

Plants in Grinnell: A Guide for Connecting with the Earth



By Mariposa Condron
Grinnell College GWSS Department

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
Gardening.....	3
Foraging.....	4
Indigenous Context.....	5
Nettles.....	6
Sagebrush.....	9
Echinacea.....	11
Acknowledgements.....	13
Sources.....	14



Introduction

Healing and Plants

This project is the culmination of my summer research with Professor Carolyn Herbst of the Grinnell College Gender, Women, and Sexuality Studies Department. I have been working as her research assistant as she gathers sources for her book and memoir on sacred healing journeys. My research has focused on how relationships with nature and the Earth are important and helpful in the healing process.

For this research project, we have looked at healing as a process separate and different from a cure. So often in the modern, western healthcare system, doctors diagnose a physical problem and fix it, but this does not take into account how the patient feels or copes with the illness or condition. Particularly with chronic conditions, the impending reality of death or the relentless pain takes a toll on a person that cannot be fixed with prescriptions or medical treatment. As such, we define healing as a holistic journey to feeling whole again and being at peace enough to live with one's condition. This applies to people who need to heal from trauma, physical illness, chronic disability, or any other state of feeling damaged. I also argue that most people are affected by and need to heal from the detriments of capitalist society and being cut off from nature.

What is "Nature?"

The modern, western, capitalist world would have us look at "nature" as something separate from humanity. Humans are society and "civilization" and nature is whatever is left outside of that. In a capitalist world, "nature" is a commodity. The Earth is bought and sold as natural resources, whether land, water, plants, animals, or energy. We pollute the world, so green space and clean air are a luxury, and often, only wealthier white people can afford to spend much time in nature.

Cutting marginalized people off from the natural world is a strategy employed by governments and corporations to erode culture and oppress people. The US government forcibly removed Indigenous tribes from their homelands, severing people from their relationship with the land and other-than-human beings that formed important cultural connections. Since then, mainstream US society has depicted Indigenous people and those who seek a relationship with nature as primitive or silly, bringing to mind stereotypes of savages or dramatized Shamans.

A relationship with nature in this way is made to seem ridiculous and un-Christian, therefore uncivilized and un-American. Compartmentalizing the world into civilization and nature also allows us to rank beings, putting humans above everything, animals above plants, and plants above bacteria and so on, allowing us to decide which lives are more valuable and real and which are not. This type of thinking is what allows our society to rank humans also, with white and wealthy people at the top and Black and Indigenous and poor people at the bottom. This way of thinking hurts people and hurts the world, so we are all in need of healing.

As such, one is required to change their worldview to restore a relationship to nature that many have been denied. Nature is not separate from people; it is all around us, and humans are a part of it just like any other creature. Plants, animals, fungus, and other beings may have different ways of expressing themselves and living their lives, but so does every human being have a different way of thinking and acting. After learning to see other-than-human creatures as equals and respect all the life around me, it has been easier to heal and to treat other people with respect and dignity and to individually go against the capitalist system I find myself in to the extent that I can. Building my own relationship with nature has allowed me to feel more connected to the world around me.

The purpose of this project is to give people a starting point for building a relationship with the natural world. Going outside and being able to look at plants and identify them, calling them by their names rather than lumping them all together or just accepting and not really noticing their presence, can build a connection with those beings. Knowing what they do and how they can help you and how you can help them strengthens that relationship. Knowing the historical context of those plants and understanding the meaning they have to other groups of people and learning how to treat them with respect when using and harvesting them solidifies that relationship and connects you with generations of people that have used the same plants. As such, I have tried to include all this information in a way that people can walk out the door and use it for themselves, and can, through this, access greater healing and connection. This book looks at five plants that grow wild in or can be easily grown in central Iowa, and each plant has a specific cultural and ecological context as well as medicinal and culinary uses. In the next two sections, the importance of both gardening and foraging and how to do each safely and effectively will be explained.

Gardening

The moment humans learned to put seeds in the ground, they have been able to have certainty and control over their lives. Gardens have taken many forms and had many purposes throughout time and across different landscapes and cultures. Gardening has been consistently used as a form of subsistence agriculture as well as a means of growing medicinal plants. Gardens have also been used for healing purposes, using the activity and the design of the landscape as a way of growing a relationship with the Earth and taking care of oneself.

Many recent studies have shown the positive health and healing benefits of gardening. Gardens are a way to be exposed to nature, even in a setting usually devoid of it, like a hospital or a city. Studies show that exposure alone can improve mental and emotional health, and physical health can be improved by the exercise and fresh food yielded. Healing gardens have been shown to improve well being for patients with chronic illness as well as people suffering from trauma. Gardening enables people to have a relationship with plants and nature that can help a person heal holistically.

The structure of a garden can vary based on its purpose and the environment it is in. It is always good to plant native plants in one's garden. Plants that are native to the region will grow best, and most places across the US have had their environments decimated to some degree, so planting native plants helps restore that ecosystem's health. Planting and interacting with native plants can also make you feel more connected to the environment you are in and honor your relationship to nature with your garden. A garden is a relationship or mutual support, not just taking for oneself, so planting native plants is a way to give back when the garden gives you food or other plants to harvest.

There are many other factors to keep in mind when planning out your garden as well. Planting annual versus perennial plants can influence the health of the soil and what you are able to plant in the future. Replanting the same annual plants in the same place every year will degrade the soil, so it is good to plant certain perennials or rotate the type of annual plants each year. Plants like beans or legumes that are nitrogen rich help the soil quality and can revitalize the soil, so it is important to pay attention to the levels of nutrients that your garden plants give or take away from the soil and plant them in areas that keep the garden balanced. Not all plants require the same amount of water, so if you set up a long term irrigation system this must be taken into account.

Foraging

Foraging has been important to human life since the beginning. Before humans figured out how to garden and cultivate, they subsisted off of and preserved what already grew around them. Today in America, foraging is less widely done, and most people lack the knowledge to know which plants are edible or poisonous and what each plant is called, let alone what it does. Learning the names of the plants around us is an important way to interact with nature, whether or not one is foraging. Learning this also causes one to see the world in a different way. It is hard to look at your lawn and see weeds growing in the grass when you know the “weeds” are clover and wood sorrel that can be added to salads, or dandelions that can be delicious braised or can be medically used to help one’s liver or relieve chronic arthritic pain. In reality, weeds are a social construct. Weeds are only weeds so long as we decide they are unwanted plants. When foraging, nothing is a weed, because everything is growing naturally without interference from humans, and everything has a purpose.

Identification is an important first step, and understanding comes next. Once you can identify the plant, you need to know how much is ok to take so that the plant can keep supporting itself. If you take too much, the plant could be without nutrients and die, which would not be fair to the generous plant or to the other people and animals and other animals that depend on the plant for survival in the ecosystem. When you forage, you participate in a balanced system that produces and replenishes, and damaging that balance does a disservice to yourself and the environment you live in. Therefore, to maintain a healthy relationship with the plants around you, learning about them and the context in which they live is important.

It is also important to practice caution and forage safely. Many plants have poisonous lookalikes or can be toxic if prepared for consumption incorrectly. Sometimes only part of a plant is edible or safe to use, and certain plants can be very hard to identify for sure. It is always important to use multiple ways to ID a plant, such as leaf shape, flower, and so on, rather than going off of just one quality. It is always best to consult multiple reliable resources when foraging.

When foraging, it is important to give back to the ecosystem as you take from it. If there is trash in the area where you are harvesting, clean it up. If the soil seems too dry and it has not rained in a long time, water the plants you are taking from. Part of respecting the Earth is knowing how much to take and how much to

leave when you are harvesting wild plants. With wild populations, taking too much can cause the plants to die off and cripple the ecosystem. Therefore, only take about 20% of what you see and never take any more than what you need.

Indigenous Context

Anywhere you can walk in the world, you will find yourself standing on land that is generations old and has had incredible significance to so many people. In central Iowa, so many Indigenous tribes have made their home or been pushed through this area. These many generations of people have a relationship with the land that has shaped it in lasting ways. It is important to understand the cultural significance of land and the ways that the land and people have affected each other if one is to have a full relationship with the natural world.

Many native prairie plants have been used ceremonially or otherwise by many Indigenous tribes. These plants often have significance even if they are not specifically spiritual, and land based cultures often value respect for wildlife and maintain a connection with the natural world that capitalist societies have lost. Gardening methods like the three sisters strategy of planting corn, beans and squash together and the land management strategies, such as prairie burns that maintained the health of the ecosystem, used by tribes in the precolonial prairie epitomize this.

The line between appreciation and appropriation of Indigenous cultural practices can often be thin, and this comes into play with herbalism and Native knowledge of plants. Knowledge of plants has been preserved and passed down in many Indigenous communities. In some cases, to start mimicking those practices and take advantage of that knowledge while having no connection to that community can violate the sacredness of that knowledge and cause harm to that community. There is often no concrete answer to what is “allowed” or not for non-Native people in plant use, but it is important to always seek to be respectful and, when in doubt, to consult Native people in a respectful way. For instance, sage smudges have been co-opted by many predominantly white wiccan practices. To many, this is cultural appropriation of an important Indigenous spiritual practice that is done with no knowledge of the plant’s importance and without the blessing of the people who have used the plant for centuries. In some cases, it may be fine for a non-Native person to use white sage if doing so in a respectful and

knowledgeable way with the guidance and encouragement of a spiritual leader in a Native community. As such, it is important to do the research and be humble and caring when accessing traditionally Indigenous knowledge.

In all that we do, it is important when interacting with the land we live on to acknowledge that it is someone's traditional homeland. One cannot have a true relationship with the natural world without acknowledging the difficult truths of colonialism and the harm that has been done to the land and the people that care for it. By acknowledging these truths and seeking to be respectful to both the Earth and its people, one can have a healing relationship with the natural world that improves your life and the lives of everyone around you.

Nettles



Cultural/Historical Significance

Nettles are very common all over the world. They were originally native to Europe, but were introduced to the American continent very early in history and

are now functionally a native plant both biologically and culturally. In Europe, they have been used medicinally since the beginning of recorded history. In the US, nettles have been important medicinal plants to many tribes. Many tribes used the fibers of the stem to weave fishing nets and rope. The healing benefits of nettle are connected to the seasonality of the plant. Because it is an important springtime plant, it is connected to rejuvenation and cleansing, both physically and spiritually.

The Tulalip tribes have a story about a man during times of war to whom nettles came to in a dream and told him to make nettle tea and to have warriors flog themselves with stinging nettles. After doing this, the people banded together to face their enemy as they approached and sang, full of the strength of the nettles, and the enemy warriors knew they would be defeated and left. This story exemplifies the spiritual importance of plants and how they can be an active, conscious player in people's lives according to Indigenous worldviews in which plants have personhood and a spiritual presence.

Cultivation and Harvest

Nettles grow wild across much of the country and can be found in the prairies of central Iowa. As such, foraging is the most effective method of using nettle. They can often be found where two ecosystems meet, at the edges of forests, prairies, mountains, farms, and gardens. They are perennials and grow in all manners of environments. They start growing in the Springtime and are often some of the first plants to come up.

An important safety concern to keep in mind with nettles, often called stinging nettles, is that touching the leaves and stem will cause a stinging pain followed by a numbing sensation. Therefore, it is best to wear gloves while harvesting and to be very careful. If you do get stung, rubbing mud or plantain leaves (sometimes it is helpful to chew the plantain leaves and then put them on the skin) which grow all over (pictured below) can help relieve the affected area. Saliva can also help.

Because nettles are a wild plant, it is important not to take too much. You do not need to harvest much nettle for any medicine or recipe you are making because they are so nutrient dense. Nettles can grow up to six feet tall, so when you are harvesting, look around to see how many there are and take some of the smaller ones while leaving enough larger ones to keep the population healthy.



(plantain leaves, remedy for nettle sting)

Medicinal Uses

Nettles are known to help with:

- Menstrual problems
- Anemia and mineral deficiency
- Gout
- Arthritis
- Allergic reactions and rash
- Asthma
- Burns

For menstrual problems, gout, and rheumatoid arthritis drink nettle tea. For osteoarthritis, nettle has been traditionally used by hitting or rubbing the pained joint with the plant, and the sting will mask the joint pain momentarily and create a long term chemical reaction that strengthens the area. Nettle juice is best for anemia and mineral deficiency. Using nettles to make a compress can help reduce pain and treat burns.

Culinary Uses

Nettle leaves can be made into a tea, added to soups as a vegetable, and steamed, blanched or sauteed as you would other leafy greens. It can also be added to pasta or made into a pesto sauce. It is high in minerals and fiber, very similar to spinach. Nettle juice is a good alternative to tea in warmer months, and can be made by chopping the leaves and straining the liquid after letting them sit.

Sagebrush/Prairie sage



Cultural/Historical Significance

Sage is crucial to many Indigenous spiritual practices for prairie and southwestern tribes, such as the Dine, Navajo, Paiute, Cree and Lakota peoples. It is said to be spiritually cleansing and is revered as a sacred plant. Practices like sage smudging have been widely co-opted and appropriated and done by non-Native people with no knowledge of its origins in recent years. This has hurt Native communities as well as harmed the supply of prairie sage in the ecosystem as they have been carelessly overharvested to meet the market demand. With care and intention, sagebrush can be used for healing and culinary purposes, but mimicking or attempting to replicate a group's spiritual practice if you do not belong to this group should be avoided.

Cultivation and Harvest

Prairie sage grows wild in the open prairie as well as dry areas near canyons or mountains. It can also be easily cultivated in a garden. It grows best in open spaces with direct sunlight and in well drained soil. Prairie sage is a perennial and is good at spreading itself and surviving tough conditions. Seedlings should be planted 18-24 inches apart in the springtime and watered thoroughly after planting. It should be watered regularly during the first year after planting, but prairie sage is very drought resistant and it is important to make sure you are not over watering it.

Because sage is sacred to many people, it is crucial to take only what you need while foraging and respect the plant. Be intentional while growing sagebrush and do not take the growing and harvest process lightly but be mindful about each step, whether planting, watering, or cutting the stem or taking leaves.

Medicinal Uses

Prairie sage has been known to help with:

- Skin irritation and inflammation
- Sore throat and cough
- Anxiety
- Headache
- Mental clarity and wellbeing
- Immune support and sinus problems
- Stomachache

Sage tea can be made to help with any of these things. It is also a very aromatic herb, and smelling the sage can help with anxiety, mental clarity, and headaches. Prairie sage can also be used as insect repellent and deodorant.

Culinary Uses

Like culinary sage, prairie sage has a strong flavor that can be used in meat seasonings, added to soup, stew or baked in bread. Sage tea is also delicious and medicinally beneficial.

Echinacea



Cultural/Historical Significance

Echinacea, also called purple coneflower, was used by many prairie tribes, including the Lakota and Cheyenne, as a cure and treatment for all manners of ailments. The Ute people call the plant “elk root” because they noticed that wounded elk would eat the plant for medicine as well.

Cultivation and Harvest

Purple coneflowers commonly grow wild in the prairie or can easily be grown in one’s garden. They are perennials and are excellent pollinators. They naturally self seed and spread but are not hostile. Seedlings should be planted in a garden in spring or early summer spaced 1-3 feet apart. They should be watered thoroughly after planting. It can be good for the continued health and regrowth of the flowers as well as the birds and other creatures in the garden to leave the dead flowerheads on the plants until winter.

Echinacea grows wild across eastern and central North America and are very prolific in Iowa. When foraging, make sure you leave far more plants than you take. Echinacea roots can be used in many remedies, but only uproot wild plants if you must and if there are many other healthy plants around.

Medicinal Uses

Echinacea has been known to help with:

- Immune support

- Infections
- Skin diseases
- Stomach ulcers
- Herpes
- Snake bites

Echinacea can be made into a tea and consumed orally. Tinctures and infusions are also an option. For topical use, a poultice can be made from the leaves and applied directly to the wounded skin. It is good to take echinacea particularly in the winter months to prevent or lessen the effects of colds and flus.

Culinary Uses

Echinacea is much more commonly used for medicine than for cooking, but you can still add the petals to any recipe for an extra flavor and health benefits. It has a very strong, distinctive taste, so it may not be everyone's first choice for seasoning. For brewing tea, it can be mixed with other herbs or fruity flavors to make a delicious blend.

Acknowledgements

My research on healing has been led and supervised by Professor Carolyn Herbst. She has taught me so much about plants and herbalism, and her garden is a wonder to behold. My fellow researchers in our so-called “Sacred Journeys” mentor advanced project are Hikaru Aoki, Amy Brandt, and Emma Lewis. It has been incredibly healing and informational to learn from them and share connections about our areas of study. I must also give special thanks to Jonathan Andelson, recently retired anthropology professor at Grinnell College who I worked for in the Grinnell College Garden, where I learned about the beauty of gardening and the importance of creating a garden with intention and care. I thank the Gender, Women, and Sexuality Studies department and Grinnell College for funding the project.

Sources

Baker, Zak. "Plants of the Pipe: Ancient Uses of North American Wild Herbs." Bushlore Press, Bushlore Press, 23 Aug. 2024, bushlorepress.com/intheoldwayjournal/plants-of-the-pipe.

Bastian, Gemma, and Robin Buterbaugh. "Sweetgrass and White Sagebrush: Native Plants with Medicinal Uses." *SDSU Extension*, 16 July 2025, extension.sdstate.edu/sweetgrass-and-white-sagebrush-native-plants-medicinal-uses.

Bates, Caroline. "What Is Prairie Sage Good for? - Green Packs." *GreenPacks*, greenpacks.org/what-is-prairie-sage-good-for/. Accessed 31 July 2025.

Boeckmann, Catherine. "How to Grow Coneflowers (Echinacea): Complete Guide to Planting & Care." *Almanac.Com*, 12 June 2025, www.almanac.com/plant/coneflowers.

"Essential Backup Herbs to Grow for Culinary and Medicinal Use." *Live to Plant*, 22 July 2025, livetoplant.com/essential-backup-herbs-to-grow-for-culinary-and-medicinal-use/.

Gather. Directed by Sanjay Rawal, 2020. Netflix, [Home | Gather Film](#).

Hills, Jenny. "15 Medicinal Plants Native Americans Used to Cure Everything." *Healthy and Natural World*, 23 Jan. 2025, www.healthyandnaturalworld.com/medicinal-plants-native-americans-used-for-healing/.

Johnny. "How to Grow Prairie Sage: Tips and Tricks for Success." *Johnysfarm.Com*, 7 Apr. 2024, johnysfarm.com/how-to-grow-prairie-sage/.

Kimmerer, Robin Wall. *Braiding Sweetgrass*. Milkweed Editions, 2013.

Kimmerer, Robin Wall. *The Serviceberry*. Simon & Schuster, 2024.

Koncikowski, J., and N. Capozziello. "Therapeutic Gardening: A Community-Led, Community-Wide Approach." *Acta Horticulturae*, no. 1330 (November 2021): 31–40. <https://doi.org/10.17660/actahortic.2021.1330.5>.

Kondaguli, Sharat V, et al. "Gardening as a therapeutic tool for healing mental health issues among terminally ill patients: An opinion review." *International Journal of Health Sciences and Research*, vol. 13, no. 12, 5 Dec. 2023, pp. 124–131, <https://doi.org/10.52403/ijhsr.20231215>.

"Native American Coneflower Mythology." *Native American Indian Coneflower (Elk Root) Medicine, Meaning and Symbolism from the Myths of Many Tribes*, www.native-languages.org/legends-coneflower.htm. Accessed 31 July 2025.

Orr, Eric. "Stinging Nettle: Superfood." *Foraging for Wild Edibles*, www.wildedible.com/wild-food-guide/stinging-nettle. Accessed 31 July 2025.

Sainsbury, Peter. "Environment: Developing a Better Relationship with Nature." *Environment: Developing a Better Relationship with Nature*, johnmenadue.com/post/2023/05/environment-developing-a-better-relationship-with-nature/ Accessed 31 July 2025.

Shaw, Non. *The Complete Illustrated Guide to Herbs*. HarperCollinsPublishers, 2018.

"Stinging Nettle." *Native Memory Project*, 8 June 2022, nativememoryproject.org/plant/stinging-nettle/.

"Stinging Nettle - Uses, Side Effects, Stinging Nettle Allergies." *Health Jade*, 2 Aug. 2018, healthjade.com/stinging-nettle/.

Tibbits, Ashley. "Here's What Native Americans Say You Should Know before Burning Sage Again." *The Zoe Report*, 20 Feb. 2024, www.thezoereport.com/p/the-significance-of-sage-among-native-american-nations-for-healing-health-45450613.

Tulalip, Lushootseed. "Roger Fernandes How Nettles Saved the People." YouTube, YouTube, 20 Dec. 2024, www.youtube.com/watch?v=TZauNyiK5x0.

Wilbur, Matika and Lane, Temryss. "The Old Growth Table: Our Food Is Our Medicine". *All My Relations*, April 22, 2025. Podcast 00:34:28. [The Old Growth Table: Our Food Is Our Medicine - All My Relations Podcast | Listen Notes](#)