

Bio-regional Herbalism:

A reciprocal relationship with our ecosystem and our community.

By K. Sequoia Ladd

A common phrase you see on bumper stickers, canvas grocery bags and t-shirts is “think globally, act locally”. This slogan has been around for several decades and in the last few years appears to have started to sink into the American consumers’ conscience. We like locally made products, try and buy our groceries from regional farmers and support our smaller community businesses. We do it in the name of putting money back in to the local economy, using fewer resources for transportation and causing less pollution and environmental degradation. With all of this apparent awareness it never ceases to amaze me that people will go out of their way to buy locally grown, organic produce and purchase at the same time an herb that has traveled all the way from China, India, South America or Polynesia. Having been to China, I can tell you that there are no organic standards, all water needs to be boiled for twenty minutes due to fecal matter content and that the wages are pathetically low for very hard work and long days. Not to mention the fact that many herbs are wildcrafted by the hundreds of pounds for the world-wide herbal industry with little thought to future preservation, are fumigated for bugs while sitting on the docks and then travel thousands of miles to sit in a warehouse for an undisclosed amount of time before being sold in bulk form or put into capsules or tinctures. Hmm...Despite the negative environmental and social impact of this aspect of the herb industry, these products fly off the store shelves with all kinds of amazing health claims attributed to them. One of my teachers, Michael Moore, calls this phenomenon the allure of “rainforest herbalism”.

Ayurvedic and Chinese medicine have been around thousands of years, and have contributed a great deal to modern, alternative medicine with their holistic approach and constitutional models (European medicine is as old and holistic, we would have more practitioners if it wasn’t for a bunch of pyromaniacs during the Middle Ages...). The concepts are sound and have helped a lot of people, I just wish practitioners and clients/customers would re-evaluate the resources and use local alternatives. Here in the Pacific Northwest we are blessed with many native species that are medicinal, as well as a climate that hundreds of other medicinal herbs can grow in. An herbalist who uses native or locally available medicinal plants is called a bio-regional herbalist, a term I hope will grow in societal and consumer awareness. A bio-regional herbalist uses whatever constitutional or diagnostic model they are most comfortable with (TCM, Ayurvedic, Western Medical, American Folk, Native American, Wise Woman, the list goes on...) and then formulates with native species or locally abundant plants. This approach honors the diverse healing perspectives used by herbalists everywhere while maintaining a close and protective relationship with the ecosystem they live within.

There are many benefits to bio-regional herbalism. Herbalists who use the wild, medicinal plants growing around them generally have a reciprocal relationship with their local habitats and won’t over harvest (wildcraft) in a destructive manner. This includes not harvesting when the plants are stressed and weak from a seasonal climate change (i.e. too little water), making sure to wildcraft after the plant has let go of mature seed and not taking so much from a slow-growing plant stand that it’s rate of reproduction is hampered. Bio-regional herbalists may also grow their own herbs, which takes some of the pressure off of wild plant populations and provides easy, urban access to plant medicines. When herbalists harvest their own herbs, they can also be assured of the medicinal quality and efficacy of the plants they use. If growing isn’t an option, they can buy plants from local, ethical suppliers. This minimizes packaging and transportation pollution, while supporting local growers and businesses. Finally, a bio-regional approach doesn’t support the often unrestricted habitat destruction or inhumane “sweatshop

labor” that can happen during herb wildcrafting and processing in other countries. This is not to say that habitat destruction and unethical wages don’t happen in our own country.

In the last one hundred years the U.S. herbal supplement industry has wiped out large, wild stands of Echinacea spp. throughout the Midwest as well as slower-growing species like goldenseal, ginseng, eyebright, black cohosh and osha. For more information on at-risk plants, go to unitedplantsavers.org. Wildcrafters are often paid per pound instead of by the hour, which inadvertently encourages over-harvesting and the addition of other materials (plant and otherwise) to add weight to their bags. By supporting a bioregional herbalist in our community, we are protecting the wild plant stands and providing her with a living wage. To find these illusive characters, ask around at the farmer’s market, local health food/herb store or alternative practitioner networking groups. Many herbalists can only be found by word-of-mouth.

This article only touches on the environmental and social problems that come with having a world-wide herb industry. By being conscious consumers we can support our local herb growers and herbalists as well as develop a harmonious relationship with the environment that we live in. The plants give us so much, the least we can do is give a little back. Education is key to this endeavor and we have multiple options. Attend herbal classes/workshops, participate in plant walks at parks and community gardens, and do some research at the library. With a mind empowered by education and a heart open to sustaining our local ecosystem and medicinal plants, we can all practice bio-regional herbalism.

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