

ANITA RALPH & MARY TASSELL

*Native  
Healers*

Foundations in Western Herbal Medicine



# NATIVE HEALERS



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Herbal Medicine

*Anita Ralph and Mary Tassell*

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## PREFACE

*The salmon is able to jump upstream, not by fighting against the current, but by utilizing its knowledge of the reverse current which flows beneath the surface current.*

—P. Carr-Gomm and S. Carr-Gomm<sup>1</sup>

We see the practice of Western herbal medicine as an example of the confluence of a multitude of streams of knowledge, ancient and modern, flowing into a harmonious pool of wisdom. All traditions of healing have their truths, their strengths and their weaknesses. As with so many things in life cooperation and integration yield the best results. We seek to combine the best that scientific research and development has to offer with the wisdom of ancient traditions and the powerful healing and tonic benefits of whole plants with whom we have co-evolved, to move towards a system of healing that is flexible, supportive, powerful and kind.

Native healers, the title of this book, refers to healing plants that exist in ecological niches across the planet. The term 'native healers' also resonates with the archaic tradition of herbalism and the wisdom passed down by our ancestors. 'Native healers' could also refer to you—by connecting with plant medicines and using what grows locally to you

to help and heal yourself and your loved ones you are a native healer—thriving in nature!

Practising forms of medicine which are not considered to be biomedicine in the conventional sense can, on the surface, seem to be a daunting proposition for many of us. Herbal medicine is not part of mainstream-funded medicine here in the UK, and this can be used to imply that state-funded healthcare is the only bone-fide medicine. Unlike many other countries this artificial polarity sometimes leads to misunderstanding about herbal medicine. It can feel as if we are operating in opposition to current medical thinking. Under the surface, however, lie rich streams of knowledge and wisdom to carry us forward.

One of the central aims of this book is to provide a source of knowledge which forms the basis of the counter-current mentioned above; a source of complementary knowledge that in fact offers a fundamentally useful system of medicine to complement conventional biomedicine. Of central importance is the opportunity to offer help to those that have not been helped by conventional biomedicine. Equipped with this knowledge we can then progress with ease along the paths of our individual rivers, navigating potential obstacles and opposing energies with more assurance and finesse, to finally reach the transformative pool of healing wisdom that awaits us all.

This book reaches out to herbalists, health care professionals and all those interested in healing, and bridges the gap between thinking of plant medicines as simply 'natural' drugs, and across into the rich landscape of herbalists' ideas: ideas about the human body and how we function, and how plants might contribute positively to that dynamism.

We are from the Earth, and so are the plants that heal us.

Anita Ralph and Mary Tassell, 2019

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1. Carr-Gomm, P. and S. Carr-Gomm, *Druid Animal Oracle*. 2007: Connections Book Publishing.

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# INTRODUCTION

## *Context: Introducing herbal medicine*

Herbal medicine must have been there right at the very beginning of human history. Our ancestors were deeply embedded in the landscape in a way that is difficult to imagine for us modern humans. *Innately, we must have used herbal medicine.* Consider the complex meanings and significance to the earliest people, of animals, birds, trees and plants, when these things provided *everything*—all shelter, food, clothing and tools; it is less problematic then to see how knowledge of plant medicine will have begun very early indeed.

Animals are known to use plants as medicine.<sup>1</sup> Many recorded examples exist, and substantiation for Neanderthal medicinal plant use has recently been demonstrated by archaeologists.<sup>2</sup> Humans will have witnessed and copied the behaviours of other-than-human-beings, as we know we copied them in hunting and other skills. Consider also, the fact that *we are animals*, and therefore this instinct to track down and identify healing substances from the natural world is innate to us. We are a product of our environment, and that environment (until very recent times) has always been the natural world.



**Definition—Native:** Belonging inherently, and thriving innately, in nature.

In the world of information technology it denotes software, data, etc., that is specifically designed for the system on which it is run.

Native healers—those local plants with a capacity to heal reliably—will have been learned by our emergent species. At some point, *human* native healers, specialised in keeping and sharing knowledge of healing plants, will have begun a lineage that can still be found in all remaining native peoples, and even in technological societies today, all over our beautiful Earth.

Herbal medicine has been utilised in every inhabited continent on the planet, and has been adapted and updated as civilisations have progressed, and as our understanding of human physiology, and understanding of our relationship to the environment, has increased. Many sophisticated herbal medicine systems with ancient origins still exist and are utilised alongside any conventional biomedicine that may now be practised. Ayurveda, Traditional Chinese Medicine, Tibetan, Unani Tibb and many others have functioning educational institutions and practitioners in our modern world. The World Health Organization (WHO) recognises herbal medicine as the major form of healthcare for over 60% of the world's population.<sup>3</sup>

The focus of this book is partly an exploration of the fundamental usefulness of plants for healing to all people whatever their training or skills. Plants have been utilised as healing food and medicine by families and in homes across the world, and they can still play an important role today. We introduce recipes and strategies for using herbal medicine as kitchen pharmacy and home first aid throughout this book.

The focus of this book is also partly upon the professional practice of herbal medicine by the medical herbalists of the European tradition and, in particular, those of the UK in the 21st century. In Europe the term for medical herbalist is more usually phytotherapist, and phytotherapy refers to the subject of modern herbal medicine more broadly. Modern Western herbal medicine/phytotherapy has multiple and global origins, but is also intimately linked with the development of modern conventional biomedical science.

**Definition—*Phytotherapy*:** Phyto comes to us from the Greek, and means ‘derived from or pertaining to plants’. Therapy also comes to us from Ancient Greece and means ‘curing or healing’.

Medical herbalists do not use plants as direct alternatives to synthetic drugs however. The fundamental principles of Western herbal medicine lie in the recognition of the unity of the body-mind, and in the core principles of the restoration of dynamic function and enhancing the resilience of our physiology. By acknowledging complexity and interconnectedness, and by directing herbal medicine strategies at these root causes, the herbalist aims to help others re-build that resilience and help restore health and wellbeing.<sup>3</sup> We explore these concepts in more detail in this book.

**Note:** The word health is used here in its original meaning: health derived from the Old English *haelth*, meaning ‘whole’.

Modern Western medical herbalists seek to combine up-to-date scientific advances in the study of physiology and medicine with everything that is known about medicinal plants in order to apply plant therapy to aid the dynamic ecosystem of the body to actively restore and balance function and resilience. In fact, Western medical herbalists exist as a result of a unique historical context whereby Europe became a melting pot of ideas derived from revived manuscripts of the ancient Egyptian, Greek and Roman worlds, from localised folk medicine and mediaeval monastic practice, through to the American botanical movement and its significant influence on herbalists in Britain. The effect of the plant medicines arriving in the UK and Europe from the First Nations peoples of the Americas, and the ideas of that time, led to a divergence from conventional medical practice that continues to this day. This divergence is still undergoing change with our ever-greater understanding of Eastern traditional medical systems, combined with an evolving acknowledgement of the importance of psychological health. New concepts of complexity in biology and modern discoveries in physiology are also informing the modern herbalist’s practice today.

As scientific knowledge has increased, and as biomedical research has focussed on the search for new single-chemical drugs isolated from natural substances, ancient ideas about illness and the plants originally used to treat illness, have been largely discarded by modern medicine. The 20th century saw the steady, and all but complete, removal of once official plant medicines from the British pharmacopoeia by 1980. Subjects concerned with the nature and effects of these phytomedicines died out as well, without having been tended to and updated, and because this was before the age of the internet, formerly officially accepted knowledge about phytotherapy remains largely inaccessible to modern biomedical practitioners.

Much of Western herbal medicine is therefore based on empirical knowledge, and most modern herbalists acknowledge that historical ideas about health and disease can either seem out-dated or incompatible with conventional biomedicine. It is important to remember, however, that traditional concepts and ideas of health and disease were based on pre-modern descriptions of what was experienced, and reflected the extent of accepted knowledge of the time. Phenomenologically, these ideas are describing something useful. The use of plants was observed and recorded by people in much closer contact with the natural world than we can perhaps imagine today ...

It was empirical observation that led to plants being developed into drugs used in pain relief and surgical anaesthesia, such as belladonna (*Atropa belladonna* L.) for atropine eye drops used in eye surgery; opiates—alkaloids found in opium poppy (*Papaver somniferum* L.); and curare (*Chondrodendron tomentosum* Ruiz & Pav.)—which acts by blocking the action of the neurotransmitter acetylcholine at neuromuscular junctions allowing surgery to take place more easily whilst a patient is anaesthetised. The recent history of conventional biomedicine is full of doctors (and others) testing substances on themselves. Chemicals, plants and hormones were all examined in this way, and this form of experimentation helped our eventual understanding of their nature and mechanisms, as well as occasionally producing the odd medical charlatan who could temporarily cash-in on this.

Some traditional 'folk' remedies were adopted by conventional medicine and became synthesised into drugs. The discovery that the foxglove plant (*Digitalis purpurea* L.) could have benefits for patients with heart problems was attributed to William Withering, who had a patient who had been helped by a local traditional healer in

Staffordshire, England. He studied one of the herbs in her recipe (a species of *Digitalis*), identified cardiac alkaloids and developed these into what later became digoxin, a drug still used today.<sup>4</sup> Dr Withering of course was lucky enough to be wealthy and educated: the female traditional healer (we don't know her name), not being granted either wealth nor a right to education due to gender, was developing her empirical knowledge nevertheless.<sup>5</sup>

It is our hope that, like that native healer from whom Dr Withering found inspiration, this book will enable you to develop your own empirical knowledge of plant medicines, and bring those healing benefits into the lives of yourselves and those dear to you.

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Blackberry (*Rubus fruticosus* L.) Illustration from the Vienna Dioscorides, early 6th Century.