

# Herbs: Honorable Harvest

lessons from

# Braiding Sweetgrass

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# Ten thousand years

- It is thought that “modern” humans came across a land bridge from Asia thru the Bering straights and into North America about 10,000 years ago as the last Ice Age ended. (1)
  
- (1) Jared Diamond, Guns, Germs, Steel

# Hundreds of miles per year

- The new people moved & spread across the continent from North to South and East at a rate of about a 100 miles a year.



# As the people moved

- They connected with the plants that were growing in each bio-region and became familiar with them.
- First Nations people knew North American plants well.
- They developed story and rituals to pass knowledge from generation to generation.

- Contrary to popular belief, North America was not EMPTY when Columbus landed, it was well-populated with substantial towns and native people's villages around the 1500s.

(Small pox & other factors reduced the native population to 1/10<sup>th</sup> its original size by the 1700s.)

# Lost knowledge

- Indigenous knowledge of our native North American plants has been lost except for small pockets of First Nations People who have kept the knowledge alive.

As herbalists, we can use traditional knowledge from:

- Asian-Indian Auyvedic Herbals
- Chinese Herbal Medicine
- European Herbals
- .....but.....

# No place like home

- There is nothing that can compare with knowing the plants and herbs that are native to this place.....
- As well as the plants and herbs that have, like most of us, been transplanted from other parts of the world just a few short generations ago.

# Let's start

- With a story from the beginning.....
- Because it illustrates the good relationship with plants (and herbs) as understood by Native Americans.



# The story that follows

- Is a traditional way of instructing on how to harvest herbs.

# Skywoman Falling

- In the beginning was sky world
- Read from pages 3-5 in Braiding Sweetgrass
- Adapted from oral tradition and Shenandoah and George, 1988

# Skywoman Falling

- A woman fell, like a twirling maple seed...
- Thru a hole in the sky
- Toward a world covered only in water
- ..... no land.



# Skywoman Falling



- She clutched a bundle in her hand....
- The geese caught her to break her fall.....
- All creatures of water & wing held council.....
- Great turtle offered his back on which she could rest.

# Skywoman Falling

- The creatures of water understood she needed land for her home.
- Deep beneath the rivers there was mud.





Loon, then Otter, Beaver and Sturgeon dove deep, but came back empty handed.

Muskrat made the dive and came back with mud clutched in his paw, but he died trying.

Skywoman bent and spread the mud on turtle's back.



# Skywoman Falling

- Moved by the extraordinary gifts of the animals.....
- Skywoman sang and danced in thanksgiving.
- As she danced her thanks, the land grew from the dab of mud on Turtle's back until the whole earth was made.
- Not by woman's gratitude alone, .....
- ....but by the gifts of all animals.....





# Skywoman Falling

- the earth was made



# Skywoman falling

- Like any good guest
- Skywoman had not come empty handed.
- For when she first fell thru the hole in the sky
- She had reached out to grab onto the Tree of Life that grows there.
- In her grasp as she fell, were branches with fruits and seeds and all plants.
- She scattered the bundle of plants onto the ground and carefully tended each one until the brown world turned green.
- Many animals came to join her and live with her on Turtle Island.



# Wiingaashk - Sweetgrass

- The stories say that Sweetgrass was the very first to grow on the earth.
- It is a ceremonial plant (herb) that helps all of us “remember to remember” this story and its meaning.
- This is the first herb to know in this course.



# What is the lesson in the story?

- How did you feel as I read the story?
- Bored?
- Get to the point?
- Hurry up already?
- What's this possibly got to do with herbs?

# The first lesson

- We always seem to be in a hurry.
- We don't take time.
- We may not care to learn from the past.
- Please be patient with this type of instruction through story.
- Learning patience is one of the first things to learn as an herbalist.



# Which tradition do you come from?

Skywoman helped create a garden of Eden....

She helps to tend and foster it.

A “generous embrace” creation story –

Plants as allies

Original blessing

The Judeo-Christian story of the Great Fall.

Eve was cast out of a garden for tasting its fruit.

She was instructed to subdue and have dominion.

A “banishment and sin” creation story –

Plants as enemies

Original curse.

# Skywoman asks

- “In return for this gift of a world on Turtle’s back, what will I give in return?”
- The culture descendant from Eve seems to ask “what can I take and show mastery over?”
- “I live in fear, I am an outcast, I must control the world around me”

# Original Instructions

- Native American stories shared by the original peoples of the Great Lakes.
- Stories that are a compass, an ethics guide, an orientation but not a map.
- Skywoman Falling story is the story of origin and instruction from the land where you were born.
  
- Not the Great Fall or Ten Commandments of Shall & Shall Not from a distant land.

# Original Instructions

The story of Skywoman Falling is an original instruction story:

- Accept the gifts from other beings with open hands.
- Use the gifts honorably.
- Use your own gifts and dreams for good.
- Share the gifts you bring.
- Despite our fears of falling trust that the gifts of the world stand by to catch us.

# What does this mean for herbs class?

- Humans are the “younger brothers & sisters” of creation. Not the dominant species.
- Animals and plants have been here longer and can teach us how to live....since we have the least experience.
- We can receive the gifts of plants as medicines.
- We should give something in return every time we take something.

# An Indigenous language lesson

- Plants and animals are not “its”.
- Plants and animals are “who”.
  - Imagine if I called one of you in the classroom “it”.
- “If an oak is an “it”, we can take up the chainsaw.
- If an oak is a her, we think twice.”

# The Honorable Harvest

- The story of Skywoman Falling and other points up until now prepare you for the idea of how we will harvest the plants we will use in class.
- Medicine plants are best (most powerful) when harvested in this intentional way.

 **NORTHEAST**  
WI Technical College  
**Honorable Harvest**

(copied from Robin Wall-Kimmerer Braiding Sweetgrass page 183)

- Know the ways of the ones who take care of you, so you can take care of them.
- Introduce yourself.
- Be accountable as the one who comes asking for life.
- Never take the first.
- Never take the last.
- Take only what you need.
- Take only that which is given.
- Never take more than half.
- Leave some for others.
- Harvest in a way that minimizes harm.
- Use it respectfully.
- Never waste what you have taken.
- Share.
- Give thanks for what you have been given.
- Give a gift, in reciprocity for what you have taken.
- Sustain the ones who sustain you and the earth will last forever.





# Harvest

- When:
- I prefer sunny day, mid-afternoon when plant sugars are highest
- Some herbalists prefer sunny mornings

I am most familiar with harvest & storage of culinary herbs, less experienced with medicinal herbs.

# How

Most herbs:

- Cut back stems just above a node
- This encourages more branching as the plant regrows
- Typically, when flowers are in bud stage

Rosemary & sage

- Just pinch off leaves

Chives

- Shear off at ground level

# Extending the harvest

- Cut just before flowering
- Cut regularly (every 3 weeks or so), not just once at end of season – this encourages new growth and won't hurt the plant (like mowing grass)
- Stagger plantings – especially annual herbs like cilantro & basil
- Some perennials will re-flower once you harvest the first blooms.