

Integrating Ethics: Resources for Integrative and Alternative Health care

Ethical harvesting of weeds, wild foods, herbs and medicinals
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Herbology continues to be a fast growing part of alternative health care. It is only natural for practitioners and clients to begin to focus more on a do-it-yourself approach. Wild foods are also being recognized for their greater nutritional value, as well as being a part of the locavore movement, as people come back to appreciating local and unprocessed foods.

There is nothing more natural than finding food, harvesting it and using it. People who didn't do that died out long ago. Herbs and medicines have also been free for the taking, in all areas where there are people. But we've recently — in the last 100 years or so — made it more complicated.

Our parks and the natural areas have rules about picking things and eating them; harvesting roots, bark, seeds and more might be illegal. At the same time, with growing interest and awareness of the richness of wild food and medicine, it has never been more important to harvest wild things ethically.

Wild harvesting is not inherently dangerous to the plants, the environment, wild animals or to people. We can make it dangerous, we can create conflicts and behave poorly and thoughtlessly. In balance, most foragers develop great caring for the environment and act on that concern in positive ways. Having more people out and about in nature has so many benefits, positively affecting our overall health and spiritual lives, stimulating mental awareness and satisfying our innate seeking behavior. By foraging, we're also creating people who care more about the world around us.

Be thoughtful, but certainly the most important ethic is to enjoy yourself, have fun, and share that positive experience with other people, especially kids.

I've compiled a simple beginning list of some ethical concerns and cautions. These are just guidelines. The best suggestion in most cases is to ask for permission, and know before you harvest what is allowed. This applies even to truly wild areas, where some plants are protected

What can you harvest? It varies not only state to state, but in different areas. In many parks and wild areas you can take berries and sometimes greens. In many areas no digging is allowed. It is your responsibility to know the law, the restrictions, and even what wild plants are protected by state or federal law due to being endangered. If in doubt, ask first.

Where can you harvest? Many private land owners are happy to have their fruit used, their weeds harvested, and invasives dug up. It is a simple thing to ask permission, and you can often do some education at the same time. Find out park rules and what state laws might apply. You can ask there as well, and even foresters and park rangers may not be aware of what value the weeds have and how they can be safely and ethically harvested. Share your knowledge.

How do you know who owns the property? Look for signs, even if they seem out of place. Railroads and electric companies have easements along their tracks or electrical lines, and this isn't a place you'd want to harvest anyway as these areas are often doused with chemicals to kill weeds and other plants. If you see a prime foraging area and don't know about ownership, you can always check with city township or county records. Many of them are online and easy to search. Do it in advance of the season for whatever you have in mind to harvest.

How much should you take? There is a rule of thumb, that you can take 1/3 of the plant or the patch without causing problems. That's pretty vague. Some plants you will want to remove as much as possible, garlic mustard (*Alliaria petiolata*) and autumn olive (*Elaeagnus umbellata*) for example are two invasive plants you would normally try and eradicate as you harvest. Some are endangered and nothing should be taken, such as goldenseal (*Hydrastis Canadensis*). Consider if others will also be harvesting, the needs of the animals and pollinators in the area. Leave the remaining plants healthy and in good shape for the next person.

Will you use all that you harvest? An ethical wildcrafter only takes as much as he or she can use. If you don't have the time, the patience, or the ability to process and use what you harvest, don't pick it in the first place.

Should you be giving something back? You can help spread seed of valuable non-invasives, you can help remove plants that are threatening others, you can be a steward for the land you are using in many other helpful ways. You can ask the land owner, be involved in city or state restorative efforts, there are many ways that you may be needed.

Do you need to stay on the trail? There are a number of reasons this is a good ethical policy. In sensitive areas, it is essential to not tread on other plants or fragile environments. In some areas erosion may be a concern. In others the soil would be disturbed by compression. Be aware of your environment. If you are taking a portion of the plants and leaving more for the animals and pollinators, harvesting just near the trail helps ensure the deeper, often safer areas are left for those native dwellers. Inexperienced harvesters are more likely to trample other plants, and cause other damage. It takes time to see what is beneath your feet and step gently. This is less of a problem when you stay on the path.

What if you want to sell wild food and medicine? Being sustainable applies to wild harvesting as well as gardening. Over harvesting is certainly more of a concern when there is profit involved, and you're gathering far more than personal use. The responsibility to know the area, be aware of the impact of your actions, and ensure the wild areas can recover from extensive harvesting becomes even more important. Knowledge of the larger ecology can help make good decisions. And human competition can be deadly for any wild area that attracts a number of professional foragers. It is better to have a knowledgeable, experienced, careful harvester bringing the wild food to the consumers than to have a lot of misinformed and clumsy consumers rampaging through sensitive areas. Yet some of the value of wild foods is the process of collection. This is a service with great responsibility. The ethical choice is to do as much educating as possible, let people know your ethics and how you are balancing profit with stewardship, and always keep the larger perspective and overall health of the natural areas as your top priority.

What about fruit trees in public areas? There are gray areas. Fruit trees are a great example. If I find a tree bearing fruit that hangs over the sidewalk or falls on the street it's fair game, but if I can see or know that the tree owner is collecting the fruit I'll leave it alone. Nearly everyone will say yes if you ask to pick it if they aren't planning to harvest themselves. You're helping to keep their yard clear of rotting fruit and the wasps and animals it might attract. You can also offer to share the bounty. I've gotten permission to tap maple trees by offering back a bit of syrup.

Are there ways to protect the plant you're harvesting? Each plant is different. It is your ethical responsibility to know how to effectively harvest each plant. For example, being aware that girding a tree while harvesting bark will kill it. Knowing how to replant bloodroot after taking a bit of the end of the root. Understanding which plants would benefit to have seeds scattered as you harvest. This is also a good reason that an ethical harvester will only harvest the plants they know well, adding a few each year. A part of using wild herbs is understanding how they grow and what harvesting techniques are best for each plant. People new to foraging often commit two common errors. One is to trample other valuable plants in order to get to the one they want. We need to tread lightly. The second error is to destroy the whole plant when only a part is used. For example, with some perennials you can dig the root and replace part of it to continue to grow. If you are harvesting leaves, the plant doesn't need to be uprooted at all. If possible, pick only the portion of the plant you will use.

Is there something we overlook with weeds? There is an ethical value in using local and common plants. Exotics may attract more of a reputation and mystique, while the common weed that can contribute as much or more is overlooked. In many cases the common weeds were intentionally introduced for their value in cooking or as a medicinal herb. Using the most common plants is usually best for the environment, is easier, and they are certainly more available without much

effort or as much risk to other rarer plants. Keep it simple. Many of the prized exotic and endangered plants are not even needed. There are simple, easy to find substitutes that can be used. Use what is abundant and local first.

Are some wild plants illegal? There are some. Some hallucinogens, some common plants like comfrey (*Symphytum officinale*), not approved for internal use, and protected plants. Some plants have been unfairly singled out and some truly are dangerous. Use a couple good sources of information, so that you can know what is proscribed and why.

Are there dangerous plants? While there are plants that are poisonous and toxic, the real danger is in their misuse. Don't be overconfident and don't take unnecessary risks. Gently expand your area of expertise, but don't put yourself or other people at risk by trying plants you don't really know are safe or you can't positively identify. Yes, it is unethical to accidentally (or intentionally) poison yourself or others.

How does holistic thinking help? It is important to look at the area from a greater perspective as well as considering what is happening right in front of you. The ethical principle is to harvest sustainably, aware of the impact your collection will have in the short term, the long term, on the immediate area and on the others who depend on it for food.

Who else needs these plants? Be aware of your competition. The bees will also need the flowers you pick. The hummingbirds may be dependent on the plant you want to eat. The goldfinches and I are in disagreement about Echinacea seeds. I want them scattered to grow more plants, they want to devour them all. Waiting even a few days after blooming to harvest bee balm flowers will let the bees have at them first, a good compromise. The more you know about a plant, the more you know about who depends on that plant for survival and you can learn ways to stop it from being a competition and find ways to accommodate everyone's needs. And there are compromises. If you stick to the path, the birds and insects and other animals will generally find plenty deeper into the woods or fields.

Are there enough plants and areas to harvest? You can be generous. Sharing your finds with others inspires them to also go out and harvest. In most areas of the United States scarcity is more perception than reality. You need to find out if the plants you want to harvest are truly endangered. Harvest more of the common plants, and less of the ones that are more rare. Wild mushrooms may be the exception, but feeling protective and secretive about your harvesting spots generally doesn't help people to start harvesting, and makes it an exclusive and hostile, secretive thing rather than an opportunity for community sharing and learning together.

Should we ask the plants for permission? Yes, you can communicate with the plants you want to harvest. Now, that can sound a bit nutty but it can also be very practical. Plants don't talk. But they do communicate. You can tell if a plant is stressed by looking to see its vibrancy, great color and if it's keeping pace with its neighbors (premature leaf drop or being ahead or behind the season are not good signs). You don't want to eat stressed and unhealthy plants, which isn't something that is hidden. You can also trust your instincts when balanced with knowledge. If you see a fruit and your response is "Wow! Yes!," that is worth noting and responding to. If you instead have an initial negative reaction, pay attention to that as well. There may be unconscious communication from the plant to stay away. It may be only later that you realize there are signs of recent spraying, mold, or maybe even a dead and decaying animal nearby.

*Publication History: A version of this article was previously published as:
"Wildcrafting: Is foraging harmful? An ethical overview" Mon, Aug 30, 2010,
AnnArbor.com
<http://www.annarbor.com/entertainment/food-drink/wildcrafting-is-foraging-harmful-an-ethical-overview-part-two-of-two/>*

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