
Plants Under Pressure

by Sue Mullen

My intention over the next year is to brainstorm and, hopefully, with the help of the permaculture community, come up with viable solutions to the looming problems I feel rising in the face of Herbal Medicine.

For years, partner Michael Moore and I prided ourselves in the fact that we personally gathered most of the plant medicines for our small tincture business. This felt appropriate for us because we chose to accept total responsibility for making all our medicine, from the gathering to the dispensing. As much as I love every part of this process, I have come to the realization that circumstances are changing and so must I.

Last summer I journeyed back to Arkansas and Missouri on a plant-gathering trip. I was shocked at the magnitude of plant loss that had taken place in the three years since I had last been in the Ozarks. I saw only a handful of the lovely *Echinacea* plants that had always graced the roadsides in abundance. The Goldenseal had been completely picked out

of a deep, wet drainage that we had been monitoring and gathering from in a conscious, sustainable fashion for the last seven years. I felt stunned, disgusted, heartbroken, angry, and ... guilty.

After talking to local residents and friends, I realized that this relatively recent pillage of plants was due, for the most part, to the efforts of a few large companies to supply the ever-growing demand of the European market for wildcrafted American plants. They had a bounty out on certain species, and would rendezvous with all interested pickers on pre-arranged days, in various small towns, to buy whatever they had collected, no questions asked. Consequently, the National Forests, the roadsides, and even private lands were all being ripped off.

Our own urban sprawl, industrial development, and the resulting pollution has already destroyed much fragile plant habitat, as has inappropriate logging, grazing, mining, and recreational use. The over-harvesting of herbs, for export or domestic use, just adds insult to injury for much of the land. Many wildcrafters are very ethical, and I do believe that a healthy ecology could support a fair amount of harvesting, but probably not enough to meet the needs of the ever-growing demand for good plant medicine. To be even a small part of the problem was very uncomfortable to me. I seriously considered abandoning my business and moving on to greener pastures. But, after the initial panic and fears wore off, I gradually came to the conclusion that I had to help create some kind of solution to protect, restore, and take the pressure off of native plant populations.

Taking Responsibility for our Public Lands

By protecting vast areas of any given ecosystem we can directly increase and insure future generations of wild plant and animal populations. During the last five years, I have felt compelled to involve myself in the affairs of the Gila National Forest. My concern has been for the watershed in general (90% the water in Arizona and New Mexico originates in the National Forests), and initially, for the specific protection of remaining old-growth forests, and the fragile riparian zones. This has evolved into an interesting journey of trying to figure out how to manage with a larger, ecosystem approach. My involvement with ranchers, loggers, hunters, radical environmentalists, and various federal agencies has been a real education in not being attached to my own agenda, and I've learned how to really listen. Working to find common ground with folks who often have very different

opinions seems to be the most enduring way to restore diversity to the land itself. If we can learn to honor our own differences, we will understand and appreciate the beauty and necessity of diversity, and with cooperation we will be more apt to preserve and protect our communities and watersheds.

Just start by going out and really observing that favorite place in the landscape where you like to go. And if you come up with any concerns, talk to your neighbor, or carry them to the appropriate land manager. Most of the people in land management positions are doing it because they love the land. So there is your common ground to start with. Speak your mind, listen to other opinions, and trust that you can be co-creators of a management that everyone can live with.

So we do have some options. We can be educated consumers, active growers, and responsible members of our communities helping to create a sustainable relationship with our local environments. "Care of the Land and Care of the People." Who said that?