



Wildcrafting for the Practicing Herbalist

7Song, Director

Northeast School of Botanical Medicine

P.O. Box 6626 Ithaca, NY 14851

607-539-7172 www.7Song.com

This handout is to help familiarize herbalists with some of the practicalities of wildcrafting plants. The term wildcrafting is loosely defined here as gathering plants you did not specifically plant. This includes harvesting from natural ecosystems such as fields, marshes and forests as well as vacant lots and weeds from gardens and farms.

Wildcrafting entails much pleasure and many perils. It can involve gathering plants in striking high slopes with the sun gleaming down as you take in the beauty of the scenery or just as likely, spending days on end in hot, muggy locales searching for a desired plant only to not find gatherable amounts.

In concert with the last sentence, an experienced wildcrafter knows that they may not always find the plant they seek, and yet not get too discouraged, since this is an aspect of the Way of Wildcrafting.

My entreaty here is for all reading this to please take into consideration the ecology of the area in which you are harvesting. This should come before your personal needs for a specific plant. Wildcrafting is a time-honored art but the earth has seen its share of ravishes and so it is now our business, as people who work with plants, to limit the damage we may cause by our plant gatherings. Please read through this handout and take special note of the moral and ethical obligations of the wildcrafter.

These notes are my personal reflections on wildcrafting, having been honed over the past 20 years of gathering plants throughout the United States.

Two major reasons for wildcrafting

- 1) To gather plants to prepare as your own medicines
- 2) Harvesting plants to sell to others

The second of these, gathering plants for profit, can be a tricky situation. First there are the ethical considerations of not overharvesting. Other difficulties arise from scrambling around trying to find enough plants to gather, keeping the plants from becoming moldy, and finding people willing to pay you a reasonable sum for a hard days work. And then there are the bugs, the weather, and the long days of digging, pruning, washing and cutting. For those uninitiated this work may seem dreamy, and indeed at times it is, but it is also demanding and there is usually a tight time limit of what plants can be gathered from a specific area.

Naturally it can also be rewarding. You may find yourself alone, in a handsome location, far from the daily noises of civilization. It can be exuberating meeting new plants and being with them in their native and naturalized surroundings.

Wildcrafting also allows us to get a real picture on which plants are endangered and which should be left alone to grow. This means traveling sufficiently and seeking out the plants that are commonly used. I feel that herbalists benefit greatly from

seeing many of the plants they use, as plants. Living, CO2 breathing entities. It enlivens the art of the herbalist and perhaps we can glean some new information about the plant as we later use it as medicine. There is also a lot of satisfaction in continuing this ancient grassroots tradition.

While gathering plants it is important to know which plant and plant parts you seek, when the best times are to gather them and finding favorable locations. You may be a wildcrafter who stays in their own neck-o' the woods or one who travels widely. Both types can be time-consuming, demanding work compounded by the dictates of nature.

Wildcrafting Considerations

- 1) Please don't overharvest. Be considerate of the land from which you are gathering. Consider this piece of earth from many perspectives. Contemplate it from the perspective of the animals living there, from the humans who visit, and from the perspective of the plants themselves in their ecological niche.
- 2) Leave an area as beautiful as you found it. Before you gather anything, let your eyes sweep in the terrain and consider how you can leave the least amount of impact.
- 3) If there is a lot of trash from a given gathering area, gather some of this too.
- 4) Learn which plants not to gather, including endangered, overharvested and scarce plants. With current sprawling development coupled with a popular resurgence of herbal medicine, many plants are currently threatened. Check resources such as native plant societies, conservation groups, United Plant Savers, regional groups, and state environmental departments for guides to endangered plants. Also, check it out for yourself. Which plants are proliferating in your area, which plants are disappearing? With an eye towards the future, consider not gathering plants that are not yet in jeopardy, but are becoming scarce, or may be so in the future as more plants are harvested for the burgeoning herbal market.
- 5) Teach responsible wildcrafting ethics. Teach by example and let other folks know why you don't harvest particular plants or gather from specific locales. Help instruct other gatherers whom you feel may be overharvesting. Let buyers know why you won't gather or sell certain plants. Speak up at conferences, workshops and meetings.
- 6) Learn about the most prolific plants, especially the common weeds. Many of these have well-established uses and can be harvested readily. They generally easily reestablish themselves.

- 7) Learn how to make accurate plant identification. It is important to know how to accurately identify plants to the species. Books based on floral plant keys are the primary source of this information.
- 8) Learning how to use a plant key will help in a number of ways. It will assist you in the identification of uncommon plant species, which may otherwise be indiscriminately gathered or trampled on. And it can also be instructive in finding species analogues of overharvested plants.
- 9) Be discreet when showing people your wildcrafting locations. If one person tells one person, who tells one person, etc., an area can easily be overharvested. When demonstrating and teaching wildcrafting skills, take people to places that can handle a group of gatherers and gather the common plants.
- 10) Rescue plants from areas that are going to be developed or destroyed. Besides gathering these plants as medicine, you can also help relocate the less common ones to similar habitats and gardens.
- 11) Bring medicine making equipment (see list) on wildcrafting forays so you can prepare fresh plant medicines on your travels.
- 12) Wildcrafting and the law: Since most land is either privately owned, state or federally controlled, you may want to obtain permission before gathering. Since wildcrafters may be eyed with suspicion (not a typical sight) make sure your 'papers' are in order, i.e.. car registration and insurance, dog tags, personal ID, appropriate cash, etc.
- 13) Gather seeds and replant them.
- 14) While gathering roots and rhizomes, replant root crowns and rhizome pieces, especially if there is a bud present to help the plant re-grow.
- 15) Gather and sell wildcrafted plants locally. Encourage the use of locally common plants as medicine.
- 16) Wildcraft from organic gardens and farms. These places may have an abundance of medicinal plants such as dandelion, burdock, alfalfa, and red clover. Also support local organic farmers in helping them grow and market medicinal plants.
- 17) Leave some of the strongest and most lush plants from an area you are wildcrafting. These are important to continue the local health and survival of a species.

- 18) Be respectful of the plants you are gathering. Treat them as the allies that they are.
- 19) Be careful not to gather from polluted areas. These include roadways, railroad tracks, industrial and agricultural runoff, urban areas, sewage zones, oil spills, and places heavily sprayed with pesticides and/or herbicides.
- 20) It is important to initially learn all the poisonous plants growing in an area you may be wildcrafting from to be absolutely sure that you have not harvested these.
- 21) International borders: Many plants are not allowed through foreign borders and may be confiscated, such as in Mexico and Canada. Keep this in mind while gathering or bringing plants into or back from other countries.

Books

It is helpful to have an assortment of plant field guides while wildcrafting. These botanical identification books can range from technical floras with 'keys,' to books with photographs and drawings. Black and white botanical line drawings are often the most useful since they can give the plants' basic *character* as well as botanical details such as seeds and hairs.

I find the old Eclectic medical dispensatories helpful to see if a plant I've come upon has been previously used for medicine. These books (along with Michael Moore's texts, especially for the geographic West) may state other species used similarly, as well as the part(s) utilized and how to prepare them for medicine.

Also remember to bring along a good topographic map to explore less traveled roads and mark down places that you have found gatherable.

Tools and Equipment

Below are some of the basic tools and gear helpful to wildcraft and prepare herbal medicines. This is followed by a list of supplementary supplies that I have found useful on wildcrafting adventures. Personal preferences will play a big part of which supplies you purchase, so if possible try out some of this equipment before buying. If you plan on doing a lot of wildcrafting, these tools will be close friends, so choose carefully.

As a rule, the more expensive tools are of better quality and thus last longer. This translates into them being easier on your body and less likely to bend or break while gathering. I strongly suggest buying tools from reputable companies that offer long-term guarantees.

Check the condition of your equipment before going on a gathering sojourn. It is frustrating to spend hours finding a good wildcrafting spot only to have tools malfunction. Good tools are generally easier on the plants too. Keep pruners sharp, this makes for a cleaner cut and less aggrivement to the plant and area you are harvesting from.

- 1) **Pruners** (\$30-65) Probably the most used wildcrafting tool. Pruners come in different hand sizes and should be able to open fully in your hand without pushing beyond your extended hand reach, otherwise hand-fatigue will ensue. Keep them sharp for your and the plants' sake. It is *much* easier to cut with a sharp pruner.
- 2) **Pruner Holster** (\$8) A convenient way to carry your pruners and will save many a pants pocket.
- 3) **Hori-hori / Farmer's weeder** (\$10-22) A very useful hand-held digging tool easily replacing the all-too-bendable trowel while wildcrafting. Also known as a soil knife or grubber. It's also handy to have a case with which to carry it.
- 4) **Digging / Spading Fork** (\$35-70) I use digging forks much more often than shovels. They are easier to use and do less damage by loosening the soil with the fork rather than by digging holes. Buy a sturdy one with *square*, not flat, tines. Forks notoriously bend, so purchase with care. It should also be the right length for your height. I also carry a lead pipe to bend back errant tines.
- 5) **Shovel / Spade** (\$30-90) Shovels should be heavy-duty with reinforced handles for digging into rocky ground. Poaching or tree-hole styles are usually better for wildcrafting, rather than a flat blade.
- 6) **Loppers** (\$20-50) To cut branches and to process roots and other large or hard bits. I prefer the anvil style for its durability, though you get a wider cut with the bypass type.
- 7) **Saw** (\$10-40) To cut woody plant parts. The small-sized (6"-7") types with a self-enclosing case work well.
- 8) **Burlap bags** (Free-\$2 ea.) Very useful for gathering and transporting. Check for them at places that import large quantities of rice, chili, peanuts, or coffee.

Tools for Processing and Preparing Plants for Medicine

- * **Cleaver** -A large heavy, square knife for cutting and processing plant parts.
- * **Cutting board** -Plastic or wood, portable and easily cleaned.
- * **Scale**- For weighing out herbs to prepare as medicines.
- * **Measuring cup** - 16oz. Durable. To prepare fluid medicines.
- * **Canning jars**-Quart and pint size. For preparing tinctures, oils and other medicines. Canning jars (i.e.. Mason, Ball) are a stronger glass than regular jars and the boxes they come in are handy on the road. I reinforce the corners and flaps of these boxes with duct tape for road-worthiness.
- * **Alcohol**- 95% ethyl alcohol. It is usually less expensive to mail-order high-proof alcohol than to purchase it in liquor stores. Make sure alcohol is in a well-protected, safely stored, tightly sealed, spill-proof nonbreakable container. Alcohol is *very* flammable. Make sure it is clearly marked.

Other products to make medicines

- | | |
|-----------------------------------|-----------------------|
| * Extra virgin olive oil | * Vegetable glycerine |
| * Organic raw apple cider vinegar | * Distilled water |
| * Raw sesame oil | * Calculator |
| * Honey | |

More Tools and Supplies

- * Ax/hatchet
- * Backpack
- * Basins
- * Binoculars
- * Bungee cords
- * Compass
- * Debarking (draw) knife
- * Duct tape
- * Extra batteries
- * Extra blankets
- * First aid kit
- * Flashlight
- * Fresh plant container
- * Hammer
- * Headlamp
- * Insect repellent
- * Jar opener
- * Labels
- * Lantern
- * Leatherman type tool
- * Matches / lighter
- * Plastic bags
- * Pocket knife
- * Rope / string
- * Rubber bands
- * Scrub brush
- * Sharpening stone
- * Sleeping gear
- * Small cooler
- * Small notebook
- * Strainer
- * Tarps
- * Topographic maps
- * Travel alarm clock
- * Water
- * Water bottle
- * Waterproof markers
- * Whistle
- * Wire-brush

Clothes

Bring comfortable work clothes, you'll probably be wearing them for days on end. Also be prepared for many types of weather. In places such as the desert or the Rocky Mountains, temperatures may vary up to 50 degrees during the course of a day. Wear long sleeve shirts and a hat when working in the sun; Overexposure is the energy downfall of many a hiker and wildcrafter. Drink plenty of water. You may want to bring dress clothes for going out in or if you have an opportunity to teach while on the road.

- * **Hat** - wide-brimmed for sun protection.
- * **Shoes** -1) Sturdy hiking shoes with ankle support and protection from poison ivy and brambles.
2) Sandals for wading.
- * **Cold weather clothing** - Keep in mind that you may be processing plants late into the evening. A warm jacket (one that you can get dirty), ski hat, scarf, long-johns, wool socks, thermal top, warm gloves.
- * **Rain jacket** - A fine breathable one can really make a difference in inclement weather.
- * **Protective clothing** for dealing with thorns, brambles, nettles. Heavy-duty gloves, denim or long-sleeve jacket, thick pants, boots.

Plants

The following plants are divided into three groupings; common plants, less common plants and uncommon plants. Each category is described before its section. I would like to reiterate that it is important to respect *all* plants and their environment. Please be respectful when gathering. Listen to gut instincts, if you feel you shouldn't be gathering right then, just enjoy the company of the plant and not gather any..

Key: spp. - signifies species and is used to mean that many species of the same genus can be used. A capital letter after a taxonomic name refers to the genus preceding it.

Common plants - these plants are often considered weedy. If they are prolific in your region, they can be readily gathered. Many of the common plants have been used for thousands of years as medicines. Some others are not as widely known, but as wildcrafting herbalists we can help reestablish their place in the modern materia medica. Some of the plants that are widely used in Ayurveda and Traditional Chinese Medicine also grow wild in the United States and can be gathered here.

Some of these plants may be common in certain locales but not in others (i.e. Passionflower) please use discretion while harvesting. Before picking any plants, survey the area and see what is common in the larger ecosystem. While hiking, don't gather from an area where you first see the plant you seek, for while it may be abundant in front of

you, that may be the only patch for many miles. Once again, it is in our best interests to have minimal impact and keep this planet beautiful with plants.

Some of these plants may be culled from organic gardens, such as mullein, alfalfa, red clover, corn silk and dandelion

Common plants

Agrimony	<i>Agrimonia</i> spp.	Jewelweed	<i>Impatiens</i> spp.
Alfalfa	<i>Medicago sativa</i>	Kudzu	<i>Pueraria lobata</i>
Barberry	<i>Berberis thunbergii</i>	Lobelia	<i>Lobelia inflata</i>
Bayberry	<i>Myrica cerifera</i>	Mallow	<i>Malva</i> spp.
Bedstraw	<i>Galium</i> spp.	Meadowsweet	<i>Filipendula ulmaria</i> / <i>Spiraea</i> spp.
Bittersweet Nightshade	<i>Solanum dulcamara</i>	Milk Thistle	<i>Silybum marianum</i>
Blackberry	<i>Rubus</i> spp.	Mint	<i>Mentha</i> spp.
Blueberry	<i>Vaccinium</i> spp.	Motherwort	<i>Leonurus cardiaca</i>
Buckthorn	<i>Rhamnus cathartica</i>	Mugwort	<i>Artemisia vulgaris</i>
Bugleweed	<i>Lycopus</i> spp.	Mullein	<i>Verbascum thapsus</i>
Burdock	<i>Arctium</i> spp.	Nettles	<i>Urtica dioica</i>
Burr Marigold	<i>Bidens</i> spp.	Oats	<i>Avena sativa</i>
Canadian Fleabane	<i>Erigeron canadensis</i>	Passionflower	<i>Passiflora incarnata</i>
Catnip	<i>Nepeta cataria</i>	Peppermint	<i>Mentha piperita</i>
Cattail	<i>Typha</i> spp.	Periwinkle	<i>Vinca minor</i> / <i>V. major</i>
Chaparral	<i>Larrea</i> spp.	Pineapple weed	<i>Matricaria matricarioides</i>
Chickweed	<i>Stellaria media</i>	Plantain	<i>Plantago</i> spp.
Chicory	<i>Cichorium intybus</i>	Pleurisy Root	<i>Asclepias tuberosa</i>
Cleavers	<i>Galium aparine</i>	Poke	<i>Phytolacca americana</i>
Coltsfoot	<i>Tussilago farfara</i>	Prickly Ash	<i>Zanthoxylum americanum</i>
Comfrey	<i>Symphytum</i> spp.	Ragweed	<i>Ambrosia artemisiifolia</i> / <i>A. spp.</i>
Corn silk	<i>Zea mays</i>	Raspberry	<i>Rubus idaeus</i> / <i>R. spp.</i>
Couchgrass	<i>Agropyron repens</i>	Red Clover	<i>Trifolium pratense</i>
Cow Parsnip	<i>Heracleum</i> spp.	Reed grass	<i>Phragmites communis</i>
Curly Dock	<i>Rumex obtusifolius</i>	Rose	<i>Rosa rugosa</i> / <i>R. spp.</i>
Dandelion	<i>Taraxacum officinale</i>	Sagebrush	<i>Artemisia tridentata</i>
Dooryard Knotweed	<i>Polygonum aviculare</i>	Sarsaparilla	<i>Smilax</i> spp.
Eclipta	<i>Eclipta alba</i>	Sassafras	<i>Sassafras albidum</i>
Elicampane	<i>Inula helenium</i>	Saw Palmetto	<i>Serenoa repens</i>
Ephedra	<i>Ephedra</i> spp.	Scotch Broom	<i>Cystis scoparius</i>
Fennel	<i>Foeniculum vulgare</i>	Shepherds Purse	<i>Capsella bursa-pastoris</i>
Figwort	<i>Scrophularia</i> spp.	Shiso	<i>Perilla frutescens</i>
Gill o'er the Ground	<i>Glechoma hederacea</i>	Sweet Clover	<i>Melilotus alba</i>
Ginkgo	<i>Ginkgo biloba</i>	St. Johnswort	<i>M. officinalis</i>
Globe Mallow	<i>Sphaeralcea</i> spp.	Tansy	<i>Hypericum perforatum</i>
Goats head	<i>Tribulus terrestris</i>	Teasel	<i>Tanacetum</i> spp.
Goldenrod	<i>Solidago</i> spp.	Thyme	<i>Dipsacus sylvestris</i>
Gravelroot	<i>Eupatorium maculatum</i>	Toadflax	<i>Thymus</i> spp.
Greater Celandine	<i>Chelidonium majus</i>	Usnea	<i>Linaria vulgaris</i>
Gumweed	<i>Grindelia</i> spp.	Wild Lettuce	<i>Usnea</i> spp.
Hawthorne	<i>Crataegus</i> spp.	Willow	<i>Lactuca</i> spp.
Heal-all	<i>Prunella vulgaris</i>	Wolfberry	<i>Salix</i> spp.
Horehound	<i>Marrubium vulgare</i>	Yarrow	<i>Lycium pallidum</i>
Horseradish	<i>Armoracia rusticana</i>	Yellow Dock	<i>Achillea millefolium</i>
Horsetail	<i>Equisetum</i> spp.	Yucca	<i>Rumex crispus</i>
Japanese Honeysuckle	<i>Lonicera japonica</i>		<i>Yucca glauca</i>
Japanese Knotweed	<i>Polygonum cuspidatum</i>		

Less common plants - while some of these plants may be regionally plentiful, please be extra cautious while wildcrafting these plants. Avoid taking the largest and hardiest stock, let them self-proliferate. Although there may be other wildcrafters and old-timers who gather large quantities of these plants regularly, that doesn't mean you need to. Tend the forests and the fields.

Try not to gather from areas that other people gather from. If you see holes dug in the ground or clipped plants, find another wild-gathering site. I suggest wildcrafting the following herbs for yourself and perhaps to sell to herbalists or small companies that you personally know. This will help avoid overharvesting.

Caution: some of these plants are potentially dangerous for internal use. Please know and read up on any plants you are wildcrafting, using personally or planning to sell. There is always a potential for an idiosyncratic negative response, so please exercise caution when distributing or using herbs.

Less common plants

American Pennyroyal	Hedeoma spp.	Pussy-toes	Antennaria spp.
Angelica	Angelica spp.	Rattlesnake Master	Eryngium yuccifolium
Arnica	Arnica spp.	Red cedar	Thuja plicata
Artists conk	Ganoderma applanatum	Redroot	Ceanothus americanus / C. spp.
Balsam poplar	Populus balsamifera	Reishi	Ganoderma tsugae
Balsamroot	Balsamorhiza sagittata	Rhatany	Krameria spp.
Baneberry	Actaea spp.	Silk Tassel	Garrya flavescens / G. spp.
Bearsfoot	Polymnia uvedalia	Skullcap	Scutellaria lateriflora
Bee Balm	Monarda spp.	Solomon's Seal	Polygonatum spp.
Black Birch	Betula lenta	Stillingia	Stillingia sylvatica
Black Cohosh	Actaea racemosa	Stoneroot	Collinsonia canadensis
Black Haw	Viburnum prunifolium	Syrian Rue	Peganum harmala
Black Walnut	Juglans nigra	Uva Ursi	Arctostaphylos uva-ursi
Blue Cohosh	Caulophyllum thalictroides	Valerian	Valeriana officinalis / V. spp
Blue Vervain	Verbena hastata / V. spp.	Violet	Viola spp.
Bogbean	Menyanthes trifoliata	Wahoo	Euonymus atropurpureus
Boneset	Eupatorium perfoliatum	Western Coltsfoot	Petasites frigida
Calamus	Acorus calamus	Western Sweet Cicely	Osmorhiza occidentalis
Clematis	Clematis virginiana / C. spp.	White Cedar	Thuja occidentalis
Corydalis	Corydalis aurea	White Pond Lily	Nymphaea odorata
Crampbark	Viburnum opulus / V. trilobum	Wild Cherry	Prunus serotina
Desert Willow	Chilopsis linearis	Wild Ginger	Asarum canadense
Devil's Club	Oplopanax horridus	Wild Hydrangea	Hydrangea arborescens
Golden Ragwort	Senecio aureus	Wild Indigo	Baptisia tinctoria / B. spp.
Iris	Iris missouriensis	Wild Yam	Dioscorea villosa / D. quadrinata
Juniper berry	Juniperus spp.	Witch Hazel	Hamamelis virginiana
Mayapple	Podophyllum peltatum	Yellow Jessamine	Gelsemium sempervirens
Oregon Graperoot	Berberis spp.	Yellow Pond Lily	Nuphar polysepalum
Osha	Ligusticum porteri	Yellowroot	Xanthorrhiza simplicissima
Partridgeberry	Mitchella repens	Yerba Mansa	Anemopsis californica
Pedicularis	Pedicularis groenlandica	Yerba Santa	Eriodictyon angustifolium
Prickly Ash	Zanthoxylum clava-herculis		

Plants not to gather - The following plants are ones that I have seen infrequently in the wild in my many years of wildcrafting. I am including them because some of them are commonly traded on the herb market. Most of these plants are cultivatable, others we can substitute species for, and the rest we can just enjoy being with when we come across them.

Plants not to gather

American Ginseng	<i>Panax quinquefolius</i>
Chaparro Amargosa	<i>Castela emoryi</i>
Culvers Root	<i>Veronicastrum (Leptandra) virginicum</i>
Echinacea	<i>Echinacea</i> spp.
False Unicorn Root	<i>Chamaelirium luteum</i>
Goldenseal	<i>Hydrastis canadensis</i>
Ladies Slipper	<i>Cypripedium</i> spp.
Pink Root	<i>Spigelia marilandica</i>
Seneca Snakeroot	<i>Polygala senega</i>
True Unicorn Root	<i>Aletris farinosa</i>
Venus Flytrap	<i>Dionaea muscipula</i>
Virginia Snakeroot	<i>Aristolochia virginiana</i>