

# Herbs: History/ Overview

Healing herbs - history

# A brief look back at herbal history

- Why?

To help you have confidence that people have been using herbs  
practically forever

# Why is this class part of the Sustainable Food & Ag Curriculum?

- Plant anatomy and production methods using organic/sustainable practices are important.
- The more plants you can grow locally the more sustainable we become.
- In studying herbs as healing medicines we actually start learning a little about healing the land we live on.

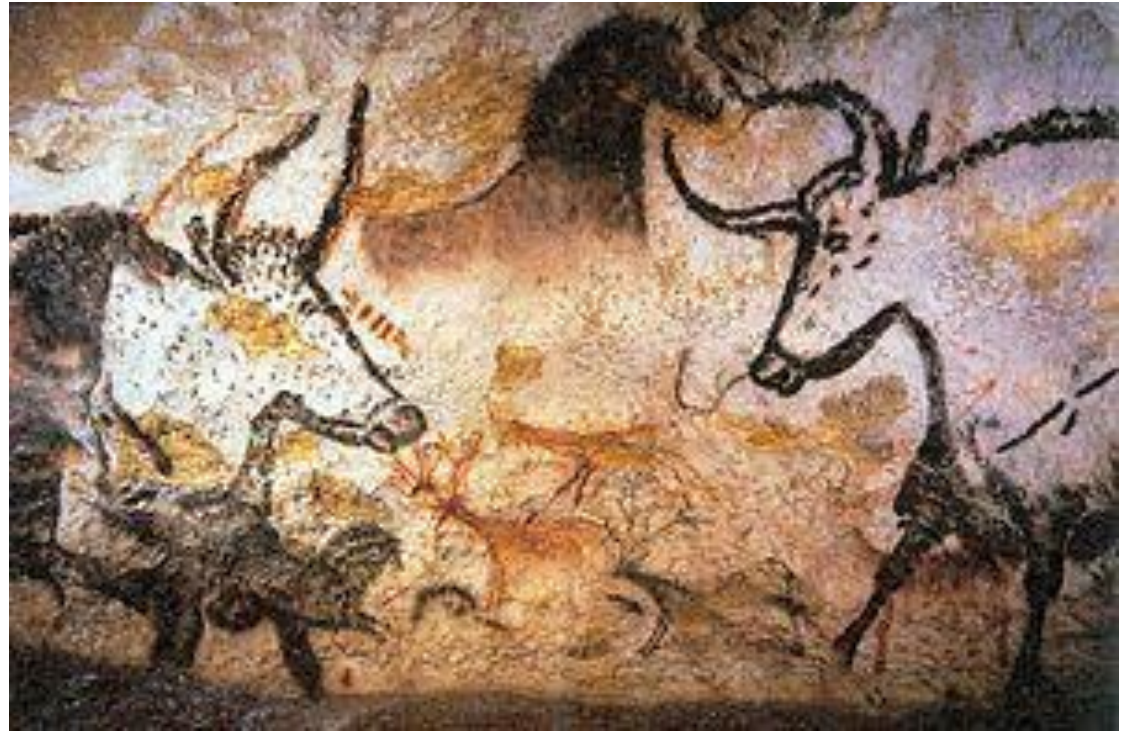
# Healing herbs - history

For 200,000 years, early humanoids have had a very, very intimate association with plants. They sustained us. We were vegetarians.



# Only in the last 50,000 years did we....

- Begin using fire
- Developed language
- Begin using tools
- Begin hunting.
  
- Began to eat meat.  
Not just plants.
  
- Our image of the  
Paleolithic diet is of  
**meat** and not plants
  
- We loose sight of our  
very ancient  
**connection to plants.**



Cave paintings, Lascaux, France

# Plants & us ....we go back a long way

- They have been our ancestral sustenance for 4x as long as animal foods.

It is not surprising that we knew plants intimately and learned how to use them well.

They had been our only medicine up until just 100 years ago.....



Are you smarter than a Neanderthal?

Which plant is....

Dogwood

Elderberry

# Is our “advanced” way of knowing about plants better now?

- It seems that intimate plant knowledge is something we have lost, rather than gained.
- Part of this course will teach how to repair our relationship with plants in general by our use of herbs, specifically, and their gifts to us.

# How is plant knowledge passed along?

- Plant to person – directly?
- Parent to child
- Elder to novice
- Shaman to apprentice
- **Teacher/scientist to student**
- Book to readers
- Doctor to patient? Is this Knowledge or just ‘fixing’?
- Internet?.....potentially a game of telephone learning by dilution.....use caution



# Scientific method

- I have a Master's degree in Agronomy
- Supposedly, I know a lot about crop plants
- I know them scientifically
- I know how photosynthesis works
- I know Latin names for things
- I can tell you the active ingredients in the plant's biochemistry.....

# Grandma method

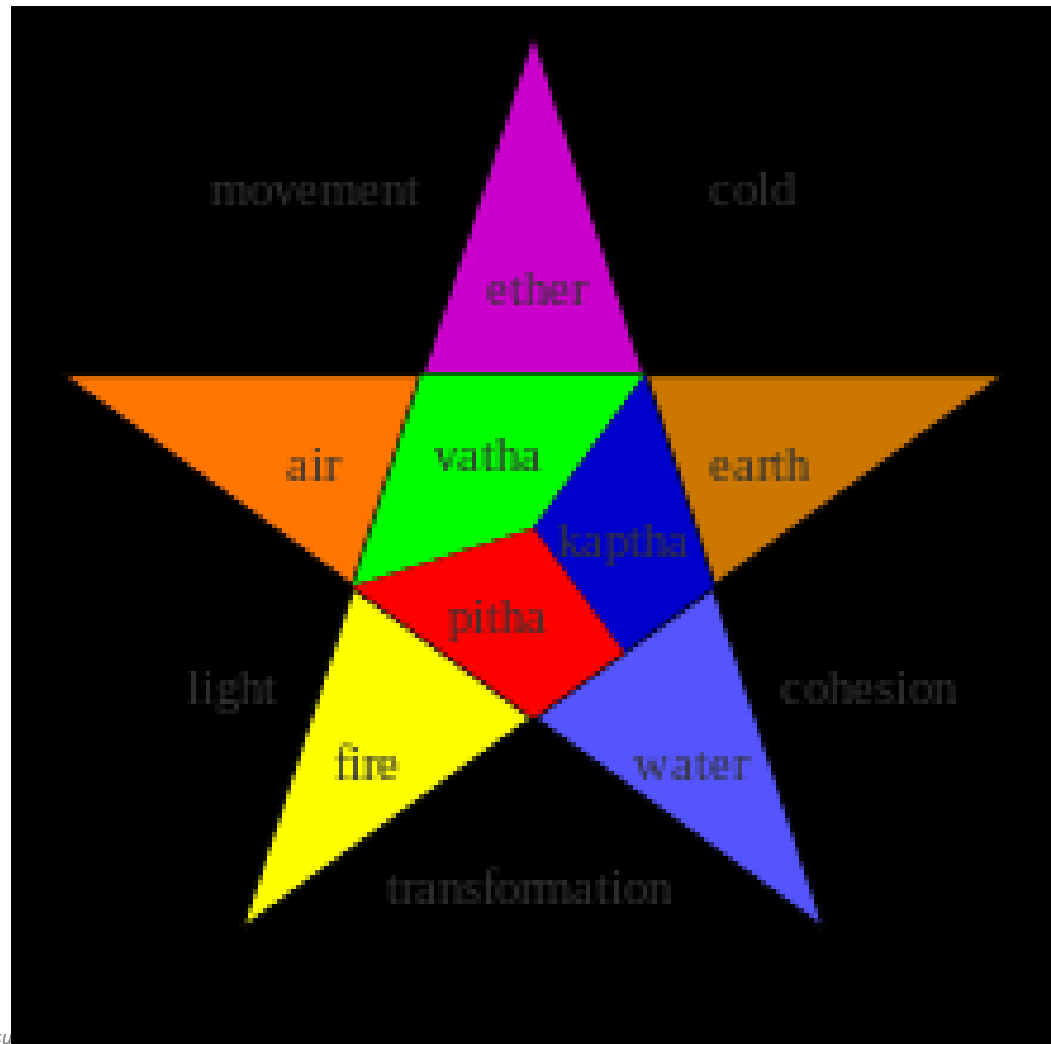
- My grandma lived in a trailer next to us
- She taught me about plants
- I grew my first garden when I was 8 yrs old
- Plants have been “calling” me all my life

# Traditional Herbal knowledge

- India and China did not lose their herbal knowledge of plant-based medicine as European culture did.
- No African-based system of plant knowledge is widespread in other parts of the world.
- Some European-based traditional knowledge still exists. Most is “modern & scientific” herbalism.
- Indigenous peoples still retain some knowledge.

# Indian – Ayuervedic Medicine

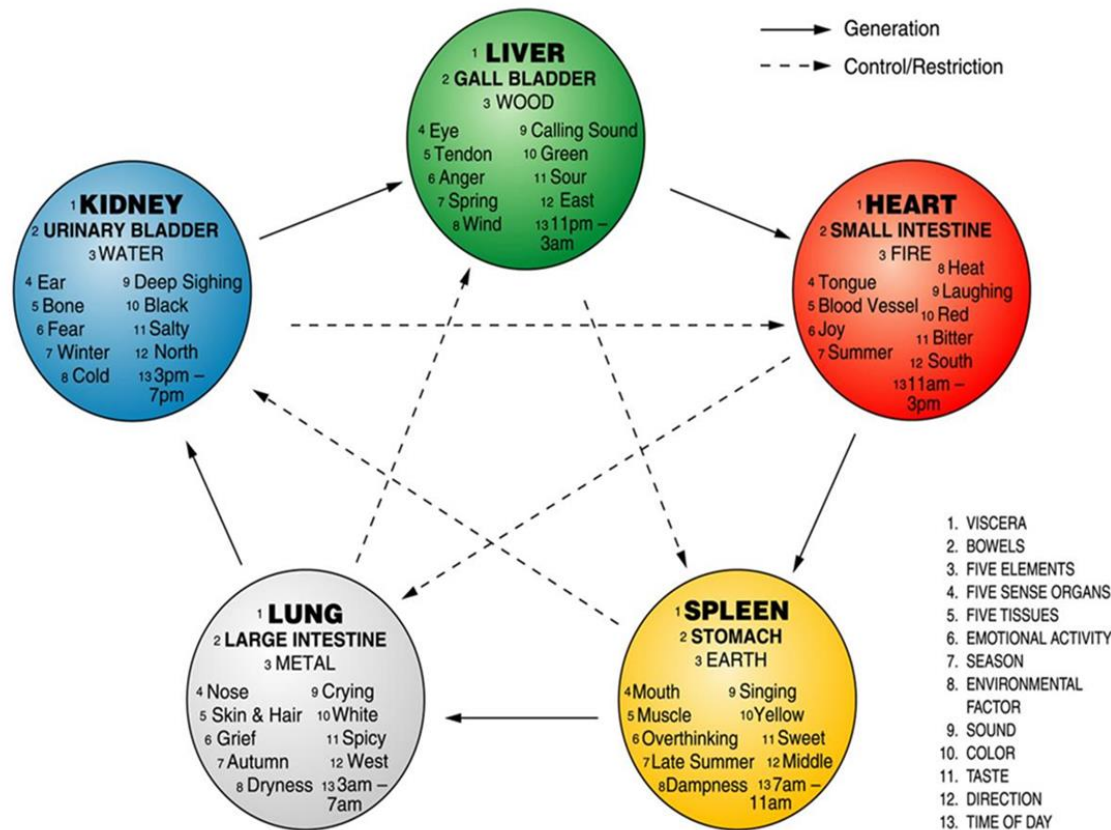
Mind and body both  
are treated as one



# Chinese Medicine

- Emperor Shen-nung 3737-2697 wrote an herb book of “pharmacopeia”

## CLASSIFICATION OF THINGS ACCORDING TO THE THEORY OF THE FIVE ELEMENTS



# Indigenous Medicine

- Plants are our helpers and allies.
- They are our older relatives.
- Shamanistic healing.
- For a good read about Native American herbs try Robin Wall-Kimmerer's book "Braiding Sweetgrass".
- When do I become indigenous to a place?
- I tend to use this tradition because it uses herbs that are right here, in our neighborhoods.



NORTHEAST

Technical College

# European herbal history 4,000 years ago

- Recorded history starts with Judeo-Christian bible where stories of use of the herb Hyssop (and blood) over a door lintel spared the firstborn child from the last of the 10 plagues of the Egyptians.
- Further in the Exodus story, white “manna” (like coriander seed) sustained the people.
- Egyptian papyrus records indicate there were 2,000 herbal doctors 4,000 years ago.

# European herbal ancestors

Egyptians

Greeks

Romans

Romans

Northern  
Europeans

Monasteries



# Traditional European Herbalism

- Suffered setbacks in the Middle Ages when Christian religion prosecuted those who were keepers of plant knowledge as “witches” – interesting to note – pentagrams.
- Monasteries became the centers of science & learning
- Perhaps organized religion wanted to keep healing, magic, knowledge for its own control.

- Split into two traditions – German and English in the 1450’s.

Several important English books (herbals) were written in the 1600’s:

Gerard

Parkinson

Culpepper

# Culpepper - 1650

- Relied on astrology & planting by the influence of moons, stars, planets
- Exported to the new world
- “Doctrine of signatures” .....the way a plant looks helps us to know how to use it.
- Hepatica – liver wort
- (wort is an old English word for plant)

- Dr. Benjamin Rush
  - Johann Kelpius
  - Dr. Benjamin Barton (1760-1815)
  - Samuel Thompson 1813 – Shakers
- 
- Herbalism became part of science and the realm of Doctors and those with “education”.

# Communicating plant knowledge: Student to teacher

Herbal knowledge has generally been left out of the western higher education system.....why?

- Science based curriculum preferred
- Herbs seemed “unproven” - unprovable
- Herbalist teachers uninterested in getting stuck in orthodoxy of education
- Herbalists go on their own to teach, as has been the practice for generations.

# Modern Herbal teachers

- Discounted as quacks or weirdly spiritual or using “energy” or magic.
- Rosemary Gladstar, James Green, Dr. Jody Noe’, Ilsa Burgess



**NORTHEAST**  
WI Technical College

# Herbs & Science

- Extracts were made & commercialized and standardized into medicines under the control of a few specialized professions.
- There is no money to be made off you if you know how to heal with plants grown in your backyard.

# So where does that leave us today?



## All science and no traditional knowledge about herbs?



# Broken connection

US



PLANTS

Many people are far removed from growing plants and using whole plants, even as food, let alone as medicine.

# In the good old USA

Woodsman> pioneer> sod buster> farmer> small town> city> urbanite

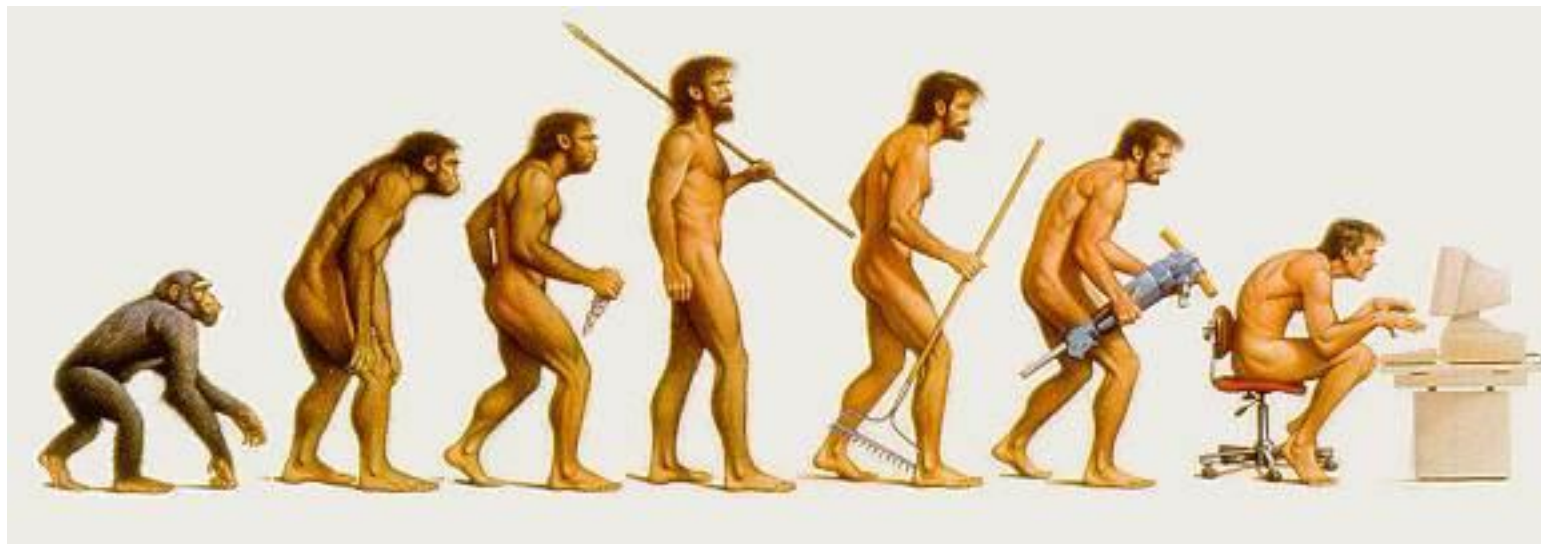
1	2	3	x	4	5	6	7
1790	1820	1850		1890	1940	1970	2020

It has not taken long to break our connection to plants  
Seven generations

# Becoming indigenous

- We move around a lot
- We don't get our hands in the soil much
- We don't know the weather patterns
- We don't know where the wet spots are in a field

# We've come along way...too far?



.....and act as if our science has all the knowledge we need  
.....seven generations

# We lost connection quickly



US

PLANTS

In just 7 generations we shifted our health care from plants as healers to science & technology.

# We don't hear plants calling us anymore



# Age of the internet

- We can actually get off track in a flood of information from well-intentioned sources

# Unless you connect directly to plants... The message can get messed up





# Example: Tulsi Basil

- It is from India, so there is a language barrier.
- Green Basil (culinary) *Ocimum basilicum*
- Tulsi (medicinal) is *Ocimum sancticum*
- How do I know this? I checked several sources as Rosemary Gladstar advises in her book.

# Basil - culinary

- There is confusion because there are over 50 species of basil.
- Sweet basils: Sweet, Genovese, Large-leaf, Mammoth
- Purple foliage basils: Dark Opal, Purple Ruffles
- Lemon basils: Lemon-Scented, Lemon, Sweet Dani
- Others: Cinnamon basil, Spicy Bush, Camphor, Anise, Licorice

- Also called Tulasi basil
- *now called*  
*Ocimum tenuiflorum*
- Revered as a sacred plant in many households in India.
- An avatar or embodiment of the Goddess Lakshmi

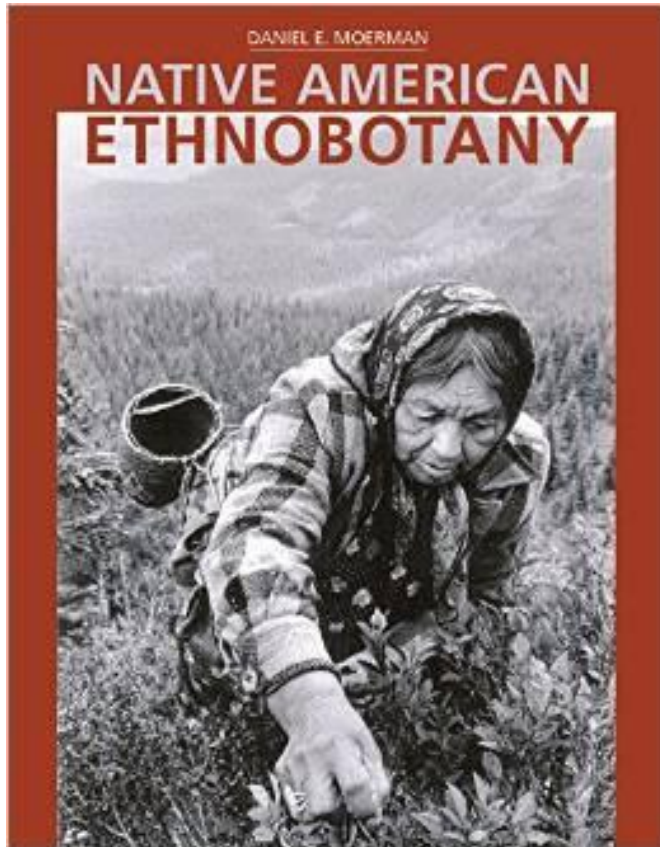


- Used in India as a send-off to raise the souls of the departed to heaven.
- Did I harvested it without proper knowledge and respect?
- How would Christians feel if the communion wafer or wine used in their sacraments as the embodiment of Christ was left on the back porch to dry in the sun and the cat sat on it?

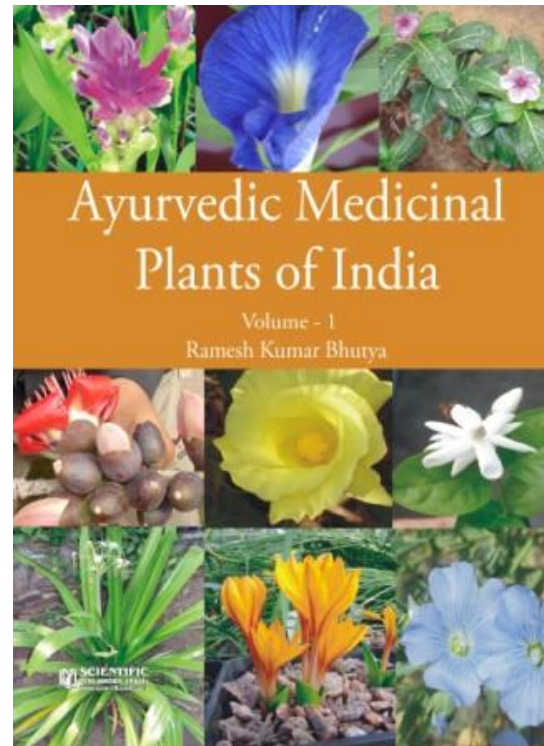
# So how do we renew our knowledge?

- Teacher/scientist to student.
- You will have to do your part to rebuild lost relationships with plants.
- How do we re-connect?
  
- ALWAYS CHECK AT LEAST 3 SOURCES!
- Books are good, people are better.

# The links are not broken in all cultures...



... some still have knowledge of plants as medicine



Braiding  
Sweetgrass:  
Robyn Walls  
Kimmerer

We will  
explore this  
book a bit  
later

- The plants themselves will be our best teachers.
- I can coach you, but they will guide you.
- But we must treat them respectfully.
- Try to let go of “rational western thought” and try a new way of learning.

# In a classroom

- It may seem like “foo foo” dust to consider that plants themselves can be our teachers.
- Difficult to help all individuals with the awareness needed to use herbs well.
- Small classes are much better.
- Lots of time spent in the field is good.
- This course is just an introduction.
- Please consider finding an herbal mentor in order to go further.



# Now is a time for us to reconnect with plants.

- Let's try an exercise in reconnecting with plants



# Plants still speak to some people



<http://earthmedicineinstitute.com/more/articles/listening-to-plants/>

<http://earthmedicineinstitute.com/more/articles/listening-to-plants/>

Homework: spend one hour listening to plants, write a paragraph or two.