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## Cultivating Weedsdom

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Getting to know the weeds as if your life depended on it!

The title above is not being used merely to be clever. In many ways the quality of one's life does depend on our connection to the plants. It is becoming painfully clear that our adolescent modern culture has taken us down a course of irresponsible recklessness, pillaging the planet and enslaving animals and dark-skinned people. It is time for us to step out of our bubbles back into the world and reject convenience, which has turned out to be a path to death. Life is not meant to be easy.

The cultural historian Thomas Berry entreats us to stop living in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and open up to the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This involves fundamental shifts in all aspects of our human culture. We need to consider the Gaia macrocosm, not just the human microcosm. The huge pressures we are thrusting upon our environment are bringing an end to the Cenozoic era. This crisis is our opportunity to awaken to a new Ecozoic era by reconnecting with nature.

I am told that the word for 'crisis' in Chinese means also "opportunity for change". Eileen Robertson, Health Expert, noted that during the war in Bosnia where she was sent by the WHO, the quality of physical health of the people actually improved when the collapse of the modern convenience systems forced people back out into the gardens and processing their own food. She noted that this was also true during the bankruptcy of Russia following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Colin Spencer, food historian, commented that food rationing in England during and after World War II actually benefited the health of the people. We are beginning to learn that the good life does not equate to an easy or opulent life. The WHO predicts that by 2020 60% of deaths will come from chronic diseases such as cardiovascular disease, which is already the number one killer in many "developed" countries.

This awareness prompts us to recognize that the earth and its people are in deadly conflict. As the martyr Bob Marley points out in his song “War”, “Until the philosophy that holds one race superior and another inferior is finally and permanently discredited and abandoned, everywhere is war...until there are no longer first class and second class citizens of any nation....it’s a war...until the basic human rights are equally guaranteed to all without regard to race....it’s a war. Until that day the dream of lasting peace, world citizenship, rule of international morality will remain but a fleeting illusion to be pursued but never attained...everywhere is war. War War ...” I am a peace warrior and I identify with these words in terms of the struggle we are facing inwardly and outwardly. I feel we need to each do our part to lighten our load upon Gaia and fellow beings. This is something that is part of everyday living. An important way to do this is to learn the plants about you—their names, their uses, their interconnections....because your (our) life does depend on it.

Changes to our very core are being asked of us. Reconnecting with the natural world must ripple through us as we reflect on all aspects of our place in the world. As we get to know nature naturally the questions arise as to...

#### **Why has wild foraging disappeared?**

Experts on prehistoric human life tell us that our ancient ancestors were gatherers and hunters and that it was not until 12,000 years ago that we began to practice agriculture. Even after we began to domesticate plants, foods and medicines gathered from the wild still made up a significant aspect of the human diet. Within western societies this began to decline as more and more people clustered into larger and larger settlements so that access to open lands receded further and further away. It is perhaps only in the last hundred years that wild food in the diet has fallen away in first world countries so that now modern westerners consume most of their diet from 25 cultivated plants. Currently over 60% of the world lives in cities. In my travels throughout the third world I still experience people gathering weeds daily as a supplement to their diet.

Why has this distancing nature and the seasons happened in the west? Time has become something that we consider a scarcity. Once people buy into the idea that they will work 40, 50, 60 hours a week to earn money and then take that money to get the goods they need, actions like wildcrafting, harvesting, cooking, food preservation become skills no longer valued. The media gains its audience through scare

stories and people have been taught to fear nature and the possibility of being poisoned. Yet the truth is we have been poisoned by convenience. It is perceived that the skills mentioned above are tedious and boring.

In addition with the class system in place refined processed food conspicuously prepared by others is elevated and basic food of the earth is associated with the poor and famines, food for animals. At times in human history when food has been scarce it has been the weeds that got us through. It is only then that they are appreciated by people. Otherwise they are somber reminders of our history when we had to rely on nature to see us through. Like an adolescent wishing to be independent and free of our parents' care, we wish to imagine it is our own ingenuity that feeds and cares for us. In addition we feed the pigs and chickens those weeds that come to our aid when there is nothing else. Only when we have eaten the chickens and pigs (and dogs and cats for that matter) do we resort to the animal's food. At other times we scoff at it as though we are somehow better than the weeds that grow beneath our feet.

Our economy has been geared towards seeing scarcity as valuable while the more common something is the less value it has. This is taken to the extreme with the elements such as air and water and earth who are considered to be practically worthless. In a similar way weeds that grow untended by humans are considered noxious while ornamental trees that bear fruit are more seen as a nuisance for the "mess" they make on walkways and otherwise homogenous lawns. By being classified this way these plants are targeted for poisoning and eradication by often horrific means. Ironically this does not seem to stop their proliferation (they thrive in disturbed ecosystems!) but leaves a devastated path in the wake of those who make war on them. Life would be much more pleasant if we adopted the approach of...

## Don't weed...harvest!

It is an irony that plants full of nutrients are tossed aside to make room for the cultivated plants we are familiar with. Exotic invasives largely provide many of the solutions for satisfying our needs. They challenge us to use them faster than they can grow. Our world is about abundance not scarcity. Invasive Exotics are here to remind us of that through their weediness.

A prime example of a valuable weed is lambsquarter who is in the same family as spinach. She is dug up as a useless nuisance to be replaced by our culinary desire for spinach and yet in every way lambsquarter is nutritionally superior. Wonder and reflect on that irony. If you must pull these weeds up at least use them. Don't just toss them aside. Take them and eat them. They are gifts to us, given freely

by Gaia to sustain us—offered by no effort of our own. If you are pulling them up anyway, why not integrate them into your diet? And when you get this message and begin to have them in your diet, be creative in their use. Don't just plop them down naked on your guests' plate. It is too much to ask others to learn the values too quickly. Instead incorporate them into dishes that are familiar and you will quickly win over your guest to this cuisine with a wild twist.

We have been trained here in the west to be passive observers watching with our minds' eyes the world pass before us, clicking the mouse or the channel to go everywhere imaginable. But this prophylactic approach to life leaves our bodies atrophying and our spirits deadened. One of the most profound acts to take in these modern times is to mindfully (heartfully and spiritfully) harvest a plant from the wild. I am still moved by it though I consider myself a wildcrafter and my knowing hands move on their own accord having gathered thousands of plants for food and medicine. When I was first learning I was taught some Native American ways of offering tobacco to plants before harvesting them. And though I greatly respect tobacco it is not a plant I carry around with me, so I often felt awkward and disrespectful without it. Finally one of my teachers taught me that it is not so much tobacco itself as offering something that I value be it a bit of hair (so the fairies can make sweaters says my teacher Greenlight), or a bit of food, or saliva in a dry climate or a breath of CO<sub>2</sub>. Often I simply offer kind words. I usually harvest with my hands, perhaps using a digging stick if I go after a root. I get down on the ground and feel the plant and see who it is in relation to its neighbors; what place it holds in its ecosystem. I tell it why I have come for it and let it know that I have seen others of its kind around. I check in my heart to see if it feels right and that this is the one for me. If so, I reach down into the earth if I am taking the whole plant and dig out soil. Deeper and deeper I explore moving the plant back and forth, seeing how much it resists coming. If I can really slow down and flow with it, I can feel it start to trust me and release itself from its hold on the mother and come up into my arms. Sometimes some of the taproot will break and I pray it may grow back from there. Other times there are many sizeable roots that come off the center and I can take some of those for my needs and replant the being, leaving hardly a trace that I have been there. It is a humbling unifying experience to harvest a plant in that way. Sometime I use tools and remove them that way. But I try to be as present as I can, remembering that this being is giving itself for the health of me and my community. I am thankful.

One of the great crimes that I have heard many times in the United States by inexperienced adults is taking children into the woods to

demonstrate the ways of the native people. They take acorns and grind them up and serve them as some sort of gruel which the children find disgusting. And in so many words the adults are saying, “See aren’t you lucky you have pizza and don’t have to live like those savages?!” A sincere attempt to introduce acorns into a children’s diet would be to process them and share them with kids in cookies or cornbread or some other recognizable food that they can accept and appreciate as a new layer of flavor with. I have done this with many children with great success.

“Let your food be your medicine and your medicine be your food” is a wonderful quote attributed to the Greek Hippocrates. There is such an emphasis on simply filling the belly. People do not realize that our bodies need not only enough calories a day from fats, proteins and carbohydrates, but also micronutrients, essential vitamins and minerals. They are essential because without them our bodies are unable to metabolize the food and perform all the thousands of chemical reactions necessary for us to be healthy. Weeds are packed with these essential ingredients and we need them only in small quantities. That is why we need to learn to...

## Nibble

Nibbling is taking in a small quantity of a plant. We have isolated a lot of chemicals and have set up many interesting models to explain how they work. But keep in mind that there are thousands upon thousands of different chemicals in the natural world. Nibbling allows us to take many of them in. We are told that we use only about 10% of our brain. I like to think that the other 90% builds the pathways through which we connect to the rest of the world. When nibbling those micronutrients into our body and brain, we facilitate our connection to the universe. It would explain why modern humans who nibble on nothing except maybe their fingernails and eat less than two-dozen plants in their diet feel so depressed and lonely and disconnected from the world. Nibbling is one of the ways we can be part of the world. Learn the plants growing around you and those few that are best not to nibble, and interact with your world each day with your mouth. One of the best way to take in phytonutrients and medicines is with...

## Teas

When you say tea to most people they think black tea (*Camilla sinensis*), a native to Asia grown on plantations with workers living in slave-like conditions throughout the tropical climates of the world.

How this came to be is largely the story of colonialism that continues to this day. With this atrocity we lost our most powerful form of taking medicine into the body. Even people who have expanded their repertoire to include green tea or peppermint or rooibos still fall short of the potential of teas as healing medicines.

This became apparent to me when I took a long trek across the state of North Carolina in 2001. This pilgrimage came about because I was becoming aware that though I had become intellectually knowledgeable about how plants were important to our health and well-being, I was detached from them. I had substituted knowledge for experience. So on a cold March morning I headed out from the coastal town of little Washington with 40 pounds on my back and began a walk of 400 miles over the next month. Twice a day I would light small fires and cook food from concentrated foods I carried mixed with wild foods I foraged and as importantly drank teas from a wide variety of plants I found around me. It was a rite of passage for me and took me to a new level of being—reconnecting to mother earth. I learned that there were hundreds of plants to make tea with. And when I drank those teas made from half a dozen to two dozen plants I felt a satisfaction inside myself that I had never felt before.

## Food Insecurity

The term Food Security is somewhat ambiguous but has become a topic of discussion as multi-national corporations have undermined self-sufficiency in countries that have become increasingly reliant on goods from other countries. But it goes deeper than that concerning issues such as: workers rights, extensive environmental degradation, food quality impacts from industrial agriculture, loss of diversity, and indeed a recognized impact to the entire planet. All of these can be seen as jeopardizing food security. These concerns can all be addressed by empowering people with knowledge of and experience with the weeds of their region. This re-skilling of the people can balance out these detrimental effects and re-establish true food security. Tim Lang, professor of food policy London College emphasizes that in addition to our personal evolution we need to form a movement. That being true, we still must begin with another movement. That motion is to bend down and harvest from nature's abundance. Here are...

Some common weeds you can eat

**Patrick Holden, Director of the Soil Association, employs us to, “Feel what the land wants and co-habitat with it.” I wish to**

share with those of you who have at least a passing care for the plants, my friends who can help to give you the courage to nibble, to use all your senses, to bring the energies of these beings inside you so that you may strengthen your walk on this planet. Find someone who knows these beings and get out there and meet them. They are waiting to meet you...

**Allium**                      **ramson, wild garlic**    **Alliaceae (Liliaceae)**

This pungent family is important cooked in so many dishes. Though they have their place raw in moderation they can take people out of balance if over used. Beside the flavor and meat-like quality they provide, they are often medicinally potent.

**Amaranthus spp.**            **amaranth**    **Amaranthaceae**

This green herb comes up all over tilled gardens and is one of the pigweeds. Some species develop spurs when older but I use the whole plants when they are young and tender. When older I just use the leaves and tops, cooking them in a variety of ways. If in seed I will add them to my food. To harvest seed, hang the mature plants upside down and enclose with a paper bag after it has dried a while.

**Bidens spp.**                **blackjack**    **Asteraceae**

This pan-world genus is eaten many places as a cooked leaf green and considered in western herbalism to be an anti-histamine.

**Chenopodium spp.**        **lambsquarter**    **Chenopodiaceae**

This close relative of quinoa (*C. quinoa*) is remarkably weeded out in favor of its nutritionally inferior cousins beets and chard. Do not hesitate to responsibly harvest this herb and include it regularly in your diet in a host of ways similar to amaranth. This is another plant called pigweed. Do be aware that this family contains a lot of Oxalates.

**Cirsium spp.**                **thistle**        **Asteraceae**

This tribe of composites is a group of many genera. The famous ones include milk thistle, artichoke leaf, and blessed thistle. As a general rule think of thistles as good for your liver. The roots of common thistles are tasty like burdock roots when harvested when the plants are in their rosette stage. All parts of the thistle are edible. Be creative. I have harvested the mighty elk thistle with me teacher Greenlight and feasted on it from flowerhead to roots below-- as mighty a being as its animal namesake.

**Commelina      dayflower      Commelinaceae**

I have seen many species of this genus around Africa but the blue flowered one, which I believe is from Asia, I have seen all over the world. That is the one I have used the most in terms of the leaves and flowers and young green seeds as food both raw and cooked. It is my understanding that most members from this family are edible.

**Galinsoga      quickweed/ galian soldier      Asteraceae**

Few people know this plant to be edible and it is yet another composite that is quite edible. I eat the leaves usually cooked in a greens mix. See if you can eat this faster than it grows.

**Medicago sativa      alfalfa      Fabaceae**

Not only is this plant good for your soil as a deep-rooting nitrogen-fixer, its dried leaves as tea or powdered as a drink are excellent sources of minerals and vitamins.

**Plantago spp.      plantain      Plantaginaceae**

The leaves of this genus are good to eat raw or cooked. There is a lot of medicine available from these beings as well. The seeds can be ground into a flour and also make a good bulk laxative.

**Portulaca      purslane      Portulacaceae**

This plant grows weedy all over southern Africa and most people I meet do not know it at all. The plant is a succulent, nice for salads or a thickener in soups. The oils, vitamins and minerals in this plant are really helpful in maintaining health.

**Sonchus      sow thistle      Asteraceae**

This is another weed that few people recognize which looks like a cross between a thistle and a dandelion. Though a bit bitter raw, it is excellent in cooked greens.

**Stelleria      chickweed      Caryophyllaceae**

This whole above ground plant is the premiere plant of the wild salad greens. But it also makes a good green for a raw pesto.

**Taraxacum      dandelion      Asteraceae**

Every part of this versatile weed is edible. Make the flowers into wine or a salad. Make the leaves a salad or pate. Sautee the roots in a stir fry.



**This is a foundation plant that serves as food and medicine. Make a wish, blow those puffs and help them to propagate.**

**Urtica**

**nettles**

**Urticaceae**

**This plant has an impressive nutritional profile. Even its sting is good medicine and brain food. Leaves are tasty as cooked greens and are excellent powdered. Nettles is famous in teas and tinctures. Every part of the plant is medicine but it is best to harvest the leaves for food before the plant goes to flower. Even the remains of the plant are a famous compost admixture in Biodynamics.**

**No more hunger—Permaculture wisdom**

There is a belief that as problems present themselves to us the solution also comes to life—two sides to the same coin. A new philosophy of how to live together on the planet came to life in Australia in the 1970's developed by David Holmgren and Bill Mollison as a solution to balance the unsustainable path we are now walking. Their approach is called Permanent Agriculture and combines a many-faceted approach to deal with the needs and wants of humanity. It emphasizes the importance of water use and values multi-functions. Look around and you will learn more. Its seeds are being planted everywhere. Cultivate it in your life and it will provide the tools for us to reconnect humanity with Gaia.

## Other wild foods

There is plenty of food for us in the wild. Beyond the amazing gifts of green herbs we have a wide store of other parts of plants that will not only take care of our needs, but also our wants and desires. Though it is beyond the scope of this paper I want to at least mention the vast availability of fruits, nuts and seeds. The list of possible foods from these three areas would fill pages and pages. Not least of these is the mighty Oak who has held the cornerstone for human evolution since prehistory. All you need is two handfuls of acorns a day to meet all your macro-nutrient requirements. Start there and that confidence will greatly empower you, but don't stop there for the variety is practically endless.

I am told that nowhere in England is more than 75 miles from the ocean. If Gaia is our mother then the oceans are our amniotic fluids and seaweeds are our umbilical cords. Take the time to bring small

quantities of seaweed into your regular diet and use this plant in your compost and on your body to achieve vibrant health.

Mycologists are aware of about 10,000 mushrooms in the world. 400 of which are considered choice edibles. 400 are considered poisonous (of which only a few dozen are deadly) and the rest are possible sources of medicines, dyes, fibers, sacraments, and play important roles in the ecosystems of the world. Why they have been so marginalized in modern living is a great wonder. Knowing your mushrooms provides a high protein source that can in many cases be dried for later use. There is a magical wonder to mushrooms once you enter their world and welcome them into your life.

These other wild foods along with the weeds are abundant and ready to reclaim their roles as sustainers of human life. They are ancient sentient beings waiting patiently for us to awaken from our self-delusions back into the world of plenty.

#### **Enhancing foods through fermentation**

Nature provides us in abundance with the foods we need to thrive through the simple, natural act of fermentation. Ferment comes from the Old French word derived from Latin, fermentio which means boiling. This is because the natural off-gassing of CO<sub>2</sub> from some kinds of ferments give the impression of boiling. Perhaps you have never looked into fermentation, but you have most certainly eaten fermented foods and drinks. There are the well known ones such as wine, beer, vinegar, cheese, yoghurt....but also many other common foods such as black tea, chocolate, sauerkraut and pickles as well as lesser known famous foods from other cultures such as miso, kim chi, and kefir are fermented. Stephen Buhner, author of "Sacred and Healing Herbal Beers," makes a case for the view that humans would have died off long ago without fermentation. Why? Not only does fermentation preserve food to make food available during times when food is scarce but the act of fermentation significantly increases the nutrition of that which is fermented. You can read all about it in Sandor Katz's empowering book, "Wild Fermentation" for not only a complete history of fermentation but also ways to simply prepare them. It is important that we...

### **Don't just think about it...eat it**

If these are just words on a page for you to mull around in your head a while before moving on, then you've missed the message. This is about doing and being. It is about getting up off your donkey and getting out there. Promise right now that you will eat something wild

before you eat another store bought thing. And that is only the beginning. How many of the plants mentioned above do you know intimately? One walk around your neighborhood and you will meet all these plants and oh so many more. Promise yourself that you will learn the plants you see every day. Walk around asking, “Who are you?” and before long you will start finding out. They will become your friends and you will look forward to seeing (and nibbling) on them each day.

As Satish Kumar points out, when an apple comes into fruit on a tree it is freely offered for the deer and bear and bees and worms but not for humans. We are told we must get a job and earn money to go to a store to buy the apple. Are we the lowly of the world or is this a deception? I encourage you to regain your right as the bible says, “And God said, Behold, I have given you every herb bearing seed...and every tree, which is the fruit of a tree yielding seed; to you it shall be meat.” This is repeated in all the sacred texts of the world. It is our birthright to have our needs provided by the natural abundance of the earth. It is our artificial economic system that focuses on scarcity. Stand up for this right and embrace the earth in all its glory! Aho Mataquiassa!

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