

Wildcrafting

Interview with Ginger Webb, herbalist

IW. Please tell me a little bit about yourself. How did you get interested in plants & healing?

GW. I initially studied French and have a Master's Degree in linguistics. I spent time in Europe and found myself working in the environmental movement there. But I ended up at a desk again. I wanted to be outside. I asked, "How can you get people to care about the earth? How can I be outside?" I stumbled across herbalism by chance. It seemed so interesting to me, and I followed that pull when I moved back to the States. I attended an herb conference in the Northeast then moved back to Texas and studied on my own. I came to herbalism through the environmental movement.

I lived in Europe a lot throughout college and found over there more use of homeopathy and holistic medicine. I found that interesting, and so I had a little bit of exposure to holistic medicine.

I grew up in New Jersey, and though most people don't think of that area as rural, my grandparents had a summerhouse in an area where there were fields and woods. As children we could play among the plants.

IW. Can you help us understand "Wildcrafting"?

GW. There are two ways that people traditionally get plants: One is that they cultivate what they need. This is why there are so many herbs that people all around the world share – for example, rosemary, thyme, and oregano were originally from the Mediterranean area. Herbs like chamomile and lemon balm were not native to North America. But people cultivate what's useful.

The second way is wildcrafting. Anywhere you live you have medicinal plants growing around you, and they can be gathered for medicine.

I want to emphasize that with wildcrafting an important aspect is stewardship of the land, of the plants, of the earth. There's an image of guys in a pick-up truck pulling Echinacea up from the side of the road. That happens, but that is not what I do and not what wildcrafting is about. Often we can use just the leaves and flowers, and we don't have to pull up roots. I've learned how to gather a few petals, sometimes only those that fall on the ground, so as not to disturb the plant's reproductive system. It is intensively respectful. We try to gather above ground and not kill the plant – though sometimes you need the roots.

In wildcrafting, when you have found a medicinal plant in the wild, you must first find out if there is a viable population before you gather anything.

I think a better term is "Wildgardening." You're thinking about how to help the population of plants as well as the small ecosystem that's there. You're trying to do the most good in the ecosystem. When you are reliant on wild medicine, you have to think about the future...about sustainability. Things might not be there next year. You must work to assure plants are a renewable resource. The relation is symbiotic: plants and people need to live together. You learn quickly not to over-gather.

IW. How can we learn about native plants in our own area?

GW. The traditional way to learn about native plants is through an apprenticeship, but there are few of these and they are hard to come by. I thought there would be a lot of people here in Texas knowledgeable about plants. There probably are, but they are hard to find. Plant knowledge is a hidden thing. People who know do not necessarily want to be out in the open about it.

I read books by Michael Moore, an herbalist and author of the Southwest. He is one of the most well respected herbalists in country. Michael is located in Southwest, and continues to learn from his customers, often the Mexican-American elders, as well as from reading. His books include information on plants that grow here in Texas even though he was in New Mexico and Arizona.

On my own, I did some very intense field training: I took a field guide out and tried to identify plants. Then when I had done that, I would cross reference the plant with the information in Michael's book. I had a long and steep learning curve. When I started, I didn't know what anything was.

That's how I learned native plants and then with Michael's book figured out which were medicinal. Later, I studied with Michael at his apprentice program. [Currently held at the Southwest School of Botanical Medicine, Bisbee, Arizona]

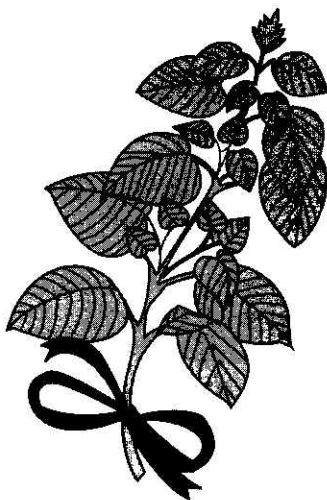
It's a lovely feeling to go walking anywhere and know your friends around you, the plants that grow around you.

I love wildness –there's a surprise around every corner – an old friend around the corner at every turn.

Everyone has a culture of herbalism. It is indigenous to the entire world. Certainly there's a western European tradition of herbalism. My ancestors, Anglo-Saxons, used herbal medicine. People like Michael Moore write books about herbalism, but we've all learned what we know from someone's ancestors. Now that I'm living in Texas, I'm using plants that are different from the ones my ancestors used, but the indigenous population here has a tradition of passing on information about the plants used by Mexican and Indigenous people, and I learn from them. My husband is Mexican-American, so our daughter is really a child of this land. It is so fitting to be able to share the love of its plants with her.

I have been friends with Alma de Mujer since Marsha Gomez was director, and I go there to study with Doña Enriqueta Contreras whenever IWN brings her up from Oaxaca. I've also attended other workshops Doña Enriqueta has held, including a midwives' conference she held here in

Austin. Doña Enriqueta teaches profound lessons. She teaches that having respect for one's body is the most important thing. She teaches us to act upon that respect by not ingesting things that are bad for you. She tells us that people often go to the pharmacy and spend money to get sick. She warns against soda and all that bad stuff that people eat, emphasizing respect for one's body, including eating wholesome foods, not overeating, not abusing one's body. She wants her students to be spiritually in a good place and to avoid abusive relationships.



When you're trying to heal a specific problem, Doña Enriqueta asks you what you think the answer is, because she believes we have the answer inside of us. She also uses colors a lot in her healing, showing how the colors of flowers are relevant to the healing they do.

I also have a friend who is an indigenous man from Mexico. He has taught a class for me and shared an incredible history of people interacting with plants.

IW. How did you get started with Texas Medicinals?

GW. My business grew out of making medicine for clients. After school with Michael Moore, I learned what to do with tinctures and other medicine. You don't just make medicine because you can make medicine. You must have an idea of how you're going to use it – even if you don't have

someone specific in mind. You don't waste plants; you shouldn't make medicine if you don't know how to use it. Better to make less.

Plants are seasonal, you have to plan for the year. You do not have control over supply.

IW. As the mother of a young child, could you discuss your products for children in more detail.

GW. They grew naturally from having a child and knowing that when my baby was sick, I needed to have something on hand. I didn't have time to take out my books with a crying baby in my arms. So I created products that you don't have to think about: Glycerin extracts without alcohol, and sweet tasting. They're safe for kids. And, in my opinion, better than over-the-counter. They're gentle medicine that our bodies know.

IW. How do you see native herbs relating to "mainstream" medicine? Is "mainstream" even an appropriate term?

GW. I refer to Western medicine as "conventional" medicine. What I do is "traditional." A lot of holistic medicine is not traditional, but herbalism is. I think the World Health Organization says that two-thirds (2/3) of the people in the world depend on herbal medicine for their primary health care. This is what people do and have done for hundreds and thousands of years.

It's traditional, more specifically, because I gather medicinal plants around me. But also, there has always been trading, so it's totally reasonable to use some plants from other places while relying primarily on the plants around us.

The concept of traditional medicine is important: the information that my teacher, Michael Moore, got, he got from others. I didn't come along and discover these, and I honor those who went before and whom I've learned from.

I have always tried to keep in touch with the IWN's Alma center. Everything I know is because some indigenous person taught another person.

I try to create my own rituals around wildcrafting and I don't try to co-opt the way a Native American would wildcraft. I try to

looks deep in myself for my own connections. When I gather a plant, I say a prayer and connect with the plant, thanking the plant. I do it with respect and ceremony, in the same spirit as native peoples have thanked the animal that they have killed for meat or the plant they've gathered for food or medicine.

I gather strength from the plants that I visit. Whether I gather them or not. I get "medicine" from them by sitting with them, noticing their beauty and being near them. Sometimes I need to gather them as well for more physiological healing. But it's the communion with the plants, whether I'm gathering them for medicine for other people or myself, that is my medicine.

The spiritual aspect of connecting with the plant is important. It helps to shed our weird western awkwardness with nature.

I really like how natural it is to use plants. One of the most natural things in the world.

Mary Braunagel-Brown (Osage) interviewed Ginger Webb for "Indigenous Woman."

Ginger Webb, herbalist, can be contacted through her web site: www.texasmedicinals.com

