

# The Changing Landscape of Herbs

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What a difference a few years can make. I can clearly recall defending using Echinacea. When no one had heard of one of my favorite herbs, St. John's Wort. When Ginkgo was unknown. Now I pass these old friends all nicely boxed up in high profile locations at the local chain drugstore. I read about them in the New York Times. They're referenced in comic strips, they are the star of schmaltzy overdone TV ads. So why am I growing more and more uncomfortable about all this hype and supposed public awareness of the benefit of herbs?

The herbs are being marketed. People are making choices the way we've been taught in the last few decades, in response to advertising. The motivation of marketing is to sell. We are pressed to buy. Using these new best sellers is sexy, makes you one of the gang, impresses your friends. Madison Avenue creates an aura, a need. And what is the motivation? Profit. This is not the motivation of the plants. For an herbalist, to make a recommendation that a client use a particular herb based on profit is unethical. Why do we condone it for big business?

Herbs are being mistaken as a substitute for drugs. When people swap herbs for drugs they are doing themselves a disservice, may be endangering themselves, and are missing many of the important aspects of herbology. In the herbal tradition I was trained in, we didn't learn to suggest herbs for conditions, but rather for people. There are hundreds of herbs that might help with menstrual difficulties. Some help certain symptoms while exacerbating others. When working to help a specific condition, especially long standing, an understanding of both the person and the effect of the herbs is essential. Choosing a product after seeing a label that says "female help" is not sufficient. In another example, Skullcap is a great herb for an occasional headache. But unlike aspirin and other pain relievers it seems to work best when you also lie down, relax, and take some time out. It doesn't "keep you going" like most common drugs. A person expecting a conventional pain relieving response would be very disappointed.

The dose and content of herbs is different than drugs. To effectively use herbs there are variables that are different from drugs. With herbs you need to learn what part of the plant is effective for your needs, what season the plant should be harvested in, the timing and amount of the dose, and if the herb is best taken internally or externally, and also if it is most effective as a tincture, an infusion (a strong tea), inhaled, a vinegar, eaten, or some other method. In marketing herbs, that is too much information for the seller to impart to the consumer. They are looking for the quick and easy method that convinces you to walk out of the store with the product. I have had countless conversations with people claiming an herb was not effective. When I ask for more details, I often learn that someone has bought combinations that don't work well together or that have opposite effects, aren't taking enough, are taking too much, or are taking the wrong form. They didn't know. Another problem is that for legal and practical reasons, and sometimes financial reasons, the dosing instruction on packages is non-specific, doesn't address personal differences, and is frequently too much.

The relationship with the plant is being left behind. How many people who are using St. John's Wort are walking by it all summer and never realizing that is what they are taking? I've met dozens of people who swear by Echinacea and don't realize they have a common variety of it growing in their front yard. Not only that, they have no clue on how to harvest and use these plants and that it is easy to do so! My experience is that when people have a "story" behind an herb, especially when they have the experience of knowing the plant, the herb is more effective. That may include being a part of the harvesting and preparation of the plant, knowing the area where the plant is grown, or just knowing what the plant looks like and where and how it is grown and relating that to their symptoms.

Using herbs based on mass media is disempowering. When St. John's Wort is substituted for Prozac for depression, has the client gained anything? What makes the herb better? Lack of side effects addresses only part of why a person chooses an herb over a drug. My experience is that many people have

an innate longing for a whole, tangible and more real experience with plants that they don't get from sterile pills. People just feel more comfortable when something is closer to nature. Is this need being addressed? As the herbs become more and more similar to drugs, and dispensed in micrograms and packaged to be sterile and precise, it creates confusion especially for people who don't have access to options. Learning about ourselves and what is in the natural world is empowering. Learning to trust that nature has provided for us is empowering, and for many elicits a profound sense of safety and even joy.

The whole plant is no longer being considered, just the aspects that will sell. Did you know that St. John's Wort is excellent for problems affecting nerves such as shingles and other herpes? That it can be used internally for muscle soreness, and externally for bruising? That internal use can (rarely) trigger a rash in response to the sun, but externally it can be used as a good sun block? This is very basic beginner information about St. John's Wort. Is it included in commercials? Are people aware of it when they take it? I've had clients go to health food stores asking for St. John's Wort Oil (a preparation in standard use long before I began studying herbs -- so more than 20 years) only to be told it isn't used that way. This is but one example. We are in danger of losing our perspective, of the whole picture of the herbs we choose.

It is important to have a relationship with the people who harvest and preserve the herbs you use. You've heard about the importance of supporting organic farmers, local producers, etc. In the herb "industry" we have similar problems. Plants are being over harvested, adulteration is occurring, there are lax standards concerning use of sprays and pesticides, particularly with herbs that are imported. Radiation is legal for many herbs, and contamination is possible. If you know the person or company you purchase herbs from you can ask the questions that matter. Are the herbs harvested ethically? What quality control do they do? What part of the plant is used, and at what time of the year? Is the herb raised organically or wildcrafted? What is added or taken away from the preparation? These are just the beginning questions.

The use of herbs can be an easy "quick fix" that requires no involvement or change on the part of the person using them. It can also be a life affirming, empowering experience, that causes us to be more open to what is around us, to enjoy ourselves a little more, and can even stir a little awe at how nature supports our healing. It would be a great loss if we only saw Echinacea as a way to stop the common cold, St. John's Wort for people who are depressed and Ginkgo for people who forget.

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