

A Gathering of Old Friends

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The process of gathering and using local herbs is uncommon among acupuncturists these days. Traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) has an outstanding clinical tradition that stands beautifully on its own, but because of this clinical focus, the benefits of growing or gathering herbs are now often overlooked. One only needs to recognize the names, *Shen Nong* or *Li Shi Zhen*, to remember that gathering wild plants has been the tradition, not the exception, for thousands of years in Chinese herbal medicine. We (the authors) have found our lives to be far richer because of our familiarity with various aspects of traditional medicines. Robert has spent years collecting native plants and running medicinal herb gardens in China and California. David has spent a large portion of his adult life studying with Hawaiian elders and gathering wild herbs for himself and his patients.

Some people say Chinese herbs should not be mixed with non-Chinese herbs. We disagree. Plants not used in China can still be incorporated into a TCM practice, but a bit more research and investigation is needed to do so. Determining the energetic uses of a non-TCM herb is not that difficult with basic knowledge of plant families and information on the traditional uses of the plant. Besides, chances are that many "weeds" in your area also grow somewhere in China. If so, you can be certain they have found their way into the pharmacopoeia. Each of the authors has "discovered" more than a hundred plants growing near our homes - either as wild weeds or cultivated garden plants - whose energetic uses are well delineated in Chinese texts.

By growing, gathering and using local medicines, we are not just adding different tools to our toolbox; we're learning to use our tools *in a different way*. Growing and gathering allow us to re-establish a relationship to herbs as *plants* from the earth, not just something we buy from a vendor. This alone can change the way we view our patients, our medicine and ourselves.

Through continued contact with plants, we begin to regard them as old friends. We discover the neighborhoods where they live: Is it rainy there, or dry? Are our friends reclusive, or do they like being around others? What weather makes them stronger or weaker? Who else is in the neighborhood? We always understand our friends better if we meet them on their own turf.

The remarkable teacher Jeffrey C. Yuen delineates numerous Daoist practices of relating to an herb as a living entity: growing it, tasting it, bathing in it and using it as incense. He speaks of developing a *relationship* with the plant. This relationship is at the heart of most traditional medicines and is missing from most acupuncture practices.

When we gather plants for food and medicine long enough, we begin to see patterns in their appearance and effects. Each plant and flower has a specific "look" to it. That "look" more than likely indicates a plant is in a certain family. Each family has predictable pharmacological actions on the human body. Malvaceae will probably moisten your tissues. Myrtaceae will constipate you. Rubiaceae are unpredictable. Euphorbiaceae? Bring a book with you. And if you don't know what a Solanaceae looks like, you'd better have your life insurance paid up!

For a shaman, this was likely somewhat unconscious, and but a small part of a subtler, deeper

understanding that can come only through time and by *sitting* with plants. When we gather herbs, we must be willing to *listen* to the forest, not just with our ears but also with our bodies. We must empty our minds and *pay attention*. These plants - our friends - become our teachers.

In traditional culture, the use of a plant was determined not by reading a book or from a dried sample in a drawer, but by going out and visiting them where they live. Hawaiian practitioners gather from "Wao Akua," the "Forest of the Gods," and only will gather for one patient on each journey. Through our diligence, we become more deeply connected to the source, the origins of the medicines we use. This, in turn, connects us to their energetics. Actually seeing and experiencing herbs as *plants* gives them a context that otherwise may be lost. Live plants convey *information* to us that may be missing from our experience with a processed herb. In traditional medicine, this is referred to as the "spirit of the plant."

The philosopher Henri Bergot called this the "intuitive method" of knowing: learning something by experiencing it in its whole form. This is how we learn to ride a bike; play an instrument; dance; do *tai ji quan*, etc. While it does not replace science, tradition or common sense, it is a critical part of practicing medicine.

So, how do we begin? There are lots of ways. A good first step is to educate yourself in basic botany, the international language of plants. You can plant a garden and pay attention to what happens there. Learn the local plants of your area. How did the native population use them? What other information can you find? Remember, it's also important to know how any herb is properly prepared, so you will need to do some research. Take an herb class from a non-TCM herbalist: You can learn *a lot*.

Learn some traditional gathering practices and maintain a sense of the sacred while growing or gathering. It doesn't have to be pretentious, just a simple acknowledgement of the small, quiet miracles that often slip under our radar.

Learn other systems of traditional medicine. See how they compare to TCM. The Chinese have been assimilating medical techniques from other cultures for thousands of years. You are part of a long and distinguished tradition. As you begin to learn what grows wild in your area, your friendships may deepen. New friends may become trusted confidants.

In future articles, we will give some guidelines on how to begin using the medicines that grow in your area.

NOVEMBER 2003