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A RETURN TO ROOTS



"MIGHTY OAKS FROM LITTLE ACORNS GROW"

Although it may seem as though the U.S. is undergoing a renaissance in the field of herbal medicine, as executive director of United Plant Savers, Susan Leopold, puts it, "it's really our lineage." Even 50% of

TOP

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D O C U M E N T A R Y
P R O J E C T

WELCOME SEEDS SPROUTING CHANGE
NEW LEAVES ROOTED IN COMMUNITY
DIG DEEPER



SEEDS

Before this was a documentary project, as a child I developed a growing interest in why and how plants could be used as medicine. I was amazed to learn that it was possible to walk through the forest and find leaves that could heal the cuts and bruises I often got as a result of climbing trees. I would collect random plants in the woods around my house and place them on my skin under a wet paper towel, pretending to heal a broken arm. As an adult I marvel at the sheer magnitude of ways in which plants can heal and support wellness.

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SPROUTING CHANGE

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NEW LEAVES

A RETURN TO ROOTS: NARRATIVE ESSAY

My eyes are rolling back into my head. As hard as I try to keep my focus set on the words on the paper, or on the woman speaking in front of me, my brain overrides each fervent attempt to pay attention. Unlike my father, who would expound upon the virtues of attending church and then habitually snore through each service, I'd never had trouble staying awake in public. I found it embarrassing, in fact, to fall asleep in the presence of those outside my immediate family. "It's this damn yurt," I thought to myself in an odd mixture of frustration and deep relaxation. "It's so peaceful."

I'd been intrigued with the idea of herbal medicine since I'd been in high school. That medicine could be created by plants that surround us appealed to my innate sense of justice—medicine did not have to be in the hands of corporations who are much more interested in turning a profit than in healing people.

I'd had a nagging desire to learn about this for years, and yet I found myself at herb school, time after time, unable to keep myself from drifting off, enveloped in the scent of steeping cinnamon and peppermint.

Green Comfort School of Herbal Medicine can be found in Virginia in the foothills of the Shenandoah. It's surrounded by land that has been farmed for centuries, and mountains that have stood for millennia, but you wouldn't know that from its location. Although the drive there is crowded with open vistas and views of the Blue Ridge, the yurt-cum-school is tucked away on a

small wooded hillside, surrounded on various sides by pine trees, elderberry and echinacea.

Yurts are large, traditional, circular tents that were created by nomadic tribes in Mongolia. Since their inception they've become popular with certain "earthy" types in the West. This particular one is surrounded on all sides by a wooden lattice structure that culminates in a high glass dome in the ceiling. Sitting behind the home of Teresa Boardwine, the yurt acts as a multipurpose space for making medicine, treating clients and teaching classes. While she is native to Virginia, and in fact describes her grandmothers as "Appalachian mountain women," it wasn't until the 1980's on an American army base in Italy that she first turned to herbs for medicine. "My significant other at the time developed shingles...I looked to alternatives to the cortisone that was being given as shots, and the medical profession had very little to offer this condition that had turned into chronic pain and spasms." There on the base she found a book, "Back to Eden," by Jethro Klauss, that she says she felt such a connection to that it became her "herbal Bible." "It was sent to me through the Divine and I was drawn to herbal medicine; like it just hooked up inside of me and onto my receptor sites," she says with a genuine, happy smile. From Italy she began ordering herbs through a catalog from a store in Rappahannock County, Virginia, the very county in which she resides today.

To say that stepping into the yurt is calming is an understatement. If locations were medications, this place would classify as a heavy sedative. The scent that greets visitors as they enter is an herby, clean, woody mixture of the hundreds of dried herbs that line a third of the room, and that of whatever tea mixture is percolating for the day. Closer inspection of the mason jars labeled with names such as mugwort, bloodroot and coltsfoot may call to mind scenes from "Harry Potter," but these are very real plants with a very extensive tradition of use in Appalachian medicine. Teresa concocts custom tea blends for her students and guests based upon either the season or whatever system of the body is on the curriculum for the day: ginger and star anise for digestion; eyebright, nettles and mint for cold season. She is an herbalist in the Western, Appalachian tradition, and while she will occasionally take advantage of imported plants for which there is no local alternative, the vast majority of her practice utilizes plants that grow very close to home.

Cozying up to the mason jars of dried herbs are aquamarine bottles—liter size. Once a home to Blue Sapphire gin, they now house dark liquid extractions of herbs, called tinctures. The remainder of the yurt's circular periphery could be considered part kitchen and part reference library, centered around a cozy circle of couches where Teresa lectures students and greets clients amidst fuzzy blankets and a woodstove. If this sounds like a far cry from your typical doctor's office, it is.

When Teresa initially meets with a new client, she does a two-hour intake where she thoroughly covers questions about the person's mental and physical history. One of the driving forces behind traditional herbal medicine is the importance of treating each person's symptoms in relation to their health as a whole picture. Often allopathic medicine targets health problems as isolated incidents, while herbalism looks for causal relationships between different systems within the body. A persistent need to clear the throat, for example, could be traced to thyroid imbalances. Skin issues are often due to toxin build-up in the liver. Because it's crucial for clients to give such a thorough record of their health, it was important to Teresa that she created a space where clients could feel comfortable sharing personal information in-depth.

There are many reasons people turn to herbal medicine. In 80% of the world it has always been, and continues to be, the primary source of treatment. In the U.S., however, there is a growing trend towards incorporating "alternative techniques" into the typical health regimen. Some people prefer herbs because they tend to have fewer side effects, and are less expensive, than their pharmaceutical counterparts. Others have run the gamut with conventional treatments and hope that herbs might offer a solution when pharmaceutical drugs could not. One of Teresa's students testified that milk thistle was what finally ended a string of miscarriages when doctors were not able to correct the situation; another credits her ability to overcome postpartum depression and PTSD to skullcap, a plant native to Virginia that can ease anxiety. It was something she tried after she became concerned about her mental health, and a string of tests at the hospital, according to doctors, revealed that she was "fine."

There are many plants used to affect physical and mental health that grow wild in the Appalachian region and its outer lying areas. The root of the fuzzy-leafed comfrey plant heals broken bones; leaves of plantain and self-heal speed the healing of cuts. Hops are a natural sleep aid. St. John's wort heals skin and alleviates depression. Burdock cleanses the liver. This is just a very, very small handful of the medicinal herbs that grow in this area.

There is also a more unique category of plants that are represented in these woods. They are called "adrenal adaptogens." Adaptogens were given this name for their ability to help the body adapt to stress without creating any undue side effects that might otherwise throw the systems off kilter. The first plant to be categorized as such was eleuthero, or Siberian ginseng. The plant was studied extensively in the 1970's by scientists in the Soviet Union who were looking for a way to improve the performance of their Olympic athletes.

Adaptogens work by regulating the release of the catecholamines adrenaline, noradrenaline and dopamine in the adrenal glands—naturally occurring chemicals that create the sense of "fight or flight". Rather than taken to treat acute symptoms, adaptogens are meant to be ingested on a daily basis in order to build up over time in the body and reduce panic reactions to stress.

The most popular adaptogen that grows in this bioregion is known as American ginseng, *Panax quinquefolium*. If you are someone who buys this product, you've probably noticed that it's frequently sold out, and when it is in stock it's quite expensive compared to other herbs. There are multiple reasons for this, some of which date back hundred of years.

Jack Sanders writes in his book, "The Secrets of Wildflowers," that by the early 1700's China had so depleted its population of native *Panax ginseng* that a Jesuit missionary wrote about the shortage for a publication in Britain. In response to the article, a fellow Jesuit in Quebec sent samples of *Panax quinquefolium* to China to see if they might find it suitable for use. The new variety of ginseng was a hit, and trade began from there. John Jacob Astor, who is known for building his fortune in the fur trade, actually started his business as a ginseng trader in the late 1700's. There is also evidence that George Washington borrowed money from fur and ginseng traders to help finance the American Revolution.

During the 1860's and 1870's, 600,000 pounds of American ginseng root were shipped annually to China. Even earlier, however, botanists were writing of their concern over the impact this was having on native ginseng populations. In 1783, Johann Schopf wrote of an experience in Pennsylvania where he came across a man with 500 pounds of ginseng on horseback. "...in these mountains the plant is still common, but in the lower parts it has pretty well disappeared."

Despite the fact that it is endangered, a thriving ginseng trade continues with China today.

Around the beginning of September, rangers in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park work at a high sense of alert. Not for smoldering campfires, or people littering, but for poachers. Ginseng poachers. Autumn is the most common time to harvest due to the appearance of bright red berries atop the low-lying plant. *Panax* comes from Greek, meaning heal-all, and *quinquefolium* from the Latin word for five leaves. From the fervor with which ginseng is poached, you might gather that the price it now fetches is a financial heal-all indeed. So lucrative is the sale of ginseng that legal repercussions do practically nothing to thwart the practice of illegal digging. Since the 1990's, American ginseng prices have steadily volleyed between \$600 and \$1000 a pound. Permits are issued and laws are in place to regulate the size and number of plants dug each year, but poachers know that they would not be able to harvest nearly as many plants as they'd like to if they were to follow the legal parameters.

Billy Joe Hurley, of Bryson City, N.C., is one such example. He is known for his ginseng poaching skills along with his brother, Jeffrey. In April, 2011, Billy Joe was sentenced to 75 days in jail and ordered to pay \$5,540 as a fine—\$10 for each of the 554 roots he took from the national park. In October of the same year, he was sentenced to 120 days in jail after being found with 183 roots. The market price of wild American ginseng is so high that most poachers, if caught, face the consequences and go right back to the woods to continue digging. The financial and legal consequences of being caught are minimal in comparison to the profit poachers make.

So common is the problem of ginseng poaching that Great Smoky Mountains National Park has an entire squad of volunteers dedicated to replanting the hundreds of roots they seize each season. Plants are weighed and marked with dye, then replanted in places where they are most likely to flourish again. The replanting program has about a 50% success rate, though unfortunately it is possible that the plants will be poached again. So popular, in fact, is ginseng poaching that both the History and National Geographic channels have TV shows dedicated to the illegal trade. "Appalachian Outlaws" and "Smoky Mountain Money" are cashing in on the tired "reality" show concept, featuring over-the-top mountain men scrambling to fulfill orders for vague-sounding Chinese buyers with names like "Mr. Lee." Upon discussing the topic with a friend, it just so happened that he knows the producer of one of these shows. "You know the 'chase scenes'?" he asked, referring to instances where the people "on watch" try to catch the poachers. "That's just her (the producer) in her car with a camera on the dashboard." Despite the fact that this reality show is scripted, it is having a very real impact on the ginseng population.

Larry Harding, a ginseng farmer in Maryland, says everyone he knows in the industry is seeing more theft this year since the two shows started airing. The West Virginia Department of Natural Resources has also seen a spike in criminal activity, along with a 300% increase in calls to their Division of Forestry about when and where to dig for ginseng. The shows are high on drama and low on facts, doing a disservice both to viewers and to the plants by not emphasizing the fact that American ginseng is endangered.

In 2012 the U.S. reported the exportation of 45,000 pounds of wild and 342,000 pounds of cultivated ginseng. The annual wholesale value of the plant is estimated at about \$26.9 million according to U.S. Fish and Wildlife Services, making it by far the most popular native plant species to export. Of course it's hard to pinpoint exact numbers when there's such a high demand for illegal trade. Of the plants that are tracked legally, 90% of the ginseng exported ends up in Hong Kong, where it is then dispersed to other Asian countries. These days, China's growing middle class is driving foreign demand. While it's true that the root is still most popular overseas, that it is quickly catching on in its native country is indisputable.

A Washington Post article came out in February detailing the evidence that seven types of herbal supplements were tested from four large companies: Target, Wal-Mart, Walgreens and GNC. Reports showed that most of the supplements contained none of the genetic material from the plants they claimed to contain. Ginseng was one of the supplements tested.

“For me, the adulteration issue is sort of a larger red flag pointing to the fact that these medicinal herbs are harder to find and are being overharvested, and that the herb industry is not sustainable in its practices.” Susan Leopold is sitting across from me in a solarium attached to her home made of straw bale. The thick walls are sealed with an adobe-like plaster that create rounded lines and corners reminiscent of the Southwest, and plants of every color are crowded onto tables and along window sills, even overflowing out the kitchen sink. The house is perched atop one of the rolling hills that signify you’re entering the Blue Ridge. Surrounding it in every direction are 280 or so acres of land dedicated to both wild and domesticated plants and animals. Off in the distance are the Boren Mountains, home to the rural community Susan studied when earning her PhD in ethnobotany. She is currently the executive director of United Plant Savers, or UPS, an organization dedicated to the awareness and conservation of endangered medicinal herbs.

UPS is based in Rutland, Ohio, home to its first botanical sanctuary. Of its 370 acres, half is comprised of woodlands and half open fields. Goldenseal Botanical Sanctuary, as it is known, is a place where UPS practices “conservation through cultivation.” Both goldenseal and ginseng, in addition to black and blue cohosh, slippery elm and hundreds of other at-risk plants are grown here, in a natural setting, in an attempt to raise awareness and bolster the population. “There are examples of how indigenous people around the world have protected sacred groves in their communities...intact forests where everybody knew the trees should not be cut. It was a place where you could seek refuge, have ceremony, and you could find the medicinal plants. It was kind of revered.” The concept of sacred groves is near to Susan’s heart, and she uses it as a model for Goldenseal Sanctuary. Its fields and forests serve as a place for general education as well as providing a center of research for both scientists and growers in order to preserve places for medicinal plants to thrive. That ancient remedies such as ginseng are often only considered for their financial value is a travesty, an imbalance that Susan is attempting to upright not only with Goldenseal Sanctuary but by inviting people to be a part of a botanical sanctuary network. Anyone willing to dedicate some land to the preservation of indigenous plants and animals may apply join.

“I think the whole movement of herbalism is a deep reflection of our need to have more spirituality and more reverence for nature in general, sort of a seeking of that connectivity that we’ve lost. There’s something that’s beyond this plant constituent that can heal a respiratory infection, or this concept of ‘I have a cold so I’m going to take Echinacea.’ It’s beyond that. It’s a healing connectivity that happens when you connect with plants.”

Back in Rappahannock County, behind a tangle of wiry wildflowers, a yellow sign greets those who come to visit Teresa.

“This land is being managed for wildlife and medicinal herbs. No hunting, gathering or trespassing.” Teresa is sitting on a low stone wall between her house and the yurt, looking at a small rhodiola, another adaptogen, peeking out from the dirt next to a fuzzy marshmallow plant. “Ginseng only grows in two places: Appalachia and China. We have this amazing root plant. When you dig a root, you’ve lost the plant. When a poacher comes and doesn’t reseed the ground, it’s lost forever, and it takes seven years for one plant to reach the age where it’s suitable to harvest.” Teresa has long shared the philosophy of United Plant Savers. She uses the woodlands around her house to tend ginseng patches in the hopes of providing a safe place for them

to grow and flourish. “My father was what we would now call a ‘sanger’,”—a ginseng digger. Older generations were taught to only to harvest mature plants, and to reseed when they did—a habit to ensure the longevity of the species that newer diggers seem to forego. “I was on the phone with him the other day and he said he’d been up on his property and found a big, old ginseng plant. When he went back to get it the next day, it was gone. The poachers got it.”

As the popularity of herbs increase, so does the likelihood of endangerment. Those within the herbal community have been aware of this for some time now, hence the creation of organizations such as United Plant Savers. As more people buy and use herbal products, a greater responsibility is put on the consumer to ensure they’re not contributing to the demise of resources that, if handled properly, could be beneficial to so many.

Teresa’s face is becoming shaded by the ripening twilight, a softening effect that belies the gravity with which she delivers her next statement. “We are, as a population, seeking a connection to nature. We are seeking a way to walk on this planet without adding to the destruction, but utilizing what it has to offer, and that’s what the plants do.”

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COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

FIND A CARD

100 recipe cards were made with instructions for an herbal blend to promote relaxation. The cards were then distributed at school, in coffee shops, at farmer's markets and at the NEXT exhibit opening.

MAKE SOME MEDICINE

I chose a tea for relaxation and respiratory health since those are two things most of us could use some help with

every now and then. Also included on the card is information for where to order inexpensive herbs in bulk.

PLANT THE EVIDENCE

My favorite part of the community engagement project is that the cards are made of paper embedded with seeds. They can be planted and watered in order to germinate sprouts for sweet basil, parsley and oregano!



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To satiate further interest in the subject.

for consultations or to take classes:

Green Comfort Apothecary and School of Herbal Medicine

www.greencomfortherbschool.com

Maryland University of Integrative Health

www.muih.edu

to learn more about conservation:

Sacred Seeds Sanctuary

www.sacredseedssanctuary.org

United Plant Savers

www.unitedplantsavers.org

to order your own herbs and supplies:

Mountain Rose Herbs

www.mountainroseherbs.com

Frontier Co-op

www.frontiercoop.com

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