When I was growing up, herbs were a natural part of the landscape and everyday life. They played a role in the lives of everyone I knew. The elders who knew the most about herbs recognized their holistic place as medicine and an integral part of the natural environment.

Early on, I was taught that every plant has an ally (a companion) and a use. For instance, when I used to go ginseng hunting with my family, Granddaddy would often remind us that ginseng, deer and rattlesnakes are usually found together.

According to Granddaddy, deer eat the ginseng seeds in the early fall and the seeds pass on through and drop as the deer moves around the woods. The seeds then roll down the sides of the mountain until they rest on land that is level enough and moist enough for them to grow. That’s one way ginseng travels around the woods to new locations, and following deer trails is one way to find ginseng.

Rattlesnakes make their winter nests in the sides of the mountains near ginseng patches, but above wet ground, and go to nest about the same time ginseng is ready to dig. So, most ginseng hunters run up on at least one or two rattlesnakes. Legend tells that because rattlesnakes and ginseng live so close together and share the same land, they made a pact. If you injure one, the other extracts revenge; what you do to one, you do to the other. Killing a rattlesnake is always bad luck; the spirits don’t like that. And even worse, the ginseng can stop working for you.

Ginseng was the only medicinal plant my Daddy ever used until late in his life when his brother B.J. moved to Florida and sent him an aloe vera plant and a gallon of aloe vera juice. Daddy said that aloe vera “filled in the cracks that ginseng left.” And ginseng was the only plant I was allowed to dig, study and use for many, many years. Both Daddy and Granddaddy felt that ginseng, in the right amount, could do most everything, and I spent years learning those amounts and those uses.

I ate my first ginseng when I was only a little girl. It was fresh dug from the ground and the smell of the rich-woods dirt filled my nostrils as I took a bite. I was taught to chew on a tidbit of the woody root slowly, savoring every drop of its sweet bitterness. I could keep a bit of seng in my mouth for hours, worrying it around and around my mouth the way a cow chews a cud.

We always kept dried ginseng in the kitchen drawer—the one where all the odds and ends of the kitchen end up. There, among the matches, can openers, screws and receipts, were the dried broken bits of the seng that were too small to sell. The collection grew every year. I still have a few of those broken seng roots, given to me by Mama when Daddy died. They were a last gift and reminder of those precious times in the woods. The roots are as hard as a rock, and many have been dried almost thirty years, but I can still chew on one for quite a few hours, letting the sweet bitterness fill my mouth.

Living with a plant, the way I did ginseng, is the perfect way to get to know it and for it to know you. As with many herbs, the dose makes the difference. As a tonic, a little ginseng each day, just a little, supports the body and improves health.

Plants have always been my companions, whether in the woods or the fields. For as long as I can remember, they have kept me company, shaded me from the hot sun and kept me well.

Living with a plant…is the perfect way to get to know it and for it to know you.

—Phyllis Light

Strong roots

Southern Herbalism: My Story
Phyllis D. Light, RH shares her herbal traditions.
In the spring, a time for weeding and thinning the cotton, Queen Anne’s lace, blackberry, dock, sassafras, cleavers, summer boneset, honeysuckle, poke sallet, plantain and ground ivy were my friends. In the time before cotton became one of the most heavily herbicide- and pesticide-doused crops grown in the United States, the fields were never without a wealth of plants. Growing cotton was labor intensive, and weeds around the cotton were kept under control by field hands wielding sharp hoes and by plowing between the rows with the tractor. My maternal grandfather, Papa Bright, didn’t use chemicals on his cotton or corn; he was too poor, so the family worked the fields instead.

Of all the plants which I associate most with the cotton fields, two plants stand out in my mind: goldenrod and cockle bur. The showy goldenrod, with its bright yellow flowers, signifies that autumn has truly arrived. Insects love goldenrod, and so you can find a variety of bugs and beetles within the flowers of the plant. Galls can also be found on the stalks, and inside the galls are parasites waiting to burst forth and finish their life cycle. The galls themselves can be used as medicine to stop bleeding, either internally or externally, for intestinal problems such as diarrhea and dysentery, and for excessive release of bodily fluids. Galls are also found on other plants and trees such as oak, sumac and gum.

Some goldenrod plants have feathery blossoms, while some blossoms are collected on a spike. Some plants have simple leaves, some have leaves that alternate, and some types of goldenrod have toothed leaves. The scientific name is Solidago, which means “to make whole,” and I think this is a fine signature of goldenrod’s healing properties.

Goldenrod is one plant that I gather, dry and store for use every year. It reduces hot urine, eases inflammation in the kidneys and helps the body eliminate kidney stones. It can help increase energy when the kidneys are at a low function. I have found it useful for folks who have kidney or bladder infections or kidney stones, especially when the kidneys are congested. And, it can help relieve spasms in the urinary tract. Goldenrod provides assistance by washing away the bacteria in the bladder and kidneys, the way a good hand washing does.

When I was growing up in northern Alabama, my southern herbal heritage was an important part of my daily life, knowledge necessary to live on the land and be healthy and happy. It is those ways that still guide my life today. It is a way of life that is fading as the old folks die away and the young folks turn away, and now it has to be sought out to be learned and understood. Thankfully, enough people are devoted to keeping this heritage alive.

Phyllis is a fourth generation Appalachian herbalist, professional member of the American Herbalist Guild and the director of Herbal Studies at Clayton College of Natural Health. She can be reached through her website at www.phyllisdlight.com or by calling 256-586-8654. She will speak at the upcoming Southeast Women’s Herbal Conference in the Asheville area in September.

Note: This article is excerpted from her forthcoming book entitled The Geography of Health: Southern and Appalachian Folk Medicine.
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