

## Weeding Is the New Wildcrafting

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Herbalism in the United States has seen a surge in popularity over the past 20 years, and with that comes the good, the bad, and the complicated. There is renewed interest in using plants for healing, in incorporating medicinals in the garden, and in thinking of food as medicine -- good, right? And then there are multi-level marketing schemes, clickable panacea promises, and St. John's wort evangelicals, all of which can feed into one-size-fits-all medicine or profit-driven health maintenance -- not so great.

Somewhere in the undulating terrain in between is the intense enthusiasm around wildcrafting. Don't get me wrong -- I love wildcrafting. Having an intimate long-term relationship with an ecosystem teaches me many things. It teaches me about the wheel of the year and of how our seasons are changing. It teaches me about the animals I share the place with. It teaches me about moderation, restraint, mutuality, and generosity. But the longer I practice as an herbalist, and especially the longer I teach others about herbalism, the less enthusiasm I have about taking plant material out of intact ecosystems for my own (or other humans') benefit. There are lots of reasons for that, but two stick out in my mind:

- *Cumulative impacts:* I live in a growing metropolitan area with an intensely surging interest in herbalism, wild foods, ancestral technologies, and foraging. (Moreover, I live on a planet that has literally twice as many people on it as it did when I was born.) There are finite stands of medicinal plants within a two-hour's drive of my city. That means that even "conservative" harvesting of, say, 5% of the same stand of plants by multiple individuals over the course of a season can lead to devastating effects on the plants and the animals that rely on them. We'll talk in class about a specific case of this in the Portland area.
- *Plants are special:* In a culture that fetishizes quick fixes, "experts," and unattainable goods, it's unsurprising that so many people feel the call of difficult-to-access plants. So we import more maca and devil's claw than anyone ever needs. And the plants that catch most people's eye are the ones that are hard for them to find: devil's club, elephant's head, gentian. And then they tell others how amazing this sought-after plant is, and there becomes this intense mythology built up around an herbal medicine. But guess what? *All our plant medicines are special.*

So in this class, we'll talk about some plants that get taken for granted or overlooked because they're easy to come by. Will we start off with dandelions? Hell yes. But we'll talk about other plants that you can encourage to proliferate at your doorstep as well. Some are clearly weeds in our area -- think mullein, English hawthorn, and blackberry -- but others you'll have to invite to take over. Here are a few to get you thinking about how precious our plant allies are:

### Cleavers

*Galium aparine*

Rubiaceae

**Description:** It's hard to miss cleavers when it's in season -- if you're the kind of plant-lover that looks down. The plant sprawls over everything in its reach, often becoming viney in habit.

Visually, cleavers stands out because of its whorled leaves (6-8 per whorl), rather than its tiny white flowers, its angular stems, or its “hairy,” clingy seeds. Its springtime greenness lends the plant a certain charm. To be sure of your i.d., though, pluck some square-stemmed cleavers and toss the plant at a friend – if it sticks to her fleece shirt, it is indeed the “badge of the forest.” This last bit is important – we have many native and introduced *Galium* species in the area with whorled leaves – but only one that grabs on to you.

**Harvesting techniques & considerations:** Cleavers, even though it’s a native throughout North America, is a very weedy plant. Therefore, it’s not often difficult to find in abundance. It likes Portland’s wet climate, will tolerate (even thrive on) a lot of shade, and loves disturbed soil. If you aren’t finding any in your yard, go to a community garden plot and scope things out. If you find a ton of cleavers there – or in your neighbor’s side yard – chances are that the gardener would love you to take this “darn weed” off their hands.

What you’re going for are the **aerial parts**, preferably before flowering, definitely before they go to seed. As cleavers is an annual plant, harvesting the aerial parts can affect its ability to reproduce and perpetuate the stand the next year. When encountered in the wild, care should be taken to leave most of the plants unaffected by the harvest. In a yard setting, leaving some fruits behind to perpetuate the stand should be sufficient to ensure that cleavers returns. To introduce the plant to your yard, find a stand of cleavers that has gone to seed and just take a fistful of plants home with you. Toss them in the general vicinity that you’d like them to grow next year, and wait for the magic to happen.

Harvest when you’re certain that you can process the plant soon – dried cleavers isn’t very useful for much. In dry, hot climates, that could mean processing the plant in the field or transporting in a cooler with a damp cloth.

**Medicinal & edible uses:** The juice of cleavers is wonderful for ulcerations and chronic inflammation of the upper digestive tract – mouth, gums, esophagus, stomach. It can also be used for other ulcerations topically, whether on the cervix or the skin. Just juice the fresh plant and apply, or freeze into little cocktail ice cubes for a perfect dose. Cleavers ice cubes will also help the person whose lack of saliva (often originating as a side effect of prescribed medicine) has become chronic.

Understated cleavers is also a premier lymph mover. That can come in handy for the bedridden, for folks with swollen lymph nodes, or perhaps for those affected by a salivary stone or recuperating from surgery.

Cleavers is a gentle but pronounced volume diuretic. I often use it to alleviate swelling of the feet, or any edema (water retention) of known origin, such as premenstrual bloating. (Edema can be an indication of serious disease – encourage folks to get a diagnosis.) It can be very useful for women who get sore, swollen breasts or puffy hands in the days before their menses.

As a diuretic with cooling properties, our clinging plant friend is used in hot, irritated conditions of the bladder and urethra, from cystitis to urinary tract infections. Think hot and irritated for cleaver’s topical uses, too. Poison oak, chicken pox, blistered skin... all could benefit from some fresh cleavers. This soft-spoken weed is humble but mighty.

The aerial parts of cleavers are delicious, if prepared so as to neutralize the clingy factor. They're tasty blanched and added to pasta, and utterly delicious as a pesto. They make a great cleansing spring green.

### **St. John's Wort**

*Hypericum perforatum*

Hypericaceae

**Description:** St. John's wort has bright yellow flowers atop stems that divide into threes. The plant is usually around three feet tall. Its signature is found in the leaves: hold them up to light, and you'll see that they appear perforated (hence, the Latin name). Another telltale: rub a flower between your fingers for a purple-red stain. If you live in the Pacific Northwest, look carefully in your yard; you might already be in possession of this cosmopolitan plant.

**Harvesting techniques & considerations:** St. John's wort's **flowers** are well-known, but for excellent medicine with far less harvesting hassle, gather the top 3-5 inches of the plant in flower. This will bring flowers, buds, leaves, seeds, and tender stems to your creation, giving you a broader range of constituents that are very effective. The plant is very forgiving; I just grab the tops and cut them straight across with kitchen shears. You'll find new growth comes up in a couple weeks, yielding a smaller second harvest.

I encourage folks to allow St. John's wort to become an established weed in the garden. In the fall, find some St. John's wort that has gone to seed, and wave it like a wand wherever you hope to have a future harvest. The seeds take easily. The plant will self-seed and overwinter – though the seeding can be limited if you harvest all the flowering tops. *Hypericum* tolerates compaction, relentless sun, minimal water, and mediocre soils. St. John's wort's one enemy in our area is the beautiful beetle *Chrysolina hyperici*. Though its metallic coloration is enchanting, this bug was introduced to North America with one mission: to destroy *Hypericum perforatum*. And it does. Both adults and larva defoliate the plants quickly. If you see a metallic beetle on your patch, kill it!

**Medicinal uses:** Where do I start? For first aid, St. John's wort is the premiere nerve healer. Applied topically to cuts, cooled-off burns, bruises, sprains, neuralgia, and all manner of wounds, it speeds the healing of the nerves in the area. For such use, an internal dose is a helpful adjunct. Many herbalists combine it with calendula as an all-purpose salve or liniment.

For muscle pain and spasms, St. John's wort is an integral part of a topical treatment. Combine it with arnica for soreness or lobelia for sciatica, or use it solo in castor oil for unrelenting muscle pain. (Alert: it can stain fabric.) Again, supplement with internal use to strengthen the effects.

Our fair weed also has earned its reputation as an anti-viral. Keep some tincture around and use it to shorten the duration of a cold sore (or any form of herpes, which is a virus affecting the nerves). Some folks swear by it for colds, too. There is both research and speculation about its use in HIV. Basically, *Hypericum* may well be worth a shot for almost any virus.

What more could you want from a plant? Well, St. John's wort keeps going. A superb mood lifter, it will help a broad spectrum of folks with its cheerful, sunny energy. For some, it's an immediate first aid for the mood; for treatment of a long-term anxiety or mild depression, however, give it at least a few weeks at a reasonably high dosage. For those with seasonal affective symptoms, starting a St. John's wort regimen a few weeks before the slump kicks in will encourage a sunshiny disposition throughout the dark months.

Amazingly, St. John's wort has been shown to repair the myelin sheath that surrounds nerves. That makes it a great tonic for anyone who's frazzled or jittery, and a good herb to consider for those with chronic conditions like multiple sclerosis. Used over time, St. John's wort can increase the melatonin that the body makes, so it can be useful for those who have chronic sleeping problems.

**Cautions & contraindications:** St. John's wort can cause photosensitivity in livestock. Reports of this happening in humans are very rare, but keep it in mind, particularly for exceptionally light-skinned people.

Internal use should be supervised by a practitioner or thoroughly researched if the patient is taking any medications or daily supplements; this herb has been shown to interfere with the metabolism of some meds.

### **Mullein**

*Verbascum thapsus*

Scrophulariaceae

**Description:** A biennial, mullein is most obvious in its second year of life, when the spike of cheerful, yellow, five-petaled flowers can get anywhere from four to nine feet high. Then again, maybe it's most noticeable after it's died, when the sturdy brown plants stand, cactus-like, alongside dry country roads and provide great perches for birds. Either way, the plant is understated in the first year, forming only a basal rosette of soft, fuzzy, lance-shaped leaves. In this stage, many find mullein easily confused with comfrey (*Symphytum* spp.) or with foxglove (*Digitalis* spp.), the latter of which is deadly poison.

**Harvesting techniques & considerations:** By far and away the most oft-used part of mullein is its **leaves**. Since the plant is a biennial, the perfect time to harvest these leaves is in its first summer of life, when the plant is occupied with creating lush leaves so that it can generate plenty of food to store over the winter. That creates a problem for the beginning herbalist, though: before the plant flowers, how do you identify it? Mullein's rosette of leaves is commonly confused with other plants, including the poisonous foxglove.

So, until you get to know mullein really, really well – so well that you can positively identify it in the absence of flowers – feel free to harvest healthy, vibrant leaves off a plant that's flowering. Sure, that's the second-best time to harvest leaves, but the *most* important factor in making medicine is getting the correct ID. Don't worry, your medicine will still be useful.

Harvesting the **flowers** involves choosing a technique. Are you patient and in it for the long haul? Then carefully pick off the flowers, one by one, as they open (leaving a few for the insects). This will make the yellowest medicine. Are you all about getting your harvest in one fell swoop? Then you can harvest a whole inflorescence and process it, though most of the flowers aren't yet open. This will be less elegant but still serviceable. Or are you willing to plan ahead and grow your medicine in your garden? Then plant *Verbascum olympicum*, a perennial whose flowers all open at about the same time, making for a showy (and convenient) display. Mullein flowers are best used fresh.

The **roots** of mullein are harvested in the late fall of the first year to early spring of the second. Wait any longer than that, and there won't be roots to speak of.

Mullein tends to grow wild in disturbed areas – roadsides, old logging tracks – and in fairly sunny places. It plays a useful role in breaking up compacted soil and helping it to regain fertility. To introduce it to your yard, find conditions much like that. The seeds won't do much in lush, fertile soil.

**Medicinal & edible uses:** Mullein leaves are *the* classic respiratory tonic. If you use mullein in every single respiratory formula you ever make, you'll be making a good choice. Bronchitis, coughs, colds, allergies, asthma, smoker's hacking, post-smoking repair, pneumonia... they'll all be aided by the inclusion of mullein. The leaves aren't super *strong* medicine, but they are reliable and beneficial. I most often use them in conjunction with herbs specific to the condition to get pronounced or speedier results.

Mullein leaves are both mildly astringent and mildly mucilaginous, and may be used for hemorrhoids, topically or internally. They're seen as gently moving to the lymph system. These fuzzy friends also have a cult following for fixing ailments of the bones and muscles.

The flowers and buds are good lung medicine, too, having the additional quality of being mildly sedative. I use them for coughs, or in nighttime cold/cough syrups to both quell spasms and encourage the ability to sleep. Another fantastic use for mullein flowers is to use them topically for ear infections, putting one to three drops of infused oil or tincture into the ear. Mullein flowers topically relieve pain and act as an antibacterial. Many folks like to steep the flowers together with garlic cloves for added antimicrobial effect when working with ear infections. Solo, the flower infusion has been found to fight herpes simplex.

The roots of the plant are used successfully in addressing bladder-muscle weakness, to help prevent bedwetting or other incontinence. They are astringent and diuretic in their action, and may be useful for urethral irritation or prostate inflammation.