

## Plants: Food and Medicine Around Us

By Ellen Parry Tyler

“Herbal medicine is the medicine of the people,” began Beverley Gray as she sat with a dozen people gathered for a plant walk at a free *community solstice celebration* hosted by the Alaska Plants as Food and Medicine (AFPM) conference. Before leading us down a public trail through the heart of Alaska Pacific University in Anchorage, she briefly sketched a cautionary tale of global proportions: In Canada, [over-harvesting of goldenseal root](#) caused the plant to become endangered; [echinacea was nearly eradicated on the prairie](#); and [rhodiola collection in Russia](#) is thought to be harvested at a rate faster than it grows back. “A network of mycelium holds the earth together,” explained Gray. “When those wild plant roots are gone, the world is changed.”

Creating ethical harvesting and ecosystem preservation guidelines was a major focus of the Alaska Plants as Food and Medicine conference. As a novice forager of wild Alaskan plants I left the four-day event with a cardinal intention and a hand full of practices to restore, develop and sustain a symbiotic exchange between myself and plants, particularly wild plants, that I use for food, health, wellness or gifts. A more comprehensive guidebook for Alaska will be published based on the conversations and review of conference participants. It will be accessible on the conference website and wide distribution will be encouraged.

### **Setting an Intention: It's all about relationships!**

Before coming to the conference, my plant identification and harvesting endeavors in Alaska were limited to berry picking and pointing to chaga growing on Birch trees; I'd heard rumors about chaga being over-harvested, but I really didn't even know what it was used for. To be honest, I always felt a little overwhelmed by the detailed classification of edible, poisonous, potentially allergenic and page-long lists of medicinal qualities for each root, fruit, leaf and flower in the forest. When I thought about ethical issues around foraging wild plants, the orderly, analytical part of my brain desperately wanted quantifiable thresholds for harvesting, rules for permissible techniques, perhaps even gear, spatial or seasonal rules or “best practices” that I could memorize or easily access to navigate “in the field.”

Beverley Gray encouraged attendees at her talks to *ask permission from the plants* before picking them. She shared her experience hearing/sensing “no” and later finding out that the land where she had asked to gather from had been contaminated. I desperately wanted to be that present, aware and connected to my environment; I wanted it like I had wanted to play the piano after seeing Chick Corea play live at the performing arts center; but unlike the fleeting rush of emotions that accompany any masterful show, the speakers and presenters at AFPM invited attendees to gather, use, create and reciprocate, co-creating simple rituals, stories and habits that we could take with us and practice on our own.

### **Tuning in: “Hello my other self!”**

As the days passed, the conversation delved into “how” and “how best” to sustain, create and restore relationships with plants. Dr Allison Kelliher, a medical doctor and traditional healer at Southcentral Foundation, gave a presentation on the health benefits of spending

even just three days- a long weekend- in nature. Kuuyux Ilarion “Larry” Mercurieff, an Aleut elder told a story about how to communicate with nature. His prescription was remarkably simple: clear your mind, set an intention, feel; do all of this without words, without definitions. If you have to speak, make a greeting; say, “Hello my other self.”

### **Reciprocity: Keeping the spirit alive**

What balances a relationship based on resource use? Gratitude. Deep gratitude and bonds as strong as bloodlines. From leaving stones, prayers, pieces of hair and other gifts at gathering sites to transplanting frequently collected plants to home gardens and always remembering to say please and thank you, attendees discussed their individual practices as consumers, healers, prescribers, harvesters, philosophers and artists honoring plants.

One concept that I heard come up again and again was a principal of right relationship or use. This was expressed as an acknowledgement that the greatest protection of plants and plant medicines is sharing and using them; warnings that medicines are lost when traditions are forgotten; and deep appreciation that plant foods and medicines are gifts from the creator and that they are meant to heal. This principle helps to sustain a rich living culture based on non-ownership of resources and is remarkably accessible to any novice who is willing to be patient and hold a little space for such a relationship to develop.

Many indigenous cultures understand aspects of their local environment (what other people might define as “natural resources” or “ecosystem services”) as relatives or ancestors. Meda DeWitt Schleifman, a traditional healer and APFM organizer, asked attendees: “How can we restore our resources back to their true identity as relatives again?” She and Tikaan Galbreath, also on the APFM organizing committee and a co-founder of the Anchorage Food Mosaic, facilitated a small-group activity, outlining and beginning to fill in an up-to-date set of principals and guidelines for ethical harvesting in the State of Alaska. This is a critical conversation and involves the concept of “right relationship” and also extends into the relationships we as humans engage in when it comes to any food or medicine- not just plants; it extends into how we conduct research and treat ourselves and others.

After three days of the conference, plus the opening solstice celebration, I personally felt changed- empowered to continue practices of creating space, gratitude and reciprocity learned here. I was reminded of my own experiences with plants and motivated through interactions with elders, experts and even other amateurs to tune back in to the plant life all around me. I started to ask, “How can I develop a relationship with plants such as the one that Beverley described where she can ask permission directly from the plants to harvest them (and have them answer!)” But looking over my notes, I have a couple practices and I have the intention ...so the only thing between asking and hearing is listening and the enduring practice of patience.

### References:

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