

Wildcrafting and Wizardry

by Jim Stiak

In the wintry foothills of the Cascades they stalk their prey, rubber boots treading the needled underbrush. When the object of their quest is spotted—a yellow root, almost fluorescent in the forested light—the foragers are quickly on their knees, pulling the tangled growth from the soft humus. For hours they collect the sinewy yellow cords, taking only a little from each plant they find. Their bags finally full, they bounce back down the gravel road, heading to town with another load of Oregon Grape root.

The idea of foraging through the woods for valuable herbs, of making a living by collecting raspberry leaves or valerian root, is as old as pharmacy. The actuality of selling Oregon Grape root by the ton is a recent phenomenon. Wildcrafting—the gathering of herbs by hand in their natural wild environment—is alive and growing in Oregon.

On Eugene's near-west side, by the still-historic WOW Hall, lies an unassuming white stucco building that has housed a succession of diverse tenants. The Moonies stayed here, as have a massage parlor, and the Trojan Decommissioning Alliance, with its spread of posters covering the large windows. But after the posters came down, a pastel-colored, hand-lettered sign, with a rainbow and a magic wand, appeared in front of the heavy beige curtains: "Columbines and Wizardry Botanical Laboratory."

Inside those storied walls had sprouted not some medieval alchemist's dusty workplace, but a Department of Agriculture-inspected, shiny stainless steel, well-scrubbed new business. Through the tiny lab within flow comfrey, mullein, and a score of other plants, to be processed into herbal tinctures, salves and elixirs, then distributed along the West Coast.

"Our goal is to go nationwide this year," says Howie Brownstein, the taller, bearded partner of Columbines and Wizardry. Together with Fawn Parlamen, he now creates some 21 varieties of herbal tinctures by means of a deceptively simple process: the herbs are soaked in vodka for six weeks, and then the last remaining ingredients are extracted through a juicer.

"We don't sell medicines," Howie's quick to

point out, "just concentrated herbal extracts, just like vanilla extract." Nonetheless, Howie, a bottomless well of herb lore, will readily relate the traditional uses of the herbs they use. Oregon Grape, for example, is a laxative and blood cleanser, having an effect similar to that of goldenseal, for which it is sometimes substituted. Valerian root tincture, he says, has been recently made illegal in New York City because of its sedative effects.

"White willow bark," says Howie, "was used to reduce fever, inflammation, and stop pain anywhere in the body, as was white oak. Some chemist was playing with it and discovered aspirin, which was then made from bark, and is now synthesized from other chemicals. Ma Huang was grown by the acre in China, shipped off to Merck or some other lab, who would derive ephedrine, the basis for many cold and allergy remedies, from it. Every once in a while, they find that some herb, like periwinkle, shows some effect in treating diabetes, in stopping tumor growth, and they try to make it illegal. Now they can synthesize most drugs easier, and herbs have fallen by the wayside."

Not all herbs, however. The Herb Gatherers Association of Grants Pass recently sold over a ton each of Prince's pine and Oregon Grape to a North Carolina drug company. Howie and Fawn have been asked to supply large quantities of Oregon Grape root. "The Chinese are also very interested in American herbs right now," says Howie.

"I'd like to see from this business in the next couple years," continues the lanky herbalist, "ten or twenty wildcrafters able to support themselves by going out to the woods, making the legal arrangements with the Forest Service, harvesting and tending the wild herbs, then shipping them off to the East right away."

For now, the young company supports only the two, with its tinctures, elixirs, and "survival salve." They also offer workshops in tincture making and wildcrafting, and sell at Saturday Market. "It's a good life," says Howie, echoing a long-time Oregon sentiment, "to be able to get paid for going out to the woods."

Springfield Centennial

Happy Birthday, Springfield! This Saturday (Feb. 23) Springfield begins celebration of its 100th year of incorporation with a birthday party at the Red Lion Inn. The Centennial Committee has planned a year-long series of exciting events and projects, some of which are: building a centennial fountain and an antique rose garden, a Springfield History exhibit at the Museum, and a Historical Walking Tour (in September). Also the CABOOS committee expects to receive title to the historic Southern Pacific depot, the oldest Queen Anne style depot in Oregon. The depot will need to be moved and renovated, and donations are welcome. For more information, call Janie Thomas, 747-9844.

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Join the Saint Patrick's Day Parade as part of the 3rd annual Eugene-Springfield Irish Festival. Floats, marching units, bands, musical groups, entertainers will join in for the third St. Patrick's Day Parade on Saturday, March 16, beginning at 2 pm from the Amtrak Station at Third and Willamette. Pick up the application for your vehicle, float or a marching unit at the Springfield or Eugene Chambers of Commerce Offices and the Eugene-Springfield Convention & Visitors Bureau. No float? Then, just join hundreds of your friends in the parade as it passes and walk along the route through downtown Eugene.

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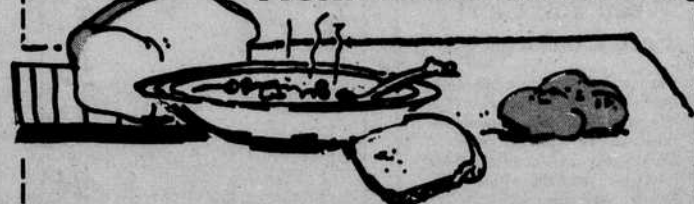
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