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Drag Queen

North American Smoke Plants

LOCAL EVENTS

Mairi Ross, author of *Smoke Plants of North America*, was in her 50s before she began using smoke as "the delivery system" for the herbal remedies that have interested her since age 19. "I was living in Tahlequah, the center of the Cherokee nation in Oklahoma," she said by phone from her current home in Jerome, Arizona. "The Cherokees are, of course, renown herbalists with 5000 herbs in their repertoire of healing."

In the late 1960s, Ross spent two and a half years in India with the Peace Corps. She lived in a village about 100 miles north of Benares. That's where she first witnessed herbal remedies being used effectively, she said.

Ross grew up in Oklahoma, where both her parents were physicians who practiced Western medicine. They didn't find their daughter's enthusiasm for herbal remedies (just in teas at first) distressing. "They were originally from the mountains of Tennessee, so folk medicine and folk healing were not strange concepts to them." Her interest in herbs increased in Hawaii, where she lived in the early 1970s. "When we went on walks, a friend from Sri Lanka mentored me on the plants around us." The education continued in Mexico, when she lived at the tip of Baja, in the early 1980s and again in the 1990s. "A friend there had an aunt who was a *curandera*" — herbal healer — "and whenever I had little health problems, the aunt would recommend an herb."

When she moved to Tahlequah in 2000, her health problems were large. Her nervous system "had collapsed." There were many reasons why, she said without giving details. "A Cherokee friend and I were taking a Cherokee history class, and at his house afterwards he would smoke a pipe of something. I have never been a smoker, but I was drawn to the pipe. He was a Vietnam vet who'd been exposed to Agent Orange and had posttraumatic stress disorder, and he had worked with a medicine man who'd helped him with his smoking mixtures." When Ross tried her friend's pipe, she experienced "almost immediate relief" from some of her symptoms: "Nervous anxiety, anxiety attacks — they were gone, within seconds."

Skullcap and passion flower are two of the "nervine" class of plants Ross began to smoke during her "personal healing journey." The nervines helped a relative, too. "He was going through a difficult time with obsessiveness and suicidal thoughts, and was on heavy medications. When he visited me, I gave him some skullcap to smoke. 'This takes me back from the edge immediately,' he said. Herbs aren't the entire answer. You're going to have to support your nervous system in other ways, but they can keep you from the brink."

Ross likes to put fennel seeds in her smokes, because of their anise aroma. "Some smoking herbs don't have medicinal properties; they're used for flavoring. I am focused on the medicine, but I think there's room for aesthetics. Deer's tongue is another aromatic that I discovered through the Cherokees; it's like vanilla."

We associate coughs with smoking (tobacco, anyway), so it's counterintuitive to think that smoking anything could be a cough "cure." Ross agreed, but offered a story about an herb called mullein. "A chronic mold was causing people here [in Arizona] to have irritated lungs and coughs, and people just smoked a little mullein and their coughing spasms stopped. Their lungs were relieved. Mullein is soft and fluffy, a very friendly, nontoxic plant that has been used as a lung cleanser by almost all the indigenous tribes."

Lobelia is commonly sold as an ornamental, but Ross claimed that smoking its dried leaves and flowers may help people stop or reduce their tobacco addiction. "Just a pinch in a mix attaches to the same [brain] receptors as nicotine."

Similarly, people Ross has known with "heavy marijuana-smoking habits" substituted some of the nervines "and were able to move off it."

Those who try to quit either of these substances may miss the ritual. Ross pointed out that taking out the pipe and the little bag of herbs can provide it.

Ross strongly suggests that, with the help of field guides, people gather, rather than buy, at least a few of their smoking herbs. "Mullein grows just about everywhere," she said. "Manzanita, a basic smoke plant, with an astringent quality, can be gathered in San Diego. I have not been able to find good-quality passionflower, so I am growing that one myself. Your connection with the actual live plant is the basis of herbalism. It's part of the healing."

This weekend, in addition to her lecture, Ross will demonstrate preparing mullein for smoking. "I used to smoke dried mullein until my friend in Tahlequah learned from a medicine person that it's better when it's cut while still almost green, like after two days. It helps moisten the whole mix and has a much gentler quality on the lungs."

— Jeanne Schinto

PHOTOGRAPH BY DAVE ALLEN

Smoking a mixture of coltsfoot and yerba santa

American Herbalist Guild lecture and book-signing: "Smoke Plants of North America" by Mairi Ross
Friday, May 30, 7–9 p.m.
Coastal Sage Gardening, 3685 Voltaire Street, Ocean Beach
Cost: free
Info: 619-223-5229