



ETHICAL FORAGING

The
At Home
Apothecary



How to Set a Standard of Foraging Ethics

Foraging can look different depending on where you live, and the practice holds a lot of different value systems, so it's important to know where you stand within your local ecology and to have a set of ethical standards that align with your values.

The first thing I always like to be aware of is what I can and can't harvest. Obviously we want to avoid poisonous plants and species we haven't identified, but I also like to research the "at risk" or endangered plants in my area so I know what to respectfully avoid.

The second thing I like to be aware of is my surrounding location. Am I next to a highway, downstream from a large factory, or in an area that has a lot of traffic and isn't safe to forage in? Plants work hard to pull toxins from the soil through a process called Bioaccumulation, and many of these toxins can be traced directly to the ways in which we humans affect the land, so avoiding heavily trafficked areas is beneficial. I like to forage in areas that I know vehicles can't get to, or on land that I visit frequently where I can be aware of the changes that people are making. I tend to avoid busy roadsides, dense neighborhoods, or city areas.

I know that takes a lot off of the map, making accessibility an issue, and that's why I encourage everyone to create their own set of standards within general ethical practices. If you're just hoping to start with what you have available at home, by all means collect where you feel safe to do so.

Lastly, be sure to 100% correctly identify every plant before using it in any way. I recommend identifying before picking. This makes it less likely for you to touch something that may cause a topical reaction. The ways I suggest going about finding an identification will also be easier if you haven't interfered with the plant. To start, download a plant ID app on your phone, there are many free options in the App store. Next, join plant identification groups on facebook or reddit. These groups have thousands of members that will readily lend a hand in identification. I also like the Peterson Field Guide books, specifically the Medicinal Plants and Herbs book that sorts plants by flower color making it easy to search their database if you can find a flower on the plant. Search every outlet that you can, and never accept the first ID without having a second source back it up. Only once the plant is correctly identified from multiple sources should it be used.

How to Ensure the Plants Thrive too

We start by never taking more than we need. You would be surprised how much of a salve or tincture you can make with a small amount of plant material. Remember, the more you leave, the more you'll return to. You should also research the specific plant before harvesting to ensure you don't interrupt important cycles, or leave the plant without what it needs to regrow. With Ramps for example, the bulb at the base of the plant should always be left behind so it can regrow without a further decline in the species.

Another great example is wild Ginseng. You should always wait until after the plant has flowered, and produced a berry. This berry can be picked from the plant and buried to ensure regrowth of the Ginseng. At this point in time however, no one should be harvesting this plant, and in many places it is illegal to do so. Ginseng has been over harvested in the last few decades, without adequate replanting, and needs to rebuild its numbers in the wild. A good rule of thumb held by the majority of professional herbalists and long time foragers is to never take more than 10% of what you see in any area. This allows plenty for other foragers, wild animals, and leaves enough for the plant species to repopulate.

Identifying Foragable Herbs:

Leaf Shape & Growth Pattern

It's important to learn not only the shape, texture, size, color, and patterning of the leaves in your local biome, but also how they grow on the plant. We use terms like alternate, opposite, or whorled to describe how the leaves are attached to the plant.

Flowers

Learning your local flowers is the easiest way to begin identifying plants. Plants only flower at certain times during the year, and when they do it's a great way to double check your previous identifications. Each plant family has a distinct flower, and learning their groups can help you identify botanical relatives with ease.

Nuts/ Berries

These can be clear identifiers of trees year round when dormant parts aren't clearly visible. Fruits and berries are a simple way to identify plants, but always double check your ID sources before eating anything.

Bark

Bark is a great identifier for trees, and getting familiar with what your local trees look like before foraging will almost always result in finding a new tree as a resource.

Endangered Flowering Plants

Below is a list of the most endangered plants across America. Leave these plants alone when you see them. Many have natural processes we cannot replicate so they need to be left alone. If you wish to use these in your practice, I recommend sourcing ethically harvested seeds and growing your own plant.

Western Prairie Fringed Orchid
Georgia Aster*
Texas Wild Rice
Howell's Spectacular Thelypody
Ouachita Mountain Goldenrod*
Short's Goldenrod*
Arizona Agave
Milkweed*
Southern Spicebush
Milkvetch*
Quillwort
Giant Blue Hyssop
Filmy Angelica
Arnica*
Smooth Purple Coneflower

*These flowers can be helped by spreading their seeds, but do not collect for personal use.

Herbal Poultices

An age-old tradition of "chew and spit" has led to an advanced understanding of working with plants. A poultice is a topical remedy that consists of crushed plant material applied to fresh wounds, burns, or sprains to reduce inflammation, decrease the risk of infection, and slow bleeding. Poultices are a great way to quickly access local herbs when you don't have a salve on hand, making them a crucial part of herbal first response. Herbs can be crushed or rolled in your hands, broken down in a mortar and pestle, or chewed. However, I don't recommend chewing wild herbs; I only mention the practice because of the tradition behind it. Now we know plants like comfrey contain toxic chemicals that should not be consumed.

However, Comfrey makes a great poultice for bruises and sprains in an emergency. Roots that can be made into poultices are best powdered before use and make great additions to any herbal first aid kit.

Foragers, always be sure to double and triple-check the identification of a plant before applying anything to your skin. Until you have a good relationship with a plant and can identify it in multiple locations without question, you should be checking your identification sources.

Poultice Herbs:

Aloe Vera- For burns and irritated skin (gel from leaves)

Calendula- To lessen risk of infection and speed up healing (flowers)

Carolina Geranium- To slow bleeding (root)

Chickweed- To lessen risk of infection and speed up healing (arial parts)

Chicory- To reduce swelling and inflammation (leaves)

Dandelion- To reduce inflammation and risk of infection (leaves)

Jewelweed- For exposure to poison ivy (fresh leaves)

Mallow- For rash and dry skin conditions (leaves)

Mullein- To reduce swelling and inflammation (leaves- can also be soaked and applied without maceration)

Plantain- To slow bleeding and reduce swelling (leaves)

Red Clover- For rash and dry skin conditions (leaves)

Tobacco- For inflammation and insect stings (dried leaves)

White Willow- To slow bleeding and reduce risk of infection (leaves and bark)

Witch Hazel- For rash and to lessen risk of infection (leaves and bark)

Yarrow- To slow bleeding (leaves)