



Intuitive Herbalism

THE ART AND CRAFT OF HEALING

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An exploration of the plants growing around us, of intuition, initiation and the medicine of mindfulness. Working with the heart and the soul and honouring the spirit within nature.

The ancient craft of the herbalist

Herbs have featured in every culture around the world as part of a rich tradition of medical practice. Thousands of plants are still used regularly worldwide, some in a traditional way, some in a modern way. They

have been described in ways that range from the deeply poetic, steeped in folklore and mythology to the reductive biochemical favoured in orthodox medicine today. No doubt in another 1000 years (if humans are still around), there will be different ways of investigating, evaluating, describing and using herbs, yet the herbs will very likely be the same. It is fascinating to consider that herbs we use today may well have been used in similar ways thousands of years ago by our ancestors.

The craft of the herbalist is still alive and well in Britain, and is a great area to explore at any level, whether you simply love plants, want to learn about self healing or want to develop your skills to work with herbs to promote health for those around you.



Our spiritual heritage within nature

Real knowledge is passed on through experience and love. For most of us, the school classes we remember best are the ones where the teacher was full of enthusiasm and passion for the subject. The word enthusiasm derives from the greek *entheos* 'having the god within'. Perhaps when we feel enthusiasm for the herbs it is the spirit of nature we have allowed within. If we listen carefully, this realm of experience can become a potent place of teaching.

All of us have had experiences of wonder whilst being in nature. By consciously nurturing this state of wonder we can allow ourselves rich and varied experiences of the natural world. Certain aspects of nature will resonate with each of us in different ways, and by following this resonance we can find our personal medicine from within the herbs.

I feel it is so important, in a time where we seem to be progressively destroying our global environment, to nurture our connection with nature. As any gardener knows, energy given to the earth returns to us in beauty, gratitude and a simple peace of being part of nature.

Learning about herbs and how they relate to our bodies, our psyche and our spirit is a wonderful way to deepen this connection. Many of us take great joy in harvesting our own vegetables - why not expand your range and harvest your own medicine?

Even without a garden, there is such an abundance of plants growing wild that make themselves available to us. As I write this, the wild garlic leaves are starting to show in the woods across the lake from me, the primroses are appearing along with nettles, cleavers and celandines. If you look closely, tiny Lady's Mantle plants are appearing and the curious flowers of Butterbur are popping up along the water side.

Wild Garlic is a fantastic alternative to bulb garlic in spring, and the vibrancy, pungency and strength means it has traditionally been used as a post winter detox. An infusion of the leaves or unopened flower buds in vinegar makes a fiery spring tonic. If you haven't tried the unopened flower buds, you may be in for a potent and satisfying surprise - I find nibbling them as I take a spring walk can't help but cheer me out of winter slowness. Perhaps the Bears knew this, earning the plant the common name Bear's garlic.



Developing intuition with herbs

The best way to learn is through direct experience. Herb books may give you information, some herbalists will have lists of uses, but nothing compares to handling, tasting, experiencing and preparing the herb yourself.

During the classes I teach, the space is left open for people to experience the herb as much as possible in their own way. Only once everyone has a 'feeling' for the herb will we start to talk about what is already known and map our experiences onto this knowledge base.

When we name something, it can easily become a label that boxes in the meaning. For instance, if you have perceived your neighbour as 'a plumber' for 15 years, you may never start the conversation about music that reveals that he is actually an incredible pianist. Likewise, if we think we understand a plant once it is categorised as 'Echinacea for immunity' or 'St. John's wort for depression', we actually miss out on the wider reality of that plant. For this reason, when I teach, I do not teach by giving labels, but by helping nurture your ability to listen to both you body, your insights and the plant directly.

Developing intuition is a skill based on experience and self-awareness. Our experiences are reflections of our own consciousness, and it's only once we engage with the reflections that the plants show us individually that can we start to appreciate how they can help others. In other words, we must learn our own medicine to start to learn how to support others.

Intuitive herbalism - Herbs



There are so many plants growing around us and within a common hedgerow it is not difficult to find a wide range of plants that can be and have been used in healing.

Nettle, dandelion, meadowsweet, willow, chickweed, lemon balm - all are familiar herbs (often called 'weeds') which present themselves to us in abundance. Whilst chasing after exotic herbs from India or China often excites the imagination, it can be easy to overlook those plants growing around us which offer so much.

In the picture here, Tracy is holding a freshly harvested marshmallow. We studied the plant outside, explored it further inside, and then dried the roots to make into a tea. This tea in particular became a favourite of several people in this class.

Last summer we prepared a distillation (using the copper still shown on the front cover) of roses harvested from an exceptional rose garden in the Forest of Dean. Even with 130 heads, we only managed a fraction of a drop of rose oil! However, we did produce 2 litres of excellent rose water which has been much prized by everyone involved in making it.

Our choice of herbs follows the seasons. In spring, we harvest fresh greens of garlic and nettle as well as the early spring flowers. Summer



gives us such an abundance that it can be hard to choose! Autumn takes us to the berries - elderberry, hawthorn and sloe, whilst moving into winter we set to digging up the roots of burdock, dandelion, echinacea, elecampane.

Leading up to Christmas we have a slightly different session, purely based on incense. Here we learn to distinguish 10 to 15 different smokes and start to experience their different qualities.



Intuitive herbalism - Techniques

There are many ways of developing our relationship and understanding of plants. Listed across this page are some of the techniques that I work with in classes to help people develop their skills.

- Experiencing the effects of **taste and smell**

Taste and smell are a fundamental building block to understanding herbs. Our nose and tongue are not here just to give us pleasure, but rather to inform us about the world we are engaged with. By watching carefully for the effect these have on us we can learn both about ourselves and the herbs.

- The **archetypal elements**, earth, water, air, fire, ether and their qualities

The elements have been used throughout the world as a map for describing and helping understand our experience. By consciously experiencing each of these, we better understand their qualities, their effect on us and the resonances each has with different herbs.



- Techniques of **journeying**, working with the imagination and dreamtime

Dreaming and journeying are common phenomena throughout the world, and have universally been used for the acquisition of knowledge and understanding. During the classes we work with meditation, drum journeys (shamanic journeying) and body scanning as ways of touching into different ways of knowing. Each person is encouraged to find their own preferred way of journeying and is supported in interpreting the insights received. All these techniques are aspects of a light trance state, which we use consciously within the course to acquire insight.

- Listening to the **body**

Many of us have been trained to perceive illness from a particular perspective that we call 'medicine'. Fundamental beliefs within this paradigm tell us that illness should be perceived as a *problem*, that we can diagnose that *problem* with technical and expert support, and that biochemical treatment can either fix or suppress the *problem*. There is a fundamentally different way of looking at health. Consider for a moment what it would mean to perceive illness as a teaching, symptoms as the body attempting to communicate to you and healing as a process of growing, understanding yourself and your environment better and improving your wellbeing. Whilst this approach is not always suitable, it can be extremely powerful in a surprising number of issues with health. Throughout the courses we learn simple techniques to help you listen to the body and make sense of its communications with you.

- Introduction to **traditional medical systems**

Systems such as Ayurveda and Traditional Chinese Medicine have a rich symbolic framework that is absent from western medical thinking. To fully understand these systems is many years work, but during the course we draw on some key concepts to help us interpret and understand what we are feeling and experiencing. In particular we start to experience the energy described as chi, explore the basics of the meridian system and look at the relationships between thoughts, emotions and the body.

- **Practical herbal medicine**

Working in a hands on way with the herbs is an essential part of learning. Whilst information can be gained through study and journeying, it remains meaningless until you are able to ground it in physical reality. In practice this means learning how to recognise plants, when to harvest, how to make use of the harvest and how to apply the techniques of traditional medicine which include tinctures, oils, creams, lozenges, syrups, washes, smudges and incenses. In the picture opposite you can see us making an inula syrup using freshly cut inula elecampane root with local honey.



- Many other approaches - too many to elaborate on here, but in brief:
 - How to use herbs safely
 - The qualities of space, experiencing landscapes and different ecosystems
 - Developing our senses, identifying our strengths
 - Opening and developing the ability to 'see with the heart'
 - Finding stillness within ourselves, allowing us to develop greater mindfulness
 - Becoming skilled at recognising our own process of healing, our preconceptions and our projections
 - Developing greater awareness of our limiting belief systems and how to change them
 - Reconnecting with younger parts of ourselves which give us a greater perspective
 - Working with the ancestors, developing respect, trust and understanding
 - Working with our soul history, exploring karma
 - Appreciating the spirit within nature, why we have learned to reject it and what we can do to open our perception to it again
 - The use of movement and sound in helping to understand plants.
 - The role of modern day research as an approach to knowing
 - Everyday household herbal remedies

Course structures

- **Herb walks** Throughout the year, a short walk helping you to identify wild plants.
- **Introductory** The two or three day classes introduce you to a wide range of techniques and skills useful when working intuitively with herbs. We learn about a range of local herbs and practical ways of working with them for healing.
- **Year long class** A small group (generally 5 or 6 people) meet for *two days* every month over the year, exploring the herbs as they emerge and going deep into the journey of our own healing and understanding. I expect every one on this class to move through a significant transition in themselves in terms of their own healing and the expansion of their awareness. Prior experience in healing/shamanism/therapy/herbs is useful but not essential.
- **Deepening** Seasonally orientated *three day* follow on sessions. For those unable to commit to the year class, we can work out a flexible programme of these modules to develop your interest. For those who have done the year class or who have prior experience, the deepening classes allow you to develop your skills further in a structured way.



About the courses

Nathaniel Hughes is an experienced medical herbalist and naturopathic healer. He started study into the realms of medicine with a degree in chemistry, developed a specific focus with four year full time study of herbalism, and continually learns more through studies in healing, shamanism and bodywork. He divides his time 50:50 between teaching and practice, finding that each brings colour and understanding to the other:

The intention of all courses is to nurture your individual experience and personal meeting with the plants; the majority of the knowledge gained comes from our experiences, the lesser part from books or 'received knowledge'.

Developing clear intuition is a key part of the courses, and requires both mindfulness and emotional awareness. The small group sizes help us to develop these skills, and provides a safe space for this exploration. As the group develops and we go deeper in the meetings with individual herbs, we start to find the particular gifts each participant brings and thus can mould the classes around *your* gifts and abilities (rather than my concept of 'teaching'). Participants experience of this is that it is very empowering and confirming, giving them the space to develop more confidence in their own inner knowing.

Booking

To make an enquiry, please email me using the form at the end of my website (www.ruskinapothecary.org.uk) or else leave a phone message on 01453 835 029. Even better, write to me at Ruskin Apothecary, Ruskin Mill, Old Bristol Road, Nailsworth, GL6 0LA

For all but the introductory classes, I like to speak to you first to find out what your particular interests are. Classes are very much geared towards the needs of the participants, so the better I know you, the better the class. All those interested in the year class are invited to the Apothecary to talk and confirm that this course is suitable for them.

I maintain small group sizes and reasonable prices. Courses generally work out at between £55 - £75 per day depending on the venue and whether food is provided.

I look forward to meeting you, and wish you well in your journey into knowing plants.

Last updated: 24th October 2011



For latest dates, venues and to find out more about the classes, see www.ruskinapothecary.org.uk