

# Wildcrafting for the Practicing Herbalist

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

Wildcrafting can be a pleasurable and perilous venture. It can involve gathering plants in striking mountain slopes, with the sun gleaming down as you take in the beauty of the scenery, or, just as likely, spending days in hot, muggy, insect-rich locales searching for a desired plant only not to find it in gatherable amounts.

Experienced wildcrafters know they may not find the plant they are seeking, and do 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 any specific plant. Wildcrafting is a time-honored art, but the earth has seen its share of ravages, 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 ethical obligations of the wildcrafter.

These notes are my personal reflections on wildcrafting, honed over the past 40 years of gathering plants mainly in the United States.

There are two main reasons people wildcraft. One is to gather plants to prepare as one's own medicines, whether for personal or clinical use. The second reason is to harvest plants to sell to others. Wildcrafting for profit is challenging. There are the ethical considerations of not overharvesting, which happens more readily when trying to gather large amounts. Difficulties arise from scrambling around to find enough plant material to gather, keeping the plants from becoming moldy before you deliver them, and finding people willing to pay a reasonable sum for a hard day's work.

For those uninitiated, wildcrafting 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 within the limitations of how long you will be in a particular region. And then there are the bugs, the weather, and the long days of digging, pruning, washing, and cutting.

Naturally, it can also be rewarding. You may find yourself alone in a fetching location, far from the daily noises of civilization. It can be exhilarating meeting new plants in their native habitat. Wildcrafting also gives us an accurate picture of which plants are endangered and should be left alone to grow. This means traveling sufficiently and seeing plants growing in their native ecosystems. I feel that herbalists benefit greatly

from seeing many of the plants they use as living, CO<sub>2</sub>-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 plants and plant parts you seek, when the best times are to wildcraft them, and finding favorable locations. You may be a wildcrafter who stays in their own neck of the woods or someone who travels widely. Either way, there can be a feeling of independence and deep satisfaction in gathering your own plant-based medicine.

### **Wildcrafting Considerations**

1. Do not overharvest. Be considerate of the land from which you are gathering. Consider this piece of earth from many perspectives. Consider it from the perspective of the animals living there, the humans who visit, and from the viewpoint 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 gather in the terrain and consider how you can leave with the least amount of impact.
3. If there is 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 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 collect 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 readily harvested. They generally 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 and websites based on floral plant keys are the primary sources of this information.
8. Learning how to use a plant identification key will help in several ways. It will assist you in identifying uncommon plant species that may otherwise be indiscriminately gathered or trampled on. It can also be instructive in finding species analogs 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 during 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, make sure your papers are in order, i.e., car registration, personal identification, appropriate cash, etc.
13. Gather seeds and replant them.
14. While gathering roots and rhizomes, replant root crowns and rhizome pieces, where there is a bud present, to help the plant regrow.
15. Gather local common plants. 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 by helping them grow and market medicinal plants.
17. Leave some of the most robust and lush plants from an area you are wildcrafting. These are important for maintaining 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 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 essential to learn all the poisonous plants growing in a region to ensure you have not harvested these.
21. International borders: Many plants are not allowed through foreign borders and may be confiscated, such as at the borders between Mexico, Canada, and the US. Keep this in mind when 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 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 convey a plant's basic *character* as well as botanical details, such as seeds and hairs. The old Eclectic medical dispensatories are helpful for seeing whether a plant you've come upon has been previously used for medicine. These books (along with Michael Moore's books, especially for the geographic West) may list other species used similarly, as well as the parts 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 you found gatherable.

## **Tools and Equipment**

Below are some of the basic tools and gear helpful for wildcrafting and preparing herbal medicines. This is followed by a list of supplementary supplies that are useful on

wildcrafting forays. Personal preferences will play a big part in 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

1. **Pruners**-Probably the most commonly used wildcrafting tool. Pruners come in different sizes and should feel comfortable in your hand. Keep them sharp for your' 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) surface. They are better for cutting thicker-stemmed woody plants. I also suggest getting a holster to carry the pruners to keep them handy and ready for use.
2. **Pruner Holster**-A convenient way to carry your pruners.
3. **Hori**-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 with a wooden handle and carbon steel blade (often sold under the name Joshua Roth).
4. **Digging Fork**-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 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 hollow lead pipe to bend back errant tines, and a wire brush to clean up the tines to prevent rust.
5. **Shovel/Spade**-Shovels should be heavy-duty with reinforced handles for digging into rocky ground. Poaching or tree-hole styles with a thicker, curved blade are often better for wildcrafting in hard-packed earth, whereas a broader blade is better when digging through sand or loose ground. Longer handles that reach the shoulder are easier on the back while digging.
6. **Loppers**-These are useful for cutting branches and processing roots and other large or hard plant parts. The two main types are bypass and anvil. Bypass loppers are generally easier to make wider cuts. The anvil type is better for thicker plant material, especially when processing plants for medicine. Both are useful for different situations. Longer loppers are useful when you need more leverage when cutting through thicker plant parts, and shorter loppers are easier to carry around and use.

7. **Saw**-Foldable saws are handy to carry around, while non-foldable pruning saws (with a curved blade) may cut more easily. These are both useful for cutting branches and stems.
8. **Draw (debarking) knife**-These tools remove the bark from tree stems and branches. Different styles can be useful for different-sized woody plant parts. I use a small cleaver to peel the bark off smaller stems, and a draw knife for larger branches.
9. **Burlap bags**-These are useful for gathering and transporting wildcrafted plant material. They are sturdy and breathable, so the plants can dry while traveling.

## Tools for Processing and Preparing Plants for Medicine

1. **Cleaver**-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 thick, tough plant parts. Keep them sharp and make a sheath to hold them. I just fold and tape some thick cardboard into a sheath to protect the tool and myself when reaching for my tools.
2. **Cutting board**-Helpful when cutting up plants. Plastic or wood are good choices.
3. **Scale**-For weighing out herbs to prepare as medicine.
4. **Measuring cup**-A durable one to prepare fluid medicines. I like the ones that also have the calibrations on the inside of the cup.
5. **Canning jars**-Various sizes for preparing tinctures, oils, and other medicines. Canning jars are made with stronger glass than regular jars, and the boxes they come in are handy for the road.
6. **Alcohol**-95% alcohol (ethanol). It is usually less expensive to mail-order high-proof alcohol than to purchase it in liquor stores. Make sure the alcohol is in a well-protected, safely stored, tightly sealed, spill-proof, non-breakable container. Alcohol is very flammable. Also, make sure it is clearly marked.

## Other medicine making supplies

- Apple cider vinegar
- Calculator
- Honey
- Isopropyl alcohol
- Extra virgin olive oil
- Vegetable glycerin

## More Tools and Supplies

- Ax/hatchet
- Binoculars
- Bungee cords
- Camera
- Cooler
- Duct tape
- Batteries
- Blankets
- First aid kit
- Flashlight
- Headlamp
- Insect repellent
- Knife
- Labels
- Lantern
- Markers
- Matches/lighter
- Notebook
- Plastic bags
- Rope/string
- Scrub brush
- Sharpening tool
- Strainer
- Tarps
- Topographic maps
- Utility pocket tool
- Washbasins
- Water
- Water bottle
- Wire brush

## Clothes

Bring comfortable work clothes, as you may 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-sleeved 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 dressier clothes for going out or if you have an opportunity to teach while on the road.

1. **Hat**-For sun protection
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, and 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. Consider thick gloves, a heavy long-sleeve jacket, thick pants, and boots.
6. **Gloves**-a thick pair for working with spines and nettles. When debarking stems, I use a thin pair of gloves with the fingertips cut off so I don't develop as many calluses while removing the bark.

## 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. The commonness of these plants can vary widely depending on where you live. This is written as a quick guide to help people consider 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 may potentially gather them. They are divided into three categories: common, less common, and uncommon plants, with each category described below.

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

Note: *Species* is an abbreviation for 'species' and means that many species of the same genus may 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 of these plants may be common in certain locales but not in others (e.g., Passionflower), so 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, as they 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 species	Japanese knotweed	Reynoutria japonica
Alfalfa	Medicago sativa	Kudzu	Pueraria lobata
Barberry	Berberis thunbergii	Mallow	Malva species
Bedstraw	Galium species	Meadowsweet	Filipendula ulmaria
Bee balm	Monarda species	Mimosa	Albizia julibrissin
Blackberry	Rubus species	Motherwort	Leonurus cardiaca
Broad-leaf dock	Rumex obtusifolius	Mugwort	Artemisia vulgaris
Buckthorn	Rhamnus cathartica	Mullein	Verbascum thapsus
Bugleweed	Lycopus species	Nettles	Urtica dioica
Burdock	Arctium species	Oats	Avena sativa
Burr marigold	Bidens species	Passionflower	Passiflora incarnata
Catnip	Nepeta cataria	Peppermint	Mentha piperita
Cattail	Typha species	Periwinkle	Vinca species
Chaparral	Larrea tridentata	Plantain	Plantago species
Chickweed	Stellaria media	Poke	Phytolacca americana
Chicory	Cichorium intybus	Prickly ash	Zanthoxylum species
Cleavers	Galium aparine	Ragweed	Ambrosia artemisiifolia
Coltsfoot	Tussilago farfara	Raspberry	Rubus idaeus
Comfrey	Symphytum species	Red Clover	Trifolium pratense
Corn silk	Zea mays	Rose	Rosa spp
Couchgrass	Agropyron repens	Sagebrush	Artemisia tridentata
Dandelion	Taraxacum officinale	Sarsaparilla	Smilax species
Dooryard knotweed	Polygonum aviculare	Sassafras	Sassafras albidum
Elecampane	Inula helenium	Saw palmetto fruit	Serenoa repens
Ephedra	Ephedra species	Scotch broom	Cystis scoparius
Fennel	Foeniculum vulgare	Shepherd's purse	Capsella bursa-pastoris
Figwort	Scrophularia species	Shiso	Perilla frutescens
Gill-over-the-ground	Glechoma hederacea	St. Johnswort	Hypericum perforatum
Ginkgo leaf	Ginkgo biloba	Tansy	Tanacetum vulgare
Globe Mallow	Sphaeralcea species	Teasel	Dipsacus sylvestris
Goat's head	Tribulus terrestris	Thyme	Thymus species
Goldenrod	Solidago species	Toadflax	Linaria vulgaris
Gravelroot	Eupatorium maculatum	Usnea	Usnea species
Greater celandine	Chelidonium majus	Wild lettuce	Lactuca species
Gumweed	Grindelia species	Willow	Salix species
Hawthorne	Crataegus species	Wolfberry	Lycium species
Heal-all	Prunella vulgaris	Yarrow	Achillea millefolium
Horseradish	Armoracia rusticana	Yellow dock	Rumex crispus
Horsetail	Equisetum species	Yucca	Yucca glauca
Japanese honeysuckle	Lonicera japonica		

**Less common plants**-while some of these plants may be regionally plentiful, please be cautious while wildcrafting them. Avoid taking the largest and hardiest stock, allowing these plants to proliferate. Although other wildcrafters may gather large quantities of some of these 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 wildcraft. 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 selling them to herbalists or small companies that you personally know. This will help avoid overharvesting.

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

### Less common plants

Am. pennyroyal	Hedeoma species	Prickly ash	Zanthoxylum clava-herculis
Angelica	Angelica species	Pussy-toes	Antennaria species
Arnica	Arnica species	Red cedar	Thuja plicata
Artists conk	Ganoderma applanatum	Redroot	Ceanothus americanus
Balsam poplar	Populus balsamifera	Reishi	Ganoderma tsugae
Balsamroot	Balsamorhiza sagittata	Rhatany	Krameria species
Bayberry	Myrica cerifera	Silk Tassel	Garrya species
Bearsfoot	Polymnia uvedalia	Skullcap	Scutellaria lateriflora
Black birch	Betula lenta	Solomon's seal	Polygonatum species
Black cohosh	Actaea racemosa	Stillingia	Stillingia sylvatica
Black haw	Viburnum prunifolium	Stoneroot	Collinsonia canadensis
Black walnut	Juglans nigra	Sweet cicely	Osmorhiza species
Blue cohosh	Caulophyllum species	Uva ursi	Arctostaphylos uva-ursi
Blue vervain	Verbena hastata	Valerian	Valeriana officinalis
Boneset	Eupatorium perfoliatum	Violet	Viola species
Calamus	Acorus calamus	Wahoo	Euonymus atropurpureus
Clematis	Clematis species	Western coltsfoot	Petasites frigida
Corydalis	Corydalis aurea	White cedar	Thuja occidentalis
Crampbark	Viburnum opulus	White pond lily	Nymphaea odorata
Desert willow	Chilopsis linearis	Wild cherry	Prunus serotina
Devil's club	Oplopanax horridus	Wild ginger	Asarum canadense
Eyebright	Euphrasia species	Wild hydrangea	Hydrangea arborescens
Iris	Iris missouriensis	Wild indigo	Baptisia tinctoria
Juniper berry	Juniperus species	Wild yam	Dioscorea villosa
Lobelia	Lobelia inflata	Witch hazel	Hamamelis virginiana
Oregon graperoot	Berberis species	Yellow pond lily	Nuphar polysepalum
Osha	Ligusticum porteri	Yellowroot	Xanthorrhiza simplicissima
Partridgeberry	Mitchella repens	Yerba mansa	Anemopsis californica
Pedicularis	Pedicularis species	Yerba santa	Eriodictyon species
Pleurisy root	Asclepias tuberosa		

**Uncommon Plants**-The following plants are infrequently seen in the wild and should not be gathered. These plants are included as some are commonly traded on the herb market, and it is important to know they are imperiled in the wild. Many of these 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, but find yourself lucky to have come upon them in their native habitats.

**Uncommon Plants**

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