



Herbal Learning

Wise Acres aims to fill an educational void.

RACHEL FOSTER

There are not many places where you can learn to grow, harvest and process your own medicinal herbs. This is a void that Sharol Tilgner seeks to fill. A licensed naturopathic physician in Pleasant Hill, Tilgner has been an avid herbalist since 1979 and has a long, interesting vita. Among her accomplishments she lists "molding an old cattle ranch into an organic herb farm that is now called Shalimar Gardens." Now she's at it again, turning a smaller parcel of former cow pasture near Pleasant Hill into a full-service herbal educational center called Wise Acres.

With 61.2 percent of the population reportedly using herbs, Tilgner believes herbal medicine is a topic that needs more attention. Most herbal products are safe when used properly, she says, but people need to learn which herbs to use, and how to use them correctly. Herbal companies are not allowed to provide educational material on the medicinal uses of the herbs they sell, so people often end up getting their information from a well-intentioned store clerk who may know little more than the consumer. So Tilgner decided to sell her 14-year-old herbal manufacturing company, Wise Woman Herbals, and devote herself to educating the public about herbs.

Most of Tilgner's perfectly bucolic 25 acres are in pasture, though there is a big new swath of creek-side planting, mostly of native trees and shrubs. The garden itself lies between two houses painted, like the mailbox, the color of lavender. Wide grass paths meander between a variety of herb beds, and a cascade emerges from a silver pile of enormous cardoon leaves. Tilgner points out that the previous owner planted rhododendrons, Japanese maples and other things at the perimeter, providing a mature backdrop and the irreplaceable look of an established garden.

To begin my tour I enter on a path of flagstones and thyme, bordered by a young blueberry hedge under-planted with strawberries. ("Blueberry flavinoids are very good for you," says Tilgner.) Nearby is a large herb bed containing oregano, winter savory and several kinds of lavender, along with a variety of medicinal herbs. Some plants are here mainly for their decorative qualities: balloon flower is used by the Chinese, and Culver's root was once used in liver disorders but has now fallen out of use. Figwort is here mainly for the bees and hummingbirds, who visit all day long.

Other plants have more solid therapeutic credentials. Tilgner showed me arnica, well-known for easing sprains, bruises and sore muscles, and meadowsweet, the original source of aspirin. Conspicuous, large-

leafed elecampane (*Inula helenium*) is a great tonic with antiseptic properties, Tilgner says, and supports the immune system. Tall stems of valerian are in full, sweet-swelling bloom. The flowers (which, I learned, smell like dirty socks when they get old and dry!) are used in Biodynamic gardening. Tilgner's interest in useful plants extends to Biodynamics and permaculture, as well as medicinals and ornamentals.

I learn about medicinal applications for several familiar ornamental plants. The orange flowers of calendula (pot marigold) are edible, and the leaves and calyces are sticky. The resins that make plants sticky, Tilgner explained, have anti-microbial qualities, and can be used externally or in the form of a tea to decrease inflammation. Hardy geraniums, it seems, have astringent properties, and are useful for diarrhea. Rue is used externally for tendonitis, sprains and bruising.

Black elder has anti-inflammatory and expectorant properties, so it is good for respiratory infections. Use flowers and berries only, though: The bark and leaves can be toxic.

Help abounds for female function and disorders. Raspberry leaves make the number one tonic for a woman's urinogenital tract. *Viburnum opulus* can lower blood pressure, but the common name cramp bark comes from its anti-spasmodic properties, which make it helpful for menstrual cramps. Goat's rue (*Galega officinalis*) promotes lactation. The dry brown "berries" of chaste tree (*Vitex agnus-castus*) are used for menstrual problems and for hot flashes associated with menopause.

Beyond the second lavender colored house, two blonde-coated cows have the run of a roomy chunk of luxuriant meadow: "More grass than they can possibly eat," as Tilgner says. I wonder when I last saw cattle grazing in knee high grass. Just watching them seems therapeutic.

Wise Acres offers everything from half-day classes to long-term apprenticeships. Instruction is tailored to fit the needs of the participants. For a free introduction to the place, join a Grand Opening and Summer Solstice Celebration from 11 am to 4 pm June 19. Tilgner's impressive book, *Herbal Medicine from the Heart of the Earth*, will be available, along with class schedules and two herbal videos she has produced. Bring your lunch — you won't find a nicer place to eat it.

The address for Wise Acres is 84537 Proden Lane, Pleasant Hill 97455. For directions or for more information, contact Sharol Tilgner at 736-0164 or visit www.herbaltransitions.com **EW**

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