

HEALING ROOTS

Long used by the Mi'kmaq people and early settlers, there's a growing interest in medicinal plants in Atlantic Canada

by Mary-Frances Lynch



INDIAN TURNIP SKETCH BY LAURIE LACEY

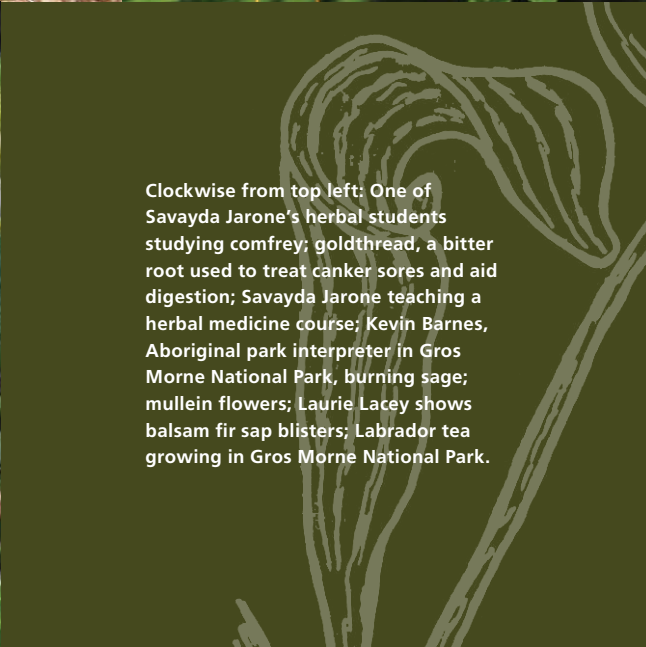
From chamomile to calm, echinacea to ward off colds, and bitter young dandelion leaves to aid digestion. These are but a few herbal remedies that were commonly found in our grandmother's cupboards, and even longer ago in ancient apothecaries, when we were much more in tune with the medicinal qualities of plants. Today, a walk in the woods, on the beach, or in our own yard can still reveal a bounty of herbal medicines ready for the picking, including everything from flowers and leaves to roots, bark and berries. Atlantic Canadian herbalists and native healers believe that there is room for a more traditional view on health that includes medicinal herbs, and they've been gathering quite a following.

HERBAL ENTHUSIASTS

Medical herbalist Savayda Jarone is at the heart of the herbal scene in Nova Scotia. Originally from Sheet Harbour on the Eastern Shore, there was no shortage of wilderness for her to explore as a child; though, it wasn't until she visited a herbal apothecary in London, England in her early 20s that her interest in medicinal herbs was truly piqued. She dove headfirst into the weeds and went off to Dominion Herbal College in Vancouver to study herbal medicines.

Coming back to Nova Scotia from British Columbia in 2002, the contrast was stark. "It was still virgin territory at the time. There was very little knowledge of nor interest in herbal medicine," recalls Savayda. It didn't take long to infuse herself into Nova Scotia's small plant circle and form the Herbal Association of Nova Scotia with a handful of herbal enthusiasts that same year.

Ground Ivy vinegar (made in Savayda Jarone's herbal course).



Clockwise from top left: One of Savayda Jarone's herbal students studying comfrey; goldthread, a bitter root used to treat canker sores and aid digestion; Savayda Jarone teaching a herbal medicine course; Kevin Barnes, Aboriginal park interpreter in Gros Morne National Park, burning sage; mullein flowers; Laurie Lacey shows balsam fir sap blisters; Labrador tea growing in Gros Morne National Park.



HARVESTING TIPS

Be sure you can identify the plant if you plan on using it medicinally. Consult an expert or fieldguide to know exactly what you are picking.

Consult a registered herbalist who has received formal training and inform your medical doctor of any herbal medicines you are taking, especially if also taking pharmaceuticals.

Harvest when the plant, tree or berry is in season for optimal medicinal value. As a general rule, harvest buds and leaves in spring, flowers and berries in summer, roots in fall, and barks in spring or fall.

Gather plants in the morning after the dew has evaporated or in early evening. Avoid harvesting on rainy days or during the mid-day sun.

Avoid picking plants close to roadside due to dust and car pollution, as well as sprayed areas.

Harvest only what you need and make sure to leave enough of the plant so it can continue to thrive.

Store dried plants in airtight container in a dark cupboard until ready to use. Dried leaves and flowers can be stored for a year; bark and roots for two years.

Laurie Lacey, a medicine maker of mixed ancestry, including Mi'kmaq and Irish, was part of the association's founding group. A member of the Canadian Council of Herbal Elders, he feels most at home in the forests and swamps of Lunenburg County and lives in Hebbs Cross on a homestead that's been in the family since the 1890s. His white hair waves like dandelion seeds in the wind as he recounts one of his earliest medicinal plant memories of goldthread, a bitter root used to treat canker sores and stimulate digestion. "I remember I was so fascinated because my father collected the goldthread and sold it to a herb company in Montreal in the 1950s. He must have been so careful because he would come home with goldthread that long (motioning a length of about two feet in length). It would look like gold to me." Watching goldthread roots dry over the woodstove, the smell of balsam fir, and the taste of burdock bitters left their mark on Laurie.

MI'KMAQ ROOTS

While an anthropology student at the University of King's College in Halifax in the early 1970s, Laurie began learning about Mi'kmaq traditions. During his fieldwork, he hitchhiked to Mi'kmaq communities in Nova Scotia and Newfoundland, knocking on doors asking if anyone knew about plant medicine. His gentle, unassuming approach and genuine passion for plants led him to many conversations about Mi'kmaq medicines over countless pots of tea. He learned about plant legends, animal remedies and tree medicines, and so what started as a one-year research project in 1974 turned into his life journey, leading him to become Nova Scotia's prominent author and illustrator of Mi'kmaq medicines.

Like Laurie, Kevin Barnes is playing an important role in preserving the oral tradition of Mi'kmaq medicines in Newfoundland. He is the western region vice chief of the Qalipu First Nation and the Aboriginal park interpreter in Gros Morne National Park, leading medicine walks and Aboriginal culture programming. Showing an old cut on his finger that was healed with the sap of a balsam fir, Kevin tells how he learned about remedies from his grandmother, a woman from Fortune Bay who later migrated to the Bay of Islands in western Newfoundland to follow the fishing industry. "My grandmother was a real medicine lady. Between the jigs and reels I managed to pick up most of the medicines, her remedies, and her teas."

What he learned he now shares with a growing number of park visitors, local students, and Qalipu band members eager to learn and reconnect with Mi'kmaq traditions. "I'm just teaching what my grandmother taught me," he says. Only a few years since Qalipu First Nation was officially formed, Kevin is hearing more and more stories about family herbal remedies from band members who are re-discovering their Mi'kmaq heritage. "It's definitely a re-awakening, no doubt about it."

Many, including Laurie Lacey, see this reconnection with medicinal plants in particular as a promising sign for preserving Mi'kmaq culture. "The thing that is really encouraging at gatherings (such as powwows) and in Mi'kmaq communities, is that now you see much more interest with the young people in the plant medicines," says Laurie.

A BUDDING INTEREST

From traditional Mi'kmaq use to modern day herbalism, the common use of herbal medicines has waxed and waned over the centuries. Home remedies were once a mainstay in Atlantic Canadian towns, though with the professionalization of medicine and growing pharmaceuticals

in the second half of the 19th century, herbal apothecaries dwindled in favour of the pharmacy. It wasn't until changing social attitudes in the 1960s that people began to challenge medical practices and explore alternatives. The last 25 years especially has seen an explosion of alternative medicines and re-connection with the healing power of plants.

Savayda Jarone can attest to the budding interest in herbal medicines. In her first years of practice in Halifax, she observed how, slowly but surely, interest grew in her clinic and dispensary. As it grew, she started offering a year-long course for those wanting to delve deeper into self-care, spending one weekend a month in the woods learning about local plants and their healing properties. Ten years later, she offers three levels of the course in Nova Scotia and New Brunswick, a course tailored for children, workshops on women's health and herbal walks. Courses like hers, offered by a trained herbalist, are a great way to learn how to identify plants, understand their medicinal properties and proper dosing as well as contraindications—essential information if you want to wildcraft on your own. "People are realizing that they've got to take care of their health in a more natural way, so they are looking for alternatives," she says. Some of these local alternatives include wintergreen oil rubbed into sore and inflamed joints and



Clockwise from top left: Hyssop at Briar Hill in Chester Basin, NS; Chantal Dufour (in purple) and visitors harvesting rosehips at the New Brunswick Botanical Garden; St. John's Wort blossoms; Briar Hill monthly medicine box; Caitlin Rooney and daughters Hazel and Lilah harvesting yarrow.

muscles, thyme and elderberries for treatment of cold and flu, and oat seed and straw as a nutritive nerve tonic.

Chantal Dufour is seeing the same trend at the New Brunswick Botanical Garden in Edmundston where she is the lead herbalist. "There is a return to a more natural way of healing and health. I see that a lot," she says. She's also noticed a steady rise in demand for herbal medicine programming since the addition of the medicinal garden and workshop pavilion at the Botanical Garden in 2011. A unique garden experience in New Brunswick, people are now scheduling their visit around herbal programming that runs Friday through Sunday during the summer months.

Visitors' senses are stimulated as they set out on a guided tour of the medicinal gardens taking in the vibrant colours, floral aromas and delicious tastes of the herbs fresh for the picking. To further explore the herbs, there are workshops on identifying plants and their medicinal properties or participants can try to make their own remedies. In the workshops, Chantal, or her colleagues Richard Fournier and Alain Lavoie, draw attention to common plants that visitors can easily identify in their own yards and gardens such as plantain, rose and basil. When not at the Botanical Gardens, Chantal runs

her own home-business, herbal clinic and garden called ViV-Herbes across the border where she lives in Lejeune, Quebec. She's been knee deep in herbal practice for the past 20 years, wading into it by way of an initial desire to care for her children naturally. "I started my herbal training for my kids—to be able to care for them and my family. I never thought that I would become an herbalist, clinician or teacher," she says.

MONTHLY MEDICINE BOX

As demand grows, people like Oren Hercz and Caitlin Rooney are making it easier for Nova Scotians to access natural remedies. They offer a year round, monthly medicine box for people interested in a regular dose of nature's medicines. Oren is a clinical herbalist with a passion for herbal education and Caitlin has a keen interest in farming and crafting. Together, they moved their young budding family of five to set up home and garden in Chester Basin on a property they call Briar Hill, aptly named for the brambles growing wild on the land. They grow herbs in their garden and wildcraft what's readily available for the medicine box. In it, you'll find herbal salves, syrups, teas and tinctures, nutritive herbal vinegars and seaweeds, as well as their popular herbal aphrodisiac chocolate elixer.

The goal of their Briar Hill medicine box is to provide remedies for general well-being, but more importantly to empower self-care. "They [members] can experience the different herbs and products that they might want or need over the course of the year and really understand all the different ways that herbs can be brought into your life," says Oren.

Annie Murphy from Purcell's Cove has been using the remedies over the last few months: "I really loved the bitters, elderberry and hyssop—they were crucial to me not getting sick this past winter," she says. She's already signed up for next year and has been passing along remedies to friends.

With the pilot year under their belts, Oren and Caitlin hope to increase the medicine box membership and plan to offer workshops on their land. They balance their work with a full family life with three kids six years old and under—they too are soaking up herbal knowledge. "Our kids can identify several medicinal plants. When Lilah gets a scrape she finds plantain and chews it up and puts it on and makes her own poultice," says Caitlin.

HERBAL RECONNECTION

Sitting in her dispensary in Halifax among jars and baskets of dried herbs and bottled remedies, Savayda Jarone's passion for plants is clear: "It's basically a source of joy...and I want to share that joy with other people and help them find that connection and that will take care of itself. I've seen it brighten people's lives—the simple connection with the plants." 🌿



GOLDTHREAD SKETCH BY LAURIE LACEY

MI'KMAQ MEDICINES

The Mi'kmaq have lived in Atlantic Canada for thousands of years and traditionally relied on Mother Nature for nourishment and health. Plant, tree and animal-based remedies were made by medicine makers for everyday ailments. In his book *Mi'kmaq Medicines: Remedies and Recollections* (2nd edition), Laurie Lacey explores the Mi'kmaq's preventative approach to health—wearing plant amulets, participating in sweat lodges and traditional dances, and making herbal remedies to ward off sickness.

Traditionally, a Mi'kmaq healer and medicine maker would hold knowledge passed down through the oral teachings of an elder relative. Some early medicines included drinking spruce tree bark tea to treat scurvy, which was useful for early European settlers, using the root of Indian turnip for stomach ailments or to treat tuberculosis, and rubbing owl fat into the skin for aches and pains.

Plant legends were also an important part of Mi'kmaq lore. Though many are now lost, Laurie Lacey writes about plant legends, sharing how it was believed that certain plants could disappear and reappear in different locations if the proper ritual was not performed when approaching the plant or that one had to follow a specific bird in order to find a medicinal herb.

The arrival of Europeans to North America at the turn of the 16th century for fishing and trading activities meant several changes for the Aboriginal people. The impact was large as it's estimated that by the late 1570s, there were a total 400 vessels from England, France, Spain and Portugal, with about 12,000 men sent to the region each year. Inevitably, Mi'kmaq lifestyle, diet and health changed and new diseases and illness were introduced. Influenza, smallpox, measles and the plague were new threats and not having built up the immunity to these diseases, Mi'kmaq health and life expectancy saw a sharp decline. Plant remedies were put to the test and it was not uncommon for the Mi'kmaq and European settlers to share their knowledge, so much so that to this day it is hard to decipher the origin of certain remedies.

Although threatened by European contact, residential schools and assimilation policies, the knowledge and practice of Mi'kmaq medicines persevered, at times behind closed doors, inside the family home. Today, herbal stories and knowledge are being celebrated as a way to preserve Mi'kmaq culture, of which the work of Laurie Lacey and Atlantic herbalists play an important role.

Laurie Lacey and the deceased elder Sarah Denny of Eskasoni won a national Herbal Elders Award from the Canadian Herbalist Association this past June for their work in the field of Mi'kmaq medicines.