A Thyme to Heal

According to one local physician, the treatment for many of your ills might be sprouting just outside your door.

BY SCOTT BARKER

“I would argue that if you take your grandmother to the store and she isn’t familiar with the ingredients on a package of food, you probably shouldn’t buy it.”

— Tieraona Low Dog, M.D.

To illustrate her point of how we are surrounded by desert flora that possess life-giving properties, she indicates the office courtyard. “Mesquite beans are a food source that many of the indigenous people who used to inhabit this area would cook and eat. A good source of fiber and protein, mesquite beans are digested slowly, which means that blood sugars do not rise rapidly — a point that should not be lost considering the epidemic of diabetes in local native populations that has occurred, in part because of the dramatic shift in their diet.”

According to Dr. Low Dog, another plant that’s currently being studied for its health benefits is a much-maligned succulent that all but grows like a weed throughout our region — the prickly pear. “Many cacti seem to have a beneficial effect on blood sugar, and they are widely used by the Hispanic population,” she notes. “Twenty-five years ago, you had to go out and pick prickly pear yourself and burn off the spines. It was hard work. Now you can get the pads — without the stickers — in many grocery stores, so it’s very easy to cook with them. You just use a cheese slicer and take off the outer layer to get to the moist inner flesh, and you can just cook it in your eggs.”

Not all of our native plants need to be consumed internally to be beneficial. “I’ve got aloees all over my yard. They’re under my palo verdes in large patches. Aloe vera has been revered since ancient times wherever it has grown. When I was a kid, I don’t think there was a fourth grader who didn’t know what the ‘burn plant’ was. All the teachers had it in their classrooms, and moms always had it in their kitchens. And now we’re looking at it not just for external burns, but there’s growing evidence that aloe vera juices and gels can be very healing for inflammatory bowel problems such as ulcerative colitis and Crohn’s.”
Tieraona Low Dog, M.D., is the education director for the Program in Integrative Medicine at The University of Arizona. Photo by Martha Lochert.
Just as aloe is often simply seen as a border plant in our landscape, when we think of oaks, we generally picture using them as furniture or flooring, but they have other uses that native peoples understood well. “We’ve got lots of variations of oaks around here — scrub oaks, live oaks. They’ve all been traditionally used for burns, and as an astringent due to high tannin content. Plants that are high in tannins are going to bind with proteins in the skin, making a natural bandage. Oak leaf and bark have been used for a long time for wound healing, and has been taken internally for diarrhea.”

If we lived in the desert Southwest some two hundred or more years ago, chances are we would know the names of all the plants around us, and what they were used for. It’s an education that is sorely lacking for folks today, and the result is a condition that Dr. Low Dog noticed when she used to live in New Mexico and would take kids out for wilderness walks. “You’d watch them when we first went out and they just tromped around, stepping on everything and not paying any attention. You started teaching them the names of plants, where the names came from, and by the end of four or five hours, they all walked differently. They weren’t just stomping on the plants. They’d say, ‘Oh yeah, that’s Osha, and it’s used for ....’”

The reality of how many common plants have medicinal properties becomes evident as soon as Dr. Low Dog begins to recite a list:

“I’ve seldom found anything that’s as good for those chest colds that just stay and stay as Osha, also known as Bear Root. Valerian is another useful plant. It grows up in our mountains, and we have our own unique species — *Valeriana edulis*. It’s great for nervousness and nervous stomach, or what old Hispanic women used to call ‘nervosa.’ Yarrow was called Soldier’s Woundwort and it was standard issue in almost all soldiers’ bags up through the Civil War. It’s a powerful styptic when it’s applied on a wound. It stops the flow of bleeding, and it has antibacterial effects. Yarrow tea is sometimes used to ease heavy menstruation. And the flowers, consumed as a hot tea before bed, will help you to sweat out a cold/minor fever.”

And money may not grow on trees, but treatments for chronic conditions sure do. Willow, cottonwood, poplar and aspen all contain salicin, the precursor to salicylic acid. “The bark and leaves of these trees have been used for centuries to ease

“...I think people suffer from the loss of nature in their lives. It’s like a ‘nature sickness’ in a way. We see nature as something to be conquered, avoided, shut out.”

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CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT Yarrow, aloe vera, sage, lavender, peppermint and prickly pear.
arthritic aches and pains. Although milder than aspirin, it also has milder side effects."

In 1899 when German chemist Felix Hoffmann patented aspirin — acetylsalicylic acid — made from *Spiraea ulmaria* (aka Meadowsweet), even though he worked for the Bayer company he probably never imagined today’s multi-billion dollar drug industry. He probably couldn’t have foreseen, either, the current rush to study the pharmaceutical uses of plants, or to try to develop drugs using their compounds. “Twenty-five years ago, with my herb shop in Las Cruces, I would never have predicted that the National Institutes of Health would spend $120 million annually of our tax dollars to study complementary and alternative medicine,” notes Dr. Low Dog. “About 40 percent of that budget has gone to researching botanicals and other dietary supplements, because we believe they may hold tremendous promise. It would be foolish to think that we’ve found every medicinal agent on the planet and have made a drug out of it. We haven’t begun to explore much of South America and Africa. China and India have such rich pharmacopias, and researchers in the West have only just begun to look at them.”

Part of what has held research back is that once a promising plant is found, it is sometimes overstudied — examples being herbs such as echinacea and St. John’s Wort. The other stumbling block is that plants are incredibly complicated from a chemical standpoint. “One of the biggest mistakes researchers make is always trying to fit herbal medicines into a drug model. We’re so used to looking for one agent — one compound that will do one specific thing in the body. Plants don’t typically work that way because they have hundreds of compounds that are very complex, and they’re kind of messy to work with in that way. I think that it’s been hard for researchers to get their heads around.”

If it’s tough for medical researchers to understand the mysteries of the botanical kingdom, it’s even harder for physicians to trade the pill-for-an-ill model for one involving maintaining health through proper diet and using natural supplements to treat chronic conditions. Dr. Low Dog, whose heritage is part Lakota, Comanche, Irish and English, grew up with a rural tradition of working with the earth and using home remedies for most ills. She jokes that, “If you didn’t have a bone protruding through the skin, you just didn’t go to the doctor.”

That sentiment is a far cry from how patients care for themselves, and how doctors approach treating them. “As far as herbal medicines, I think most doctors are interested in learning about them because they know that
many drugs are derived from plants, and there must be something to them, but they're also kind of scared. They've heard that the quality can be all over the place, which is true. There are really good companies making very good products and there are companies that put out really poor quality supplements. That fear can only be alleviated by better oversight. The White House Office of Management and Budget recently released the new Dietary Supplements Good Manufacturing Practices, which should help improve the situation by ratcheting up on the quality standards manufacturing companies will have to follow. I think this will do a lot to build more confidence.”

Part of what the Program in Integrative Medicine seeks to do is better inform physicians about herbal medicine, but also to change how doctors relate to their patients. “Nobody knows your body better than you do, and as a doctor, before I look at your labs and test results, I need to hear your story,” explains Dr. Low Dog. “Good doctors are like good detectives. If you tell us your story, we can often get a good picture of what’s going on. But with the high-tech, low-touch approach that’s taught in most medical schools, we’ve sacrificed this crucial part of the doctor-patient relationship. Doctors interrupt a patient within 18 seconds of asking a question. We’re busy asking questions because we’re accustomed to working in an acute care model. If you come into the emergency room, the chances are high that you could be very sick. I need to get at the problem and fix it fast. Works great in the ER ... works poorly in the primary care setting where the majority of our patients are suffering from chronic problems, many of which are caused or worsened by our lifestyle choices.”

Fixing this backwards approach to primary care brings into line the whole web that Dr. Low Dog speaks about: we have to care for the earth so we have safe and nutritious food and Andrew Weil, M.D., is the founder of the Program in Integrative Medicine at The University of Arizona.
Personal responsibility plays a key role in creating a nation of healthier people. “I can’t tell you how many times I’ve seen a family wait six hours in the emergency room to have their six year old with sniffles and no fever seen. Maybe it’s the loss of ‘grandmother wisdom.’ There’s no grandmother next door to say, ‘Oh, Johnny’s going to be fine. He’s got a little cold. Give him some soup and some juice with Vitamin C and send him to bed.’ There’s a sense that many of us have lost the knowledge of how to care for ourselves.”

There is hope, however, and the answer may be as simple as stepping out into the garden, taking a deep breath, and seeing not only the world in a different light, but viewing yourself in a new way, as well. “Your body is your very best friend. It never leaves you, and even when you think it betrays you, it generally does not,” Dr. Low Dog concludes. “It’s absolutely doing everything to adapt and try to survive, given how you care for it. And if you think of your body as your best friend, my guess is that you’ll treat it much differently.”

Editors note: Dr. Tieraona Low Dog is the director of education for the Program in Integrative Medicine at The University of Arizona; past president of the American Herbalists Guild; was appointed by President Bill Clinton to the White House Commission on Complementary and Alternative Medicine; is currently the chair of the US Pharmacopia Dietary Supplements Panel; and is conducting studies with the Advisory Board of the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine. She is the co-author with Dr. Marc S. Micozzi of the book *Women’s Health in Complementary and Integrative Medicine — A Clinical Guide*. Her website is: www.drlow-dog.com.

**It’s Only Natural**

Sniffles? Congestion? Before You Call the Doc, Here Are Some Natural Remedies to Consider

**Allergies:**

Stinging nettles, of the sort that grow near bodies of water and whose spine-like hairs tend to stick to you if you rub up against them, have been found to be...
helpful in reducing allergy symptoms. “Freeze-dried nettles are quite safe,” reports Dr. Low Dog. “They aren’t like ephedra, which can speed up the heart. In their capsule form, there are no known adverse effects, and you can try them even with younger kids. If they don’t work, you can always try something stronger, but medicines that are stronger also may have more risk. It seems to make sense to start with the weakest/safest and work your way up when dealing with minor conditions.”

**Migraines (and allergies):**

The herb Butterbur is gaining favor as a treatment for allergy symptoms and migraines. “It has been studied even in children as young as six,” notes Dr. Low Dog. “It has been shown to be as effective as a non-sedating prescription antihistamine, and it doesn’t make you tired.” One caution: read the label and look for Butterbur in a form that is PA (pyrrolizidine alkaloid) free. PA can cause liver damage, but once it is removed from the herb, Butterbur is deemed to be very safe.

**Coughs:**

Chances are you have a great remedy right in your pantry: dried thyme. Brewed up as a tea (and flavored with honey to make it more palatable), it’s safe and effective for minor coughs and congestion caused by colds and allergies. “Take two tablespoons of dried thyme, and steep it in two cups of water for about 20 minutes,” Dr. Low Dog directs. “And then strain the thyme out, and add about a half cup of honey to it while it’s still warm. If you want, you can squeeze half of a lemon into it. And then you just put it into the fridge. You take a couple of tablespoons two or three times a day.”

This thyme tea with honey will cost very little to make, and lasts about seven to 10 days in your refrigerator. By the way, honey has natural antimicrobial properties, and studies have shown that two varieties — manuka and kanuka from New Zealand — appear to be the best in that regard.

**Sore throat:**

We think of sage as a seasoning for poultry and vegetables, but it also makes an excellent gargle when your throat is irritated from pollutants or a cold. “In Germany, you can actually purchase throat sprays made from sage, which have antimicrobial properties as well as soothing your throat,” notes Dr. Low Dog. As an added benefit, the essential oils of this plant, whose name we associate with wisdom, shows initial promise as a treatment to slow the progression of Alzheimer’s. Dr. Low Dog points out, however, that for those considering taking any essential plant oils, caution must be used. They are highly concentrated, and shouldn’t be used without expert advice.►
Stress relief:
The word lavender comes from lavage, meaning “to wash.” The ancient Romans put it in their public baths not only for its attractive scent, but because it seemed to soothe and calm bathers. It turns out that it’s also good for the skin, and has antiseptic qualities.

Tummy troubles:
Peppermint has long been enjoyed for its distinctive flavor and the tingle it adds to foods, as well as its ability to calm an upset stomach. Mint tea is especially good for this, and served hot, also helps with congestion. Poured over ice, it can be very refreshing on a warm day. Dr. Low Dog recommends making some mint tea, pouring it into ice cube trays, and if you’re so inclined, adding a little mint leaf and a fresh raspberry. After the cubes are frozen, you can simply add them to a glass of cold water. “As they melt, you get this light, fragrant, fresh, minty water that just tastes so good. So you have a healthy little drink that costs you pennies to make.”

Getting With the Program
The Program in Integrative Medicine at The University of Arizona was launched some 13 years ago, and has built an international reputation as a place for physicians to learn to blend standard allopathic care with methodologies that include herbal medicine and acupuncture.

It’s an enterprise that, like its founder Dr. Andrew Weil, is in constant motion, always moving forward and evolving. Recently, Victoria Maizes, M.D., executive director of the program, talked with Tucson Lifestyle about some of the exciting new developments.

For a number of years, the program has accepted physicians as fellows as a way of familiarizing them with complementary care, but there’s a new twist, one that down the line may influence how doctors are educated across the country. “We’ve got a brand new project called Integrative Medicine in Residency,” Dr. Maizes notes. “We’re doing it at the U of A, but also at six other residencies around the U.S. All the residents coming into the class will have a 200- to 300-hour curriculum in integrative medicine. This is really moving toward having this education become a fundamental part of every doctor’s training.”

Meanwhile, the program continues to train fellows, both onsite and off. “For our Distance Learning Fellowship, we just had our largest class ever — 80 fellows,” says Dr. Maizes. “Three of them were from the National Institutes of Health.”
But it isn’t just doctors who benefit from what’s going on over there. The public can directly participate in a variety of ways, including the Healthy Aging workshop that takes place at Miraval Life in Balance, which Dr. Maizes, Dr. Weil and Dr. Low Dog all take part in.

Additionally, the public can attend the fall lecture series at the U of A, or the Grand Rounds, where different physicians report on specific topics. As an example of how eye-opening these presentations can be, Dr. Maizes referenced a recent one where a researcher spoke about tests he had done on Ayurvedic medicines he had randomly purchased both in his local area (Boston) and off the Internet. He discovered that 20 percent of them had unacceptable levels of lead, mercury and arsenic, all the more reason for patients to make sure they are buying from a reputable company that can guarantee the safety and purity of their products.

Down the line at the program, Medical Director Randy Horwitz, M.D., plans to open an integrative medicine allergy clinic there. As for folks in Tucson who want to be seen at the program for various chronic complaints right now, Dr. Maizes says, “We’re definitely seeing patients, and that’s a very important part of our service to the community.”

For more information about the Program in Integrative Medicine at The University of Arizona, check the web at: integrativemedicine.arizona.edu.