

Lessons From the Earth

Patricia Howell harvests healing herbs in North Georgia. By Allison Barnes

Healing plants abound in the southern Appalachian foothills. Herbalist Patricia Howell knows this. She carefully combs the land in North Georgia, searching for cures. A Master Gardener and a member of the American Herbalists Guild, she teaches classes at the Foxfire Museum and Heritage Center in Mountain City. Through her company, Botanologos, she shares the secrets of the Earth with those willing to learn and be healed.

“I’m a Healer” “This region of the Appalachians is one of the most botanically diverse places on the planet,” says Patricia, wearing knee-high rain boots on a soggy Friday afternoon. These come in handy as she trudges through the mountainside searching for herbs and plants she considers medicinal gold. She started Botanologos as a school for people to learn alternatives to what she felt were harsh medicines and procedures to cure illnesses. Many of her students are medical professionals who simply want to be enlightened about herbs.

“When I take people out to do a plant walk to teach them about medicinal plants, we can hardly walk very far. To get from here to there,” she says, gesturing a short distance away, “would take two hours, because there’s so much to see. You could do it over again in two months and find completely different plants.”

Patricia collects leaves, bark, roots, and whole plants; studies them; and turns them into infusions, extractions, teas, syrups, skin salves, and tinctures (alcohol extracts) to help her clients get well.

“I’m a healer,” she says. With herbal medicine practices in Clayton and Decatur, she cites a number of plants that help relieve a variety of symptoms. She uses



Herbalist Patricia Howell collects and studies southern Appalachian plants and flowers, using their medicinal qualities to help keep people healthy.

PHOTOGRAPHS: OWEN STAYNER

FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: Patricia collects wild plants at the Foxfire Museum and Heritage Center in Mountain City (pictured) and in the woods around her nearby home. Here, she compounds dried red sumac berries (*Rhus glabra*). Patricia has become familiar with the medicinal qualities of hundreds of plants and flowers.



lobelia or Indian tobacco to alleviate respiratory inflammation, goldenrod flowers and leaves to soothe urinary tract infections and seasonal allergies, and yellow root to kill stomach bacteria and pacify ulcers. She may use turkey tail fungus to boost the immune system of a patient taking cancer drugs or a passion-flower infusion to fight headaches brought on by stress.

“Holistic medicine is much more about the body-mind connection,” Patricia says. “What are the emotional and physical factors that work here? That’s really where herbs are phenomenal. They address things at the core level and bring them into balance.”

Much like the way the answer to a riddle just somehow becomes clear, she sometimes sees a characteristic in a plant that gives her the inkling that it might relieve someone’s cold, headache, fever, or chronic ailment. “You build a relationship with the plants,” she says. “I’m here to act as a person who can interpret for the plants.”

Kitchen Medicine For someone with a degree in audio engineering who did years of sound work at concerts for artists including Ella Fitzgerald and Peggy Lee, a field of herbs seems like an unlikely field of study. Yet having grown up on the tallgrass prairies of Illinois, she has a lifelong connection to plants. In her teens she began mixing elixirs and poultices for cold-stricken family members and then brewed a tea for her college dorm mates.

“I’m sure things tasted horrible, but I started teaching myself. You can go to anyone’s spice cabinet and make an herbal remedy,” Patricia says. “Kitchen medicine, we call it.”


Back then it was just a hobby she chalked up to the scholarly disposition


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Herbal How-To

Patricia's Botanologos classes meet at The Center on Warwoman in Clayton. Courses range from a 10-week program to weekend programs for adults and children. She takes a class to Greece each year to study medicinal plants of that region. Her book, *Medicinal Plants of the Southern Appalachians*, encompasses 20 years of her research and details the healing qualities of 45 plants. For more information visit www.botanologos.com.

of her Greek heritage. After college, her sister got sick with leukemia and died within eight months of the diagnosis. Patricia went back and prioritized what she'd always wanted to do and then attended the California School of Herbal Studies, choosing herbs as her new career.

Plants drew her to Georgia during a spring visit with friends. Everything was in bloom, and the plants made her feel at home. For her, coming to Georgia to set up her practice was a return to her first love. "I'm the luckiest person in the world," she says, "because I get to see people's lives changed by plants." ●

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