

HOWIE BROUNSTEIN OF THE COLUMBIAN SCHOOL OF BOTANICAL STUDIES DISCUSSES THE USES OF OREGON GRAPE IN THE FORESTS OUTSIDE EUGENE

Not a One Night Stand

WILDCRAFTING IN LANE COUNTY BY CAMILLA MORTENSEN

Sue Sierralupe stands on the trail, looking into the creek-side trees and brush. “Poor man’s opium,” she says, pointing into the brambles at some wild lettuce (*Lactuca serriola*). Sierralupe explains that the lactucarium, the latex or sap of the plant, can help with pain.

As herb team leader and clinic manager of the free all-volunteer Occupy Medical, Sierralupe says the plant is sometimes given to homeless patients who might be targeted for attacks if given prescription painkillers. Wild lettuce is not related to opium, but for those on the street, whose painkilling drugs might be stolen and sold, the plant is a valuable alternative.

It’s the cool start to what will soon be a hot, smoky August day, and Sierralupe is walking through Elijah Bristow State Park, about 20 miles outside Eugene, pointing to native and non-native plants and trees. It’s a park I’ve been to hundreds of times, though with scant knowledge of what’s actually going on in the greenery around me beyond an appreciation for the sweet taste of late summer blackberries.

Walking with an herbalist and wildcrafter brings a whole new perspective on what is otherwise a mass of green and yellow vegetation. Leaves have names and flowers have uses — even non-native weeds have their place for an herbalist.

Wildcrafters harvest plants for use in medicines and supplements as well as foods. And picking the plants is only the beginning. Wildcrafting is not just identifying and harvesting the plants but also focusing on the botany, ecology, uses and relationships to the places the plants are found.

From small herbal shops to nationally known herbal schools and the herb giant Mountain Rose, Lane County is home to those who love, use — and sometimes overuse — the plants around us.



SUE SIERRALUPE POINTS OUT NATIVE AND NON-NATIVE PLANTS AT ELIJAH BRISTOW STATE PARK

PHOTO BY DAVID GEITGEY SIERRALUPE

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It’s another summer morning, earlier in the month, and I’m knocking on the door of a quaint house on 5th Avenue near the highway bridges not far from downtown Eugene. Mrs. Thompson’s Herbs Gifts & Folklore looks like it should be in an old neighborhood on a hill somewhere, not nestled between boxy businesses.

It’s before business hours, and as Heather Níc an Fhleisdeir opens the door to let me in, it feels as though I’ve left Oregon, gone back a hundred years and landed in a Scottish town. The wooden floors, the shelves full of jars of herbs and tinctures, the Celtic symbols and the herb garden outside — all give this apothecary the aura of a shop from another time.

Níc an Fhleisdeir came to herbalism and wildcrafting while working as a part-time interpretive guide for the National Park Service, teaching trailside botany in the Santa Monica Mountains. “Knowledge for folly,” she says of this time. Although she could tell people all about these plants, they were protected and couldn’t be picked and used.

Fast-forward 25 years or so, and Níc an Fhleisdeir is trained as an herbalist and runs the Academy of Scottish Herbalism. The tie to Scotland is not simply a piece of Níc an Fhleisdeir’s Celtic heritage, or because the academy was originally founded in Scotland in 2000. It’s also because, as Níc an Fhleisdeir tells it, she refuses to teach what she has learned about indigenous plants used by Native Americans. She can, however, “tell you about European invasive plants.”

Like other ethical wildcrafters, Níc an Fhleisdeir is sensitive to the ecology surrounding the plants. And certain native plants, as well as those historically used by Native peoples, are “no pick” in Oregon, either because they’ve been devastated by picking or they might be if the