

Translating nature into art

Seaside artist, forager and teacher Dorota Haber-Lehigh shares the beauty of botanical drawings and the wonder of native plants

Dorota Haber-Lehigh is fascinated by plants. Specifically, native plants: seeing how they grow and change through the seasons; identifying different species; learning which are edible, which are medicinal and which are poisonous.

And, especially, drawing them.

Whether she's hiking a trail or biking around Seaside, Haber-Lehigh carries her sketchbook. With a meditative, detailed eye, she follows the lines of a plant, translating it from real world object to beautiful botanical drawing.

"When you start looking at plants and at the diversity of shapes and colors and patterns in nature, it's just so fascinating," she says. "I love botanical art because I like the structure of plants. And looking at it really closely, you kind of get lost in it."

A botanical artwork typically consists of a close-up portrait of a plant on a white background, sometimes showing different stages of growth side by side: sprouting, seedling, flowering, fruiting and withering. While some may consider botanical drawings to be illustrations or a scientific replication, Haber-Lehigh disagrees.

"For some people it might seem a little tedious or obsessive, but it's beautiful, finding all these different textures and colors," she says. "For me it's a creative process. You make a lot of decisions. You take some liberties, too: what you want to show, what you want to hide, and what you want to emphasize."

"There's always something. You can go for a walk anywhere, and I always find something colorful or unique-shaped," she says.

Growing up in Poland in the 1970s and 1980s, Haber-Lehigh was exposed to a love of plants at a young age. Bicycling to her family's community garden and going mushroom foraging with her grandparents were common pastimes. She came to Oregon in 1992 as a high school foreign exchange student, and after graduating from Pacific University, Haber-Lehigh eventually settled in Seaside,

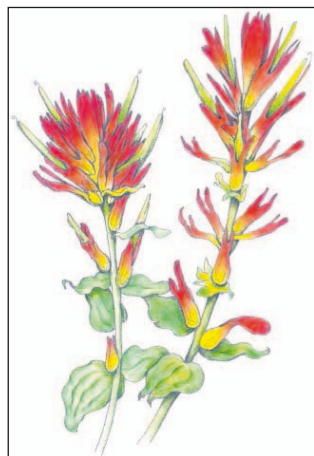


Photos by Joshua Bessex

Dorota Haber-Lehigh shares her love of native plants and art by teaching botanical drawing classes on the North Coast.

where she's taught Spanish, English as a second language, art and other classes at Broadway Middle School and Seaside High School for 17 years.

"I grew up hiking and camping, and this area just kind of fits me," she says.



"Indian Paintbrush," a finished botanical drawing by Dorota Haber-Lehigh.

With a bachelor's degree in art under her belt, Haber-Lehigh has previously focused on printmaking and landscapes, and she still creates pastel landscapes and collages today. But to foster her interest in botanical art, two years ago Haber-Lehigh became a member of Oregon Botanical Artists. Meeting other artists and taking classes from national established botanical artists like Wendy Hollender has helped her hone her art.

Haber-Lehigh's interest in native plants was also easily cultivated by local experts, including Kathleen Sayce, who leads a local chapter of the Native Plant Society; Neal Maine, Seaside wildlife photographer and founder of the North Coast Land Conservancy; and Roberta Basch, a member of the Clatsop-Nehalem tribe.

With her plant sketches piling up and her interest in botanical art and ethnobotany only growing, Haber-Lehigh decided to collect her drawings into a book — a coloring book. In 2013, she self-published "ABC of Native Plants of the Coastal Pacific Northwest," which features black and white pen-and-ink drawings of flowers, marine plants, mushrooms, trees, ferns and lichen. Information about the plant — description, habitat, uses — accompanies each drawing, offering a mix of art and education.

As a follow-up in 2014, Haber-Lehigh published "Native Berries of the Coastal Pacific Northwest," a coloring book that focuses on prolific edible berries like Oregon grape, red and evergreen huckleberries, elderberries and more. Additional coloring books are coming soon. Haber-Lehigh is busy working on a native wildflowers book. And, fluent in Polish, English and Spanish and having studied Russian, Italian and French, she wants to use her language skills to also create a multilingual coloring book focusing on the ecology of Haystack Rock in Cannon Beach.

Her coloring books are available at the Fort Clatsop visitor center, Beach Books in Seaside and the Cannon Beach Arts Association.

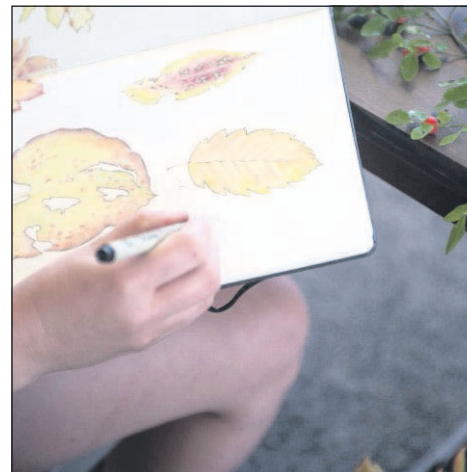
"I meant it to be for both kids and adults because I was hoping the adults would read it to the kids while the kids could color," she says, "and maybe that would encourage some intergenerational learning."

To find that people on the North Coast might not know they have edible salal or salmonberries growing in their backyards

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Dorota Haber-Lehigh taught a four-week botanical drawing class at the Columbia River Maritime Museum's Barbey Maritime Center this July and August.



Dorota Haber-Lehigh shows some botanical leaf drawings in her sketchbook: maple, salal, false lily of the valley and alder.



During a trip to Florida, Dorota Haber-Lehigh drew some tropical native plants in her sketchbook. Their bright colors and armor-like thorns were a contrast to Pacific Northwest native plants, shown here on a table at the Barbey Maritime Center during a recent botanical drawing class.

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Story by REBECCA SEDLAK