

URBAN TENDING

Words and illustrations by Alyssa Dennis

Herbalist and artist, Alyssa Dennis, tells us about the abundance of wild medicine that she has growing right outside her door.

What are the most familiar embodiments of home? Is it a place or a feeling? For most of us, home is where we rest, find comfort and safety, feel welcome and receive nourishment. Home is a sanctuary and space to cultivate togetherness and community. Outside of a modern Western mindset, home has also always been a place where local plants were made into food and medicine. An essential aspect of finding roots is understanding and honoring the traditional practices of those who came before us.

Traditional ecological knowledge of local plant medicine has been systematically stripped away first by the near decimation of indigenous peoples, coupled with both the legalities made against this medicine and those who worked with it to support and heal their own communities. In the last century, the commodification of our basic necessities in the name of convenience has seduced us away from a common understanding

in the virtues and efficacy of local plant medicine. Yet, having autonomy and agency around your own health and wellness is to be home.

In many cultures around the world, it is still commonplace for communities of about 100 people or so to have a local shaman, herbalist, plant whisperer or curandero who operates as healer by way of fully integrating and studying every plant within a 50 to 100-mile radius. This kind of engagement with our surroundings has defined the very foundation we stand on and has helped to characterize the origins of culture itself. I was astounded to realize that within just a one block radius of my apartment in Brooklyn, New York, there are nearly 20 wild species that have been used as food and medicine. Yet in urban, suburban and rural areas we denigrate, devalue, destroy, down play and dig out this bounty in favor of expensive exotic cultivars, monocrops and pesticide-dependent green lawns.

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Ginkgo biloba

Herbalists often talk about how the remedy for what currently ails you is a plant or host of plants that grow right outside your door. How is this possible? The genius of plants is that they thrive in areas that require their honed abilities. Plants are a product of their environment just as we are. Calling on their millions of years of experience, they are intelligent barometers, a mirrored reflection of how the ecosystem is challenged by human influences or otherwise.

For example, *Ginkgo biloba* is one the most common tree species planted by the City of New York to line its streets. Its leaves are prized by herbalists to “improve circulation and oxygen metabolism” (K.P. Kalsa). *Ginkgo* is a native to China and the Chinese have been harvesting the seeds for thousands of years to moisten and treat imbalances of the lungs. In fact, the two-lobed leaves resemble our two bilaterally lobed organs: the brain and the lungs! Its use as a lung remedy is fascinating when you consider that this species has been found in the fossils record dating back 270 million years (*gingko* being the only species left from the *Ginkgophyta* family) which means it evolved in an atmosphere with much less oxygen than we have now. This is why it does so well in oxygen-poor, smog-filled urban areas like NYC. Although I am not promoting the further use of fossil fuels, *gingko* has mastered these environmental restraints and can help us do the same. In addition to the herb’s terpene lactones constituents: *ginkgolides* and *bilobalides* that protect our nerve cells and improve circulation, *gingko* also prevents cell damage by free radicals.

Another example of plant intelligence in a human-dominated environment is *plantain*. *Plantago major* is a low-growing species with several wide-shaped leaves growing in a basal rosette. It thrives in dry, damaged compacted soil. Native peoples often called it “white-man’s footsteps” because wherever Europeans developed hardened paths or roads the *plantain* would appear. Although *plantain* grows in dry, disturbed places, it has mastered surviving in these conditions while maintaining exceptionally moist skin. Their seeds can take on nine times their weight in water. Its leaves are rounded without any irritating hairs or spikes and have a hardy, pliable thickness. *Plantain*’s many virtues include aerating and depositing nutrients into the soil. Unsurprisingly, this species happily finds its home among nutrient poor, dry concrete jungles. *Plantain* contains a substance called *mucilage* which acts to coat and sooth irritated skin. This species also has astringent and antibacterial qualities that help tighten and tone the skin while preventing infection. Just as *plantain* is a healer of the earth’s wounds, it is also an internal and external remedy for the surface wounds of the human body.

Yes! Plants are magic! Just think of all the other millions of species across this planet and what they’ve mastered that we haven’t. Plants are our allies and want to teach us their skills. They are our ancient ancestral mentors just as the indigenous peoples who mastered the language and decoding of these plants are also our teachers. The conditions of the land have and always will reflect back



Plantago major

what we need for balance. Once we’re able to perceive this reflection, locality becomes important not simply from the perspective of a low carbon footprint but as a paradigm shift in how we live within our environment. To receive these gifts, we must turn our ears to the ground and humbly lower ourselves.

We must take caution in connecting with plants that are exposed to contamination, especially in urban areas. Certain plants bioaccumulate heavy metal toxins which will transfer to us by ingesting them. This is a reality that we must address head on and I am not advocating that we pick any plant without the advice of a trained professional. But this risk also points to an important truth. If we truly understood the magnificent abundance of viable food and medicine within our own surroundings, we would see pollution and pesticides use as a direct assault against our own freedom of finding place and truly be home.

If the plants that grow around us are healthy enough to harvest, we must learn, as indigenous people do, to work in direct stewardship with the land. When this is done, there is little room for looting, clearing or stripping away of resources. People do not inherently strip their own community dry - they cultivate it. Enacting a clearing, taking, or hoarding of the earth's bounty, whether we are "from" that particular place or not, shows we are not truly home. We have suffered through a vicious cycle of this mentality since Europeans set foot on what they thought was a "New World."

To find better footing and live in stewardship with the land is to learn the practices of tending. Tending "reestablishes the ecological associations between people and nature" (M. Cat Anderson). It is "...the product of keen observation, patience,

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experimentation, and long-term relationships with plants and animals. It is knowledge built on a history, gained through many generations of learning passed down by elders..." It has been proven time and again that the more one is able to tend their surroundings the more resources there will be. Unfortunately, humans are among the only beings on the planet that don't consistently tend the environment they inhabit. The problem is we don't have a well-seasoned approach to regenerative practices that cultivate nature through reciprocity. Although we are beginning to see the merits of regenerative practices, in very small pockets, we by-in-large exist outside of this way of thinking.

Perhaps the beneficial experience of walking in a forest, spending the day at the park or acquiring a potted plant is not just about breathing in fresh oxygen, but experiencing joy at feeling the plants calling us back to having a relationship with them. For centuries we have dangerously positioned nature as an abstraction of something to leave alone, exploit or visit as an outsider. We ought to heed the wisdom of our great plant teachers because extensive environmental degradation, soil depletion and the consequent decline in physical, mental and emotional health tell us we can no longer turn a blind eye. Indigenous peoples believe that when you consume your local environment you become one with it and it strengthens the foundation on which you stand to move forward in life. Tending and finding nourishment from the wild is an absolute necessity for rooting to home. 🌿



References

K.P. Kalsa
M. Cat Anderson