certainly be found using this method, Ayurveda provides an accessible and yet comprehensive system to place our healing in the context of whole plants helping whole people to find healing in themselves using the energetic framework Ayurveda provides.



learning about rabbit root – a boreal remedy

We begin by becoming familiar with the force of the elements and the gunas inherent to our dosha. From there then, we learn to experience the gunas found in common medicinal plants and seek plants that will be able to help us with complimentary or balancing properties. Most medicinal plants naturally have an affinity for a particular part of the body such as the lungs or liver. If that is where the medicine tends to travel, we can combine that knowledge with the knowledge of the plants energetics to find a matching remedy to meet our needs.

Although it may sound mystical to speak of the energetics of plants, it is rooted in our sensory perception, in particular our sense of taste, as well as in our observation of the effects that the plant has within our system. By refining our senses to observe qualities (gunas) such as warming or cooling, drying or moistening, and by understanding and sensing the 6 tastes; sweet, sour, salty, pungent, bitter, and astringent, we are applying the basic energetic maps of Ayurveda to herbs. In so doing, we are increasing our ability to work with plants in a way that can lead to deeper, and more enduring healing.

APPROACHING PLANTS

"The only really valuable thing is intuition." – Albert Einstein

I often follow my intuition when going for medicine walks; by letting my feet lead the way, it is common for me to stumble upon a beautiful grouping of a particular remedy I've been interested in meeting or needing for my herbal stores. Like in all healing, we need to be able to quiet ourselves to give rise to our inner voice, which will guide us to the remedies needed.

The plants we work with have their own consciousness too which we can connect in with. Folklore has it that plants show themselves to those ready to work with them and not before.

So when we approach plants, in the garden or the wild, the better we are able to quiet ourselves, the better we will be able to hear the subtle language being spoken to us, and the more open we will be receiving the knowledge we need regarding the unique gift that plant will offer us in healing.

PRAYER AND TOBACCO

We connect with the spirit of the Earth mother and the spirit of each plant as we bring their vitality to work within our own systems. I believe it is important to acknowledge that we are dealing with the sacred when working with herbal medicine, from gathering in a pristine setting to making a simple cup of tea - it is all a participation in the great mystery and opportunity to show gratitude for the gift of life.

The traditional First Nations practice when gathering medicine is to make an offering to Mother Earth to give thanks for the gift being received and to honour the law of reciprocity in nature. Tobacco is known as Mother Earth's medicine and is the traditional offering. There are other things that can be offered as well that show your appreciation for the life of the plant. It is in this act that we open the channels to commune with the spirit of the plant.

I always offer a prayer by first giving thanks for my breath, the sun and moon, the five elements and everything which has led me to the plant that I am about to pick. I then begin to communicate with the plant through both my words and intention - to call in the healing I may need at that time or to make known how I intend to use the plant for myself or others. It is held by herbalists from many traditions that this practice will enhance the positive effects we experience because plants are sentient beings that can hear what we are asking of them.

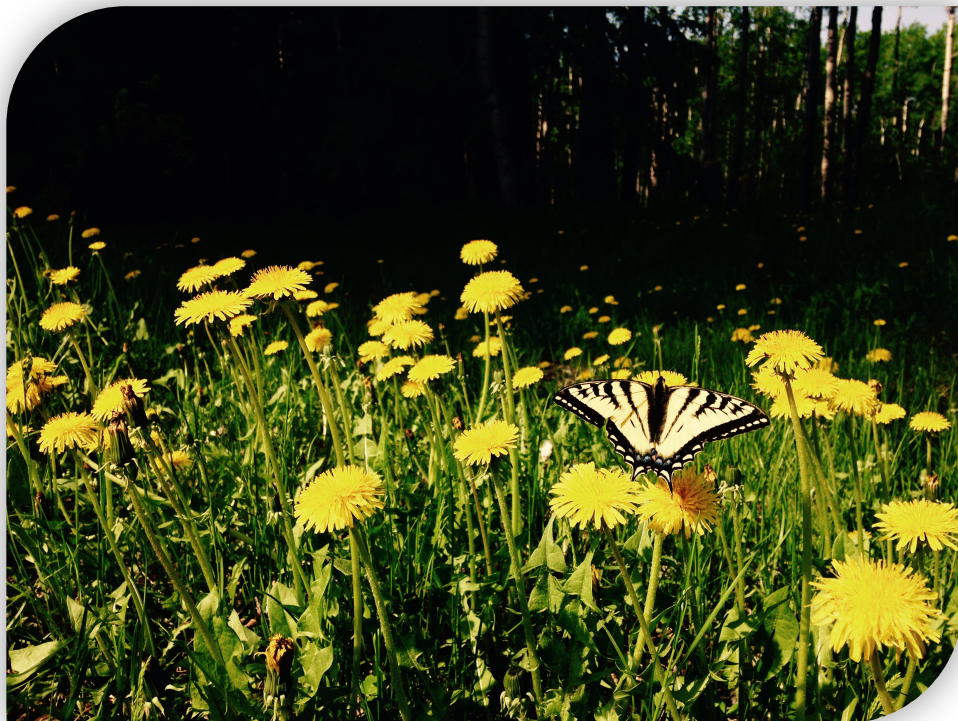
All traditional cultures have rituals involved with the way they grow, gather, and use medicines, many involve ceremony, songs, stories, and other traditional forms of reverence and communication. I suggest that you each begin to develop a ritual, which will create meaning for you when working with medicinal plants.

WHERE WE GROW, PLANTS GROW

There are so many beautiful herbs in the world! But endless names of exotic herbs can become overwhelming when looking for help from the plant world. I believe that the plants that grow around where we live are our most powerful allies for healing. Not only are they more familiar by name and appearance once we recognize them, but we also breathe the same air, and are affected by the same energetic, climatic, and seasonal patterns. As much as

possible, I try to use local herbs to help me heal. I will turn to exotic herbs for special treatment protocols, but herbs that grow across the prairies and forests of central Canada can meet most if not all of our daily needs for herbal aid.

The plants that grow where we live can also teach us about the imbalances or limitations of our culture... Take dandelion for example; they insist on growing in our towns and cities despite the onslaught of chemicals commonly used to eradicate them. As we constantly seek to weed them out of our manicured environments, they persistently insist that we pay attention to them. As it happens, dandelions are extraordinary allies of the liver, which works ceaselessly to rid our bodies of accumulated toxins (including herbicides!). Most people nowadays could benefit from liver support because of chemical residues in our water and food, and other environmental contaminants. In addition to their benefits to us, dandelions are valuable soil builders, and act as a bandage in disturbed landscapes. So our relationship with our bodies mirrors our relationship with the land... we would not see so many dandelions growing around us if we did not disrupt the natural landscape as much as we do, and we would not need the powers of dandelion so much if we did not disrupt the natural health state of our bodies to the extent that modern living allows.



a swallowtail butterfly drinking the nectar from early summer dandelion blossoms

DAILY DOSE

"Tea is instant wisdom – just add water!" – Astrid Alauda

We can always turn to herbs in times of great need. But any herbs greatest effect can be realized when they are seen as companions to our ongoing wellness journey. For example, the hawthorn berry is valuable for recovering from a heart attack or mending a broken heart, but it can truly shine as a protector of the heart organ if taken on a regular basis to strengthen the heart and *prevent* heart attacks as well as regulate our love center and promote feelings of protection and nurturing.

Herbal medicine can be taken every day in a multitude of different forms. When we find herbs that resonate in our system they can prevent disease, strengthen the immune system, and contribute to an overall balanced state. Like all healing, working with herbs takes time; so patience and careful observation is our key to success in herbal medicine.



wild rose petals – good for a sweet tea to mend a broken heart

CONCLUSION

In my mind, becoming a herbalist begins with mindfulness both when walking and drinking tea. When walking, you will begin to notice and grow curious about certain plants that grow around you. The plants become familiar and from there you can begin to explore their healing properties and how you may be able to use them to benefit yourself or your loved ones.

You also grow a deeper appreciation for the power of common herbs by the simple act of drinking tea; preparing herbal teas is the most common way to administer plant medicine (after direct ingestion). The effects of herbs prepared in a tea are also easily observed in the body and mind.

We are blessed with many medicines that grow close to us! Use them! My advice to you is to experiment and become familiar with some of our common wild plants such as dandelion, yarrow, plantain, mint, chamomile, chickweed, rose, clover, raspberry, giant hyssop, and stinging nettle; these powerful herbs all have a wide array of applications and effects on the gross and subtle bodies. Studying the energetic qualities of plants is easiest when you are able to use plants that you have gathered yourself after seeing how and where they grow. Research and read about the plants you are interested in to help guide you but be sure to root your herbal knowledge in your own experience. By doing so, you will come to understand how each herb interacts with your particular constitution and how they may serve to harmonize or aggravate any imbalance you may currently experience. Take wonder in the world of medicinal plants and always keep growing!

"Plants exist to transmute light into life. Human beings exist to transmute life into consciousness, love. These three – light, life, and love – are one, each an expression of the other, three dimensions of the same existence."

- David Frawley