

Ethical Considerations in the Wildcrafting of Medicinal Herbs

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An important aspect of herbalism is learning to wildcraft, in an ethical manner. I am a great believer in the idea that doing so in mindfulness and with intention increases the efficacy of your work. The first thing I tell my students about harvesting is never to pick a plant the first time you meet it. You need to woo a plant slowly and seductively to fully appreciate it. Sit with a plant - visit it as it progresses through all four seasons. Watch how it grows and propagates. Pay attention to how it responds to its surrounding and environmental stressors.

During this year of observation, read about your plant. Learn its uses before you are sitting with a pile of something in your kitchen, you know nothing about. Read the history of the plant. Often you will find that certain herbs were harvested on a certain day - St. John's Wort being an example.

Research your plant's status on the United Plant Savers' "Species at Risk" list. When at all possible, plant endangered plants in your own garden or in common areas rather than harvesting them from the wild. Many times, I will identify plant in the wild and spend time with it there learning about the neighbors and growing conditions it prefers. Then, I come home and try to recreate those conditions in my own garden.

When to Harvest

There are times when the concentrations of plant constituents in certain parts of the plants are at their best. The best way to think about when to harvest is to consider where is the energy of the plant at the time you are thinking of harvesting it. That isn't to say that you can't use your herbs all season long, but if you are going to make a tincture or dry the herbs, you should do so at the optimal time.

When I harvest a plant for the first time, I write it down on a calendar which I then copy into the next year's calendar. Of course, some years go askew because we have an early or late spring, so you have to use some discernment.

Leaves should be harvested while the flowers are still buds and they are green and fresh. Don't harvest damaged leaves or leaves that have begun to discolor. As plants flower, let them go to seed and focus on harvesting new growth.

Flowers should be harvested when they are in bloom, preferably just after they have opened up fully. The volatile oils in flower petals evaporate off quickly in the warmth and light of the sun, so the sooner you get to them the better.

Seeds once the seed pods are dry and the seeds have ripened. It is sometimes hard to tell when the seeds are ready and if you wait too long, you lose them. Seeds usually become darker as they ripen and they will have a nutlike flavor if you munch on one, rather than a green taste.

Roots should be harvested in the autumn after the first few freezes have started to wilt back the plant and the energy of the plant has receded to the root. You can also harvest roots in the very early spring, but I prefer fall harvesting.

Trees should be barked when you are sure the sap has quit running. Properly done, you only take a couple of 3 inch by 1 inch strips of bark lengthwise to the axis of the tree from each tree. It heals over, fairly quickly, but I personally don't like barking trees and prefer to use downed trees or limbs.

Buds should be harvested in the very late winter -February or early March when the buds are sticky with resin.

Where to Harvest

Only harvest from healthy ecosystems- avoid areas that may have been sprayed, splashed with chemicals from the road or are in an area where they would be subject to agricultural run-off. Yes, I know how hard that is sometimes, I live in Iowa. I am incredibly fussy about where I wildcraft in this state, because of my research on the drifting capacity of and the effects of glyphosate on human health. I am additionally concerned about GMO contamination. This means I do not wildcraft in ditches or near the fence lines of conventionally farmed fields.

If you are harvesting on public land, be sure it is legal to harvest from that land. If you are harvesting on private land, get permission from the owner before you harvest.

How to Harvest

When harvesting, be careful to do so in a way that causes the least amount of damage to the plant. Pluck individual leaves or berries. If you are harvesting the entire aerial part of a plant don't break it off rather make a clean cut with a sharp knife. Don't just yank roots out of the ground, carefully cut a section away from the rest of the plant to avoid damaging surrounding root systems.

Never harvest more than 1/3 of common plants or 1/10 of endangered plants. I try to harvest uniformly from the whole stand, rather than leaving a bare spot. The only exception to this rule would be in using the herbs you grow as annuals.

Thank the plant, or if that is too much "woo" for you at least harvest the plant with good intention and with much gratitude in your heart.

After Harvesting

Make sure to leave the spot you are harvesting from in the same condition that you found it. Fill in holes you might have created in the soil. Sometimes I snip diseased or dead foliage from the plant to try to make it look better than it did when I found it.

When you are done using the plant return it back to the Earth in some way. You can add it to your compost or grind dried herbs that are past their prime and sprinkle them in your vegetable gardens. I also use herb that might just be a bit past their prime in incense. I don't like to put tincture marcs in my compost or garden, because I was told once that the residual alcohol might kill beneficial microbes in the soil. I've not been able to disprove this, so I err on the side of caution and burn the marc in my fireplace. The ashes make it to the compost pile eventually.

Re-introduce native plants you use frequently into the wild, even if you will never benefit from doing so. You can do this by seed bombing or re-introducing garden plants into their natural environment.

Resources for Herbal ID...

[Seedling Identification](#)

[USDA PLANTS Database](#)

[Wildflowers and Weeds Website](#) brought to you by Thomas Elpel author of Botany in a Day

[Herbal Photography](#) by Larken Bunce Larken is the co-director of the Vermont Center for Integrative Herbalism and her photos have been used for the Numen blog, as well. Enjoy!

[Illinois Wildflowers](#)

[LSU Herbarium Keys](#) - Interactive Visual Identification

[Medicinal Herb Walk](#) by Christa Sinadinos. This is a gorgeous Flickr set with pictures and information about useful medicinal herbs.

[Medicinal Herb Walk](#) by Christopher Hobbs