

Wildcrafting for the Practicing Herbalist

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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 one 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 are seeking, and yet not get too discouraged, since this is common enough and just 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 ravages 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 what I consider the ethical obligations of the wildcrafter.

These notes are my personal reflections on wildcrafting, having been honed over the past 25 years of gathering plants throughout the United States.

There are two main reasons people wildcraft, 1) to gather plants to prepare as their personal medicines and 2) harvesting plants to sell to others. The second of these, gathering plants to sell, can be a tricky. First there are the ethical considerations of not overharvesting which happens easier if you are trying to gather large amounts. Difficulties arise from scrambling around trying to find enough plant material to gather, keeping the plants from becoming moldy while you deliver them, and finding people willing to pay you a reasonable sum for a hard day's 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. There is often a tight time limit of what plants can be gathered from a specific area given how long you may be there.

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 in their native or naturalized surroundings. Wildcrafting also allows us to get a real picture on which plants are endangered and should be left alone to grow. This means traveling sufficiently and seeing plants in their growing in their habitats. I feel that herbalists benefit greatly from seeing many of the plants they use as living, CO₂ breathing entities. For me, it enlivens the art of herbalism, being the gatherer of what

I prepare and offer as medicine. There is 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 of the woods or one who travels widely. Either way, there can be a feeling of independence and deep satisfaction in gathering your own medicine.

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 and 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 level. Books based on floral plant keys are the primary source of this information.
8. Learning how to use a plant identification 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, personal identification, 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 often 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. This means gathering thoughtfully as if you were working in a garden including careful pruning, and not leaving big gaping holes in the ground.
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 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.

The old Eclectic medical dispensaries are helpful to see if a plant you've come upon has been previously used for medicine. These books (along with Michael Moore's books and booklets 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 are 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 last longer. This translates into them being easier on your body and less likely to bend or break while gathering. It can be helpful to buy tools from reputable companies that offer long-term warranties.

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 damage to the plant you are trimming.

Primary Gathering Tools

Note that some of these tools have links to photos on my website.

1. **Pruners** (\$30-65)-Probably the most commonly used wildcrafting tool. Pruners come in different sizes and should be able to open fully in your hand otherwise you hand will get tired after long-term use. Keep them sharp for yours' and the plants' sake. It is *much* easier to cut with sharp pruners and does less damage to the plant.
There are two basic styles of pruners; bypass and anvil. I prefer bypass pruners in which the two blades pass each other giving a cleaner cut. The anvil type is where the blade meets a flat (anvil type) surface. They are better if you are cutting thicker stemmed woody plants. I also suggest getting a holster to carry the pruners, to keep them handy and ready for use. [See photo.](#)
2. **Pruner Holster** (\$8)-A convenient way to carry your pruners.
3. **Hori-hori** (\$30)-A very useful hand-held digging tool easily replacing the all-too-bendable trowel while wildcrafting. Also known as a soil knife. There are a number of styles, I like the one that has a wooden handle and a rabbit on the black plastic case it comes with. [See photo.](#)
4. **Digging Fork** (\$35-70)-I use digging forks much more often than shovels. They are easier to use and do less damage to the terrain by loosening the soil rather than by digging holes. Buy a sturdy one with *square*, not flat, tines. Fork tines notoriously bend, so purchase with care. You may also want to carry a lead pipe to bend back errant tines, and a wire brush to clean up the tines to prevent rust. [See photo.](#)
5. **Shovel/Spade** (\$30-90)-Shovels should be heavy-duty with reinforced handles for digging into rocky ground. Poaching or tree-hole styles with a thicker more curved narrow blade are often better for wildcrafting in hard-packed earth whereas a broader blade is better when digging through sand or loose ground.
6. **Loppers** (\$20-50)-These are useful to cut branches and to process roots and other large or hard bits. Two main types are bypass and anvil. The bypass type is generally easier to make cuts and it gives a wider bite, but the anvil type is better for thicker plant material, especially when processing plants for medicine. Both are useful for different situations. [See photo.](#)

7. **Saw** (\$15-40)- I use a foldable saw if I have limited space and use a larger pruning type (curved blade) otherwise as they are sturdier. I mainly use saws to cut thick branches and stems. [See photo.](#)
8. **Draw (debarking) knife** (\$5-\$40)- These tools are used to remove the bark from tree stems and branches. Different styles can be helpful for different size woody plant parts. I use a small cleaver for peeling bark off of smaller stems and a larger traditional type draw knife for larger branches. [See photo.](#)
9. **Burlap bags** (Free-\$2 ea)-These are very useful for gathering and transporting wildcrafted plant material. They are sturdy and breathable.

Tools for Processing and Preparing Plants for Medicine

1. **Cleaver** (\$5-25)-These are large square-bladed knives for cutting and processing plant parts. There are many types of cleavers; a medium-sized one is helpful for most plant chopping and a larger butcher cleaver for large tough plant parts. Keep them sharp and make some kind of case to keep them in. [See photo.](#)
2. **Cutting board** (\$5)-Helpful when cutting up plants. Plastic or wood are good choices.
3. **Scale** (\$20)-For weighing out herbs to prepare as medicines.
4. **Measuring cup** (\$4)-A durable one to prepare fluid medicines.
5. **Canning jars**-Various sizes for preparing tinctures, oils and other medicines. Canning jars are a stronger glass than regular jars and the boxes they come in are handy for the road.
6. **Alcohol** (\$60/gallon)-95% ethyl alcohol (ethanol). 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 medicine making supplies

- Apple cider vinegar
- Calculator
- Distilled water
- Honey
- Isopropyl alcohol
- Olive oil-extra virgin
- Vegetable glycerin

More Tools and Supplies

- Ax/hatchet
- Backpack
- Binoculars
- Bungee cords
- Camera
- Cell phone
- Duct tape
- Extra batteries
- Extra blankets
- First aid kit
- Flashlight
- GPS
- Headlamp
- Insect repellent
- Knife
- Labels
- Lantern
- Markers
- Matches/lighter
- Notebook
- Plastic bags
- Rope/string
- Scrub brush
- Sharpening tool
- Sleeping gear
- Small cooler
- Strainer
- Tarps
- Topographic maps
- Utility pocket tool
- Wash basins
- Water
- Water bottle
- Wire brush

Clothes

Bring comfortable work clothes as you will probably be wearing them for days on end. Also be prepared for many types of weather. In places such as the desert 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 wildcrafter. Bring and drink plenty of water. You may want to bring dress clothes for going out or if you have an opportunity to teach while on the road.

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

Plants

These lists are somewhat arbitrary as they are plants that I have gathered or at least seen in the wild. Many other plants could have been included as well. The commonness of these plants can vary widely depending on where you live. This is written as a quick guide to get people started considering the different categories of collectability of plants. Please use common sense and look and ask around to see whether these plants fit into these groupings where you gather them. They are divided into three groupings; common plants, less common plants and uncommon plants with each category described below.

I would like to reiterate that it is important to respect *all* plants and their environment. Please be considerate when gathering, listen to your gut instincts, if you feel you shouldn't be gathering right then, just enjoy the company of the plant and environment and leave it be.

Note: *Spp.* is an abbreviation for 'species' and is used to mean that many species of the same genus can be used.

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 a long history of use as medicine. Some others are not as widely known, but as wildcrafting herbalists we can help others appreciate their medicinal qualities. Some plants that are 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. Don't gather the first plants you find, though they may be abundant in front of you, it may be the only patch

for many miles. Once again, it is in our best interests to cause minimal impact and help keep these plants flourishing.

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

Common plants

Agrimony	Agrimonia spp.	Japanese honeysuckle	Lonicera japonica
Alfalfa	Medicago sativa	Japanese knotweed	Polygonum cuspidatum
Barberry	Berberis thunbergii	Kudzu	Pueraria lobata
Bayberry	Myrica cerifera	Mallow	Malva spp.
Bedstraw	Galium spp.	Meadowsweet	Filipendula ulmaria
Blackberry	Rubus spp.	Milk thistle	Silybum marianum
Blueberry	Vaccinium spp.	Motherwort	Leonurus cardiaca
Buckthorn	Rhamnus cathartica	Mugwort	Artemisia vulgaris
Bugleweed	Lycopus spp.	Mullein	Verbascum thapsus
Burdock	Arctium spp.	Nettles	Urtica dioica
Burr marigold	Bidens spp.	Oats	Avena sativa
Catnip	Nepeta cataria	Passionflower	Passiflora incarnata
Cattail	Typha spp.	Peppermint	Mentha piperita
Chaparral	Larrea tridentata	Periwinkle	Vinca minor / V. major
Chickweed	Stellaria media	Plantain	Plantago spp.
Chicory	Cichorium intybus	Pleurisy root	Asclepias tuberosa
Cleavers	Galium aparine	Poke	Phytolacca americana
Coltsfoot	Tussilago farfara	Prickly ash	Zanthoxylum spp.
Comfrey	Symphytum spp.	Ragweed	Ambrosia artemisiifolia
Corn silk	Zea mays	Raspberry	Rubus idaeus/ R. spp.
Couchgrass	Agropyron repens.	Red Clover	Trifolium pratense
Curly dock	Rumex obtusifolius	Rose	Rosa rugosa / R. spp.
Dandelion	Taraxacum officinale	Sagebrush	Artemisia tridentata
Dooryard knotweed	Polygonum aviculare	Sarsaparilla	Smilax spp.
Eclipta	Eclipta alba	Sassafras	Sassafras albidum
Elecampane	Inula helenium	Saw palmetto	Serenoa repens
Ephedra	Ephedra spp.	Scotch broom	Cystis scoparius
Fennel	Foeniculum vulgare	Shepherds purse	Capsella bursa-pastoris
Figwort	Scrophularia spp.	Shiso	Perilla frutescens
Gill o'er the ground	Glechoma hederacea	St. Johnswort	Hypericum perforatum
Ginkgo	Ginkgo biloba	Tansy	Tanacetum spp.
Globe Mallow	Sphaeralcea spp.	Teasel	Dipsacus sylvestris
Goats head	Tribulus terrestris	Thyme	Thymus spp.
Goldenrod	Solidago spp.	Toadflax	Linaria vulgaris
Gravelroot	Eupatorium maculatum	Usnea	Usnea spp.
Greater celandine	Chelidonium majus	Wild lettuce	Lactuca spp.
Gumweed	Grindelia spp.	Willow	Salix spp.
Hawthorne	Crataegus spp.	Wolfberry	Lycium pallidum
Heal-all	Prunella vulgaris	Yarrow	Achillea millefolium
Horehound	Marrubium vulgare	Yellow dock	Rumex crispus
Horseradish	Armoracia rusticana	Yucca	Yucca glauca
Horsetail	Equisetum spp.		

Less common plants-while some of these plants may be regionally plentiful, please be extra cautious while wildcrafting them. Avoid taking the largest and hardiest stock, allowing these to proliferate. Although other wildcrafters may gather large quantities of some of this plants, that doesn't mean you need to if the plants seem uncommon or over-gathered.

Try not to gather from areas where other people gather. If you see holes dug in the ground or clipped plants, find another 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.

It also matters which part of the plant your are taking. When gathering underground structures such as roots and rhizomes, you may be killing the plant, which lends extra consideration as opposed to fruits or leaves.

Caution: some of these plants are potentially dangerous for internal use. Please know and read up on any plants you are wildcrafting.

Less common plants

Am. pennyroyal	Hedeoma spp.	Prickly ash	Zanthoxylum clava-herculis
Angelica	Angelica spp.	Pussy-toes	Antennaria spp.
Arnica	Arnica spp.	Red cedar	Thuja plicata
Artists conk	Ganoderma applanatum	Redroot	Ceanothus americanus
Balsam poplar	Populus balsamifera	Reishi	Ganoderma tsugae
Balsamroot	Balsamorhiza sagittata	Rhatany	Krameria spp.
Baneberry	Actaea spp.	Silk Tassel	Garrya 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	Sweet cicely	Osmorhiza spp.
Black walnut	Juglans nigra	Syrian rue	Peganum harmala
Blue cohosh	Caulophyllum thalictroides	Uva ursi	Arctostaphylos uva-ursi
Blue vervain	Verbena hastata	Valerian	Valeriana officinalis
Bogbean	Menyanthes trifoliata	Violet	Viola spp.
Boneset	Eupatorium perfoliatum	Wahoo	Euonymus atropurpureus
Calamus	Acorus calamus	Western coltsfoot	Petasites frigida
Clematis	Clematis spp.	White cedar	Thuja occidentalis
Corydalis	Corydalis aurea	White pond lily	Nymphaea odorata
Crampbark	Viburnum opulus	Wild cherry	Prunus serotina
Desert willow	Chilopsis linearis	Wild ginger	Asarum canadense
Devil's club	Oplopanax horridus	Wild hydrangea	Hydrangea arborescens
Iris	Iris missouriensis	Wild indigo	Baptisia tinctoria
Juniper berry	Juniperus spp.	Wild yam	Dioscorea villosa
Lobelia	Lobelia inflata	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

Uncommon Plants-The following plants are ones that are infrequently seen in the wild and should not be gathered. These are included as some of them are commonly traded on the herb market and it important to know they are imperiled in the wild. Many of these plants are cultivatable. Other less scarce species can be used for similar medicinal uses as these plants. Depending on where you live, many other plants could be added to this group, please learn how to recognize uncommon and endangered plants. Please do **not** gather these at all, but find yourself lucky to have come upon them in their native habitats.

Uncommon Plants

American ginseng	Panax quinquefolius	Pink Root	Spigelia marilandica
Chaparro amargosa	Castela emoryi	Seneca snakeroot	Polygala senega
Echinacea	Echinacea spp.	True unicorn root	Aletris farinosa
False unicorn root	Chamaelirium luteum	Venus flytrap	Dionaea muscipula
Goldenseal	Hydrastis canadensis	Virginia snakeroot	Aristolochia virginiana
Lady's slipper	Cypripedium spp.		