

The Spiritual Dimension of Wildcrafting

by Matthew Wood

Responding to Karyn Sanders' and Robin Rose's thoughts on wildcrafting (Karyn wrote an article in the United Plant Savers journal suggesting that a 7 year moratorium on wildcrafting would do much to allow plant populations to replenish...) This activity can be a spiritual calling, and if that is the case, then it would be inappropriate for one person to tell another to cease its practice. For me to stop wildcrafting would represent a primal betrayal of my relationship to the plants. It would destroy my ability to offer them in healing and destroy me as a person. I do not believe that Karyn meant to impose a moratorium on wildcrafting in this sense, as she herself is a deeply spiritual person. Her comments would be rightly directed towards those for whom wildcrafting is merely a financial activity. Anyone who feels guilty picking plants should also not wildcraft. They should get to know the plants first. However, it is too sweeping to assert that everyone should not wildcraft. In my experience, we need to wildcraft in order to preserve something that is very important to the medicine plants themselves. I visited Grandfather David at Hotevilla with our mutual friend, David Milgrom, in the early 80's. Grandfather was sitting in silence, tapping the ground with his foot. Suddenly he said, "I had a dream last night." David asked, "Oh? Grandfather?" "I was out walking in the desert." Grandfather chuckled. He hadn't walked in the desert for fifteen years – since he was in his early 80's. "I was walking in the desert and I saw the Four Races Grass, and they were crying." He chuckled again. "I asked, 'Why are you crying?' and they said, 'Nobody uses us anymore, they use the white man's medicine.'" That time he didn't laugh. The first

thing that all herbalists should know is that the plants want to help us. This urge to interact with humanity is something that the wild plants feel keenly. The awareness they have is so intense that it would be disturbing if they had the same chaotic, needy, sharp-edged thoughts average humans have. Their alertness is so focused that if you ask one plant for help, the whole neighborhood will place its intention on your request, rush in and give the medicine Healing Authority. This, of course, assumes that you talked to the plant in the first place and got a positive response. I used to think the purpose of "asking permission" to pick a plant was to apologize to it. Wrong. Finally I realized it was to give them the opportunity to talk to me. They often wanted to tell what I should use them for, and to protect the people they were helping from poor quality medicine. Turns out I was not asking permission, but asking for help. The herbs will respond to our needs. The more confident we are in them, and in our communication with them, the more they can respond. I have heard them say, *"Yes! Yes! Yes! Yes! we want to be the medicines!"* or *"No, go over there,"* or *"This is a sacred spot because you picked in a sacred way last time you were here,"* or *"No, we are not healthy,"* or *"If you have to, but we are a medicine representative,"* or *"You're not going to get what you think,"* or *"That one over there is the one with the medicine!"*. Herbs in the garden are more like domesticated animals that have lost some of their instincts. They are more passive in our hands. Like in a sleep. They can make powerful medicines, and they also reflect the intentions of the gardener and the herbalist. There are a few garden plants that are not really domesticated. Bite into an elecampane root and you taste wildness. Nobody will conquer this plant. With the wild plants it is like we are in their hands. The more you work with them, the more they require you to change. They convey to you a dangerous, keen, adventuresome, wild, spirited, uncontrollable something. I don't know that they heal people any differently than domesticated plants, but this I do know:

they cause you to have more bizarre and amazing clinical experiences. I never had a plant say, *"no, you can't pick me"* and leave no option. They always point me to another plant. A big peach tree said, *"no, I will not make good medicine,"* then pointed me to a little peach in the fencerow. It said, *"pick me if you have to, but I am only a fair representative."* Today I know how peach twig should taste to be good medicine; they made me pay attention to quality issues that I didn't understand before. There are plants with habitually bad attitudes. Dandelions can be very unfriendly. Curmudgeonly, I would call them. *"We aren't gonna cooperate with you human beings. You've nearly destroyed the planet. We'd rather see you die of those diseases."* I was shocked at their thanklessness. "You're only here 'cause I mow the field," I replied. "If I let it grow, you'll be all gone." *"See if we care!"* Dandelion root never fails when the tongue is geographical. I pick a few trillium roots every few years and a wild ginseng now and then. I find enough growing in the woods that are being developed. Some of my best picking grounds are under concrete now. Who is there to remember those plants? They were my friends and they live on in the people they helped, in my memory and heart. When my time comes I will see them again in Paradise. The last time I picked an American ginseng she taught me to look beyond the stereotypes of herbal literature and understand her in a different way. There is hardly a plant that is more feminine. She is soft, gentle, and juicy. It's fine to call *Panax quinquefolius* "yin" or a "yin tonic" but to get caught in that limited description is to philosophize away its spirit. That would be like meeting Hildegard von Bingen and writing down "yin" in your notebook. The greatest crime I see today in Herbalism is using herbs in a purely material fashion. Or worse yet, according to "scientific research", "active ingredients" and the "expert opinions" of "armchair herbalists" who have never used herbs. I see wildcrafting, on the other hand, as a way of being intimate with the plants. I can tell you, rare or not, they feel the

same way. If none of this makes sense then follow Karyn's advice and don't pick any wild plants for the next seven years.