

*Echinacea purpurea* (and other species)

by Louise Dunlap

I photographed *Echinacea* in the wild at least two years before I learned about its almost miraculous properties as an herbal ally. Journeying across the U.S. by car one July, my friend and I began to wonder what the prairies looked like before the endless crop fields now marked with signs about which pesticides or herbicides make a given field "safe." Somewhere in northern Iowa we left the highway, negotiating the grid of small, straight roads to a spot we'd located in a guide-book — a prairie preserve.

**A Nebraskan entrepreneur agreed to submit to a rattlesnake bite to prove its efficacy.**

In this 10-acre lot, between industrial strength cornfields, we found the most marvelous tangle of green and flowering plants — a rich and diverse ecosystem. Who ever said the prairies were dull! I remember taking half an hour to walk twenty yards on a small path through rich clusters of wildflowers, the whole thing alive with birds and bees. In the beautiful tangle, my eye was drawn to waist-high clumps of rich green, rough-textured leaves with daisy-like flowers whose steep, dark, cone-like centers topped elegant rosy-lavendar petals. I was charmed. Our guidebook called this the Purple Coneflower.

Let the scene shift to busy, dark stressful December in urban New England. Everyone in my circle is getting this year's cold or flu, and home remedies monopolize our conversation. Neither vitamin C, nor aspirin, nor zinc are working for me, and that ominous tickle in the throat — with the stress of unfinished work — means I'm about to get really sick. A friend turns me on to his favorite remedy — a tincture

of *Echinacea*, which he's surprised I've never heard of. Every time I try this remedy, it seems to work. I am also drawn to the smell and taste of this concoction. A few drops of the tincture in hot water creates a fragrant steam that reminds me of childhood and my Southern grandmother's "croup kettle."

And the remedy is handy: I can carry a small vial with me for those awful days when work stretches into evening meetings and I need to dose myself with a dropperful on the back of the tongue as the sickness threatens again. *Echinacea* has already become an ally by the time I see its picture and recognize the delightful Purple Coneflower of the prairies.

So what is the story of this herb? When I sat down to read, I found myself going way beyond the hand-me-down speculations of the usual herb books. *Echinacea* has a fascinating history that includes considerable research. I found

two whole books about it, as well as a bibliography (which you can order by calling 1-800-373-7105). Found in nature only in North America, the nine species of *Echinacea* were used by Native Americans to heal a range of complaints including mouth sores, sore throats and syphilis. *Echinacea* had its first scientific journal article in 1847 and its first formulation into a patent medicine in the 1870s (by a Nebraskan entrepreneur who agreed to submit to a rattlesnake bite to prove its efficacy).

***Echinacea is more likely a stimulant to the immune system than a tonic — meaning it should be used in cycles.***

From 1845 to the 1930s, *Echinacea* became the most widely used herb of an intriguing school of physicians called the Eclectics, who used herbal medicine as part of their practice. During this period, *Echinacea* preparations were sold for a variety of infections including boils, flu and colds. (Perhaps my grandmother used one of them in her kettle.) Modern science then replaced the Purple Coneflower with Sulfa drugs and antibiotics, and U.S. research dropped off. In Germany, however, this American plant has become a much-prescribed remedy for everything from staph, strep and urinary tract infections to infected wounds, herpes, candidiasis, psoriasis, allergies, bites and stings and leucopenia (low leucocyte and T-cell levels, especially due to radiation or chemotherapy). Since the 1930s, we have been exporting some 50,000 pounds of the herb annually to Germany.

As herbs and skilled herbalists reentered the American scene in the '70s and '80s, *Echinacea* also reappeared on the market.

If you haven't already found your favorite form of this herb, I suggest trying a range of what's available in our store. The chemistry of *Echinacea* is ephemeral, and dried leaves and roots (for teas or infusions) lose their potency in about six months. Pills and powders have somewhat more longevity, but tinctures (the essence of the herb dissolved in alcohol) last a good two years. (If you don't like the alcohol, you can evaporate it by serving your dose in hot water.) You can also grow your own easily, but I suggest buying a



drawing by Louise Dunlap

***Echinacea purpurea***

well-rooted start from a nursery rather than growing from seed.

Several caveats about using *Echinacea*. Although researchers debate this, the herb is more likely a stimulant to the immune system than a tonic — meaning it should be used in cycles (when especially needed) with rest periods in between. If taken regularly for a long period, it may suppress rather than activate the immune system. My personal experiments bear this out, as they also do one author's suggestion to continue taking the herb for 48 hours after cold and flu symptoms disappear (otherwise they may return). While most books call *Echinacea* gentle and without side effects, some say it can precipitate a dizzy, ungrounded feeling if you're anemic.

In addition, we must think about sustainability. One book says 100,000 pounds per year, mostly gathered from the wild, are sold in the U.S. Of the nine species, several are rare and two endangered. Overharvesting is such a problem that concerned botanists say we need to begin cultivating *Echinacea* on a large scale.

Works consulted include Steven Foster, *Echinacea, Nature's Immune Enhancer* (1991) and Christopher Hobbs, *Echinacea, the Immune Herb* (1993).

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Louise Dunlap has taught writing at MIT and is working on a book called *Writing for Social Change*.

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# TALKING HERBS WITH THE ANCESTORS IN SOUTH AFRICA

by Louise Dunlap

Shortly after arriving in South Africa, I asked a friend who is working on the new government's health policy to tell me about herbs and healing in this part of the world. I was hoping to locate an African "herb of the month." Instead I found a more comprehensive focus for the column: my friend offered to take me to Soweto to meet Pinkie Sophia Rameña, a western-trained dental assistant who is also a *sangoma*, or traditional herbal healer.

Before the meeting, I had time to get a feel for the context. Although South Africa has far fewer "health food stores" than we do (and nowhere anything like our Co-op or its HABA), most pharmacies carry herbs in homeopathic, ayurvedic or aromatherapy form. In the progressive, multiracial circle of people I knew there, almost all—even medical and health professionals—used homeopathic remedies. With the prospect of a completely new health policy for the country, alternative groups now have opportunity for recognition. On one level, apartheid's shadow still looms—Black homeopaths must struggle for acceptance by white counterparts. At the same time, traditional Black herbalists and *sangomas* are organized and lobbying for official status. According to one news story, 200 organizations of traditional doctors now exist in South Africa. These organizations are part of a national discussion about how to protect their centuries-old wisdom from exploitation by "bio-prospectors," the multinational drug companies now rushing to

of the Asian vegetable market displays these herbs.

To meet the *sangoma*, my friend drives me to Soweto—an acronym for the classic apartheid South Western Township—accessible to Johannesburg only by train and expressway. We head west and south over hills, past the gold mines on which the city is built and their slag heaps—mountainous dust piles that continue to release cyanide particles into the atmosphere whenever the wind blows, which is day and night this time of year. Just when it seems we're out in the country, we come to a huge urban basin where tiny houses and huts in geometric rows stretch for miles out into a sea of smoke from coal and wood fires—the only affordable means of heating and cooking. Ironically the only verticals in the landscape are two enormous concrete towers of a power plant, also spewing smoke. Sowetans often cannot afford the electricity that worsens the air in their own township.

Pinkie meets us after work outside Baragwanath Hospital, the largest in Africa. In her crisp white blouse emblazoned with the credentials of Western medicine, she doesn't look like the fur-decked traditional healers I've seen on the streets, though she does wear an unusual red and white beaded bracelet. Our first stop is her teacher's brick house on a quiet, well-kept street. As we walk to the back, Pinkie rushes ahead of us to wrap herself in a distinctive red, black and white cloth skirt and joining three other women in a brief round of dancing and clapping on grass

piles on the floor. As a *sangoma* becomes expert, he or she builds up a collection of these herbs from personal experience gathering them in the veld. To some extent a teacher guides *sangomas-in-training* to the herbs, but for the most part, guidance comes from the voices of the ancestors, heard from deep within one's own being. As part of her training, Pinkie was taken far out into the veld and left to discover herbs for herself. At times, healers also trade for the

much personal pain. After qualifying as a dental assistant, Pinkie was quite happy with her home and professional life. She was not a "believer" at the time, but in 1993 became very ill. At the hospital they diagnosed a mysterious spinal affliction and put her in bed, where she spent four months sleeping day and night. At some point during this long period, Pinkie had a dream. Her ancestors spoke to her, but she ignored them. Again she dreamed of them, and again



This drawing was originally published in the South African journal *Agenda: Empowering Women for Gender Equity*. Artist unknown.

herbs, but then again, they must consult their ancestors for guidance as to whether the material they are being offered has potency.

At the present time, herbs gathered far away in Malawi, Mozambique, and Zambia have greater power than those found locally. Pinkie says this is "because so much has changed here." In heavily settled areas of South Africa, and particularly around the viciously polluted big industrial cities, sensitives can feel what has happened to plant life in the veld.

I ask if there is any "geranium," on these shelves. This plant, whose oil I find so helpful for troubled feelings, is native to South Africa and I've seen it growing in the wild. She says maybe it's here "but we don't know the English names." Yet, as a botanist, Pinkie is multilingual. Of South Africa's eleven official languages, all nine indigenous ones are spoken in Soweto. She learned plant names in Shanaang and Tswana. When her ancestors speak to her about the plants, it is in Sotho, and when she goes to Natal to acquire them from traders, she uses their Zulu names.

How does one become a *sangoma*? Always through the guidance of the ancestors, but often—as in Pinkie's case—with

ignored the dream. After a while a sister-in law said she "must do something" about a dream like that. In the next dream, a mysterious old woman told Pinkie, "If you want to be healed, you must do what we tell you to do." At this point, Pinkie was worried enough to describe the dream-woman to another relative who recognized her as a great-grandmother and advised Pinkie to wait. Sure enough, the great grandmother challenged her soon in another dream: "Are you going to do what we say?"

"Yes!" Pinkie finally answered, and, as she did, she found herself standing up for the first time in months. "It is moving! I can't believe it!" she shouted to her husband. But still she didn't know how to follow her ancestors' wishes until she took an herb which brought them again. This time they showed her a number which turned out (after much sleuthing) to be the street address of the man who became her teacher in a distant neighborhood of Soweto. "I've been waiting for you!" said the teacher when Pinkie finally located him. The ancestors—Pinkie's great grandfather and great grandmother had both been *sangomas*—had contacted him as well.

continued on page 10

## EXCUSES FOR NOT ATTENDING THE ANNUAL MEETING

# #4

### MY CAR BROKE DOWN

Hah! See excuse #9!

South Africa to discover profitable new plant cures. At the same time, traditional healers wish to share remedies that may relieve suffering worldwide.

Urbanized Africans still maintain ties with the plant life of rural areas. Traditional city markets feature piles of green leaves, shaved bark, odd bones, twisted brownish roots, and bottles of cloudy decoctions—generally called *impepi* in Zulu—that traders bring in from the countryside. In Durban, for instance, an entire section of unfinished freeway at the fringe

of mats. Afterward she shows us her teacher's medicine room. A pile of bones with a few dominoes lies in the center, to be thrown to determine what the spirit says. Red and white beadwork and other regalia hang on the walls. We take our seats on skins as Pinkie explains the herbs and her training as a *sangoma*.

On a wall of shelves in front of us sit hundreds of labeled bottles—various sizes and shapes holding powders of many colors. Roots and branches of plant material that has not yet been pounded into powder lie in

## SOUTH AFRICA *continued from page 5*

Most trainings last two or three years, but Pinkie's took only six months because she was so adept at listening to her ancestors and learning the herbs from them. Pinkie now has a deep calling to combine the power of Western and traditional healing modes. With her hospital and herbal contacts she is especially well situated to do this work. She is full of stories about times she's seen the ancestors' suggestions helping with difficult medical problems like AIDS.

Pinkie's words are so absorbing we barely notice that the light is fading outside as we greet her teacher and head off through the smoky sunset to her own house. Here, behind a white picket fence, is a pleasant home she shares with her husband and children (who have posters of Chris Hani on the walls above bunk beds). Behind the house is her consulting room, with a small waiting area outside and her own drums and brass implements for pounding newly dried herbs into powders for storage. It is a lovely place, a place I would come to be healed, and here I give Pinkie a gift from North America—a pair of earrings made by Mic-Mac people in New Brunswick, strings

of red trade beads on which hang rich kernels of blue Indian corn. She is touched by the correspondences—the corn, sacred grain of the Americas, brought here early on by European traders and now the staple “mealies” of Africans. The red beads are much like those worn by *sangomas*. I tell her how native people at home are seeking to restore their own ceremonies and even to heal the devastation of the white man's industrialism. I say my own “voices” led me to bring these earrings to Africa, without even knowing I would meet her. She responds with enthusiasm: she thinks her ancestors will appreciate the gift. When she next talks with them, she will see how they react.

In Pinkie's own herb collection, not as extensive as her teacher's but stored in neat-looking white plastic bottles and recycled film cannisters, I spot a green powder called “Fembo” and I ask about it. “That,” she tells us, “is the herb we give when it is important to hear the ancestors.” I am wondering whether I should have brought some home with me.

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HARVEST TIMES



# HERB OF THE MONTH

by Louise Dunlap



## STINGING NETTLES (URTICA DIOICA)

When the first springlike days hit, most of us city folks head to the river, the urban parks, or maybe the countryside—to walk, to reengage with the greening earth. This is when early, leafy clumps of Stinging Nettles may catch the eye. These are plants I learned as a child never to touch. Where the crinkled borders of their leaves graze the flesh for the barest instant, an irritation arises—somewhere between itch and burn—that can linger for a full day. So how does this plant come to be the herb of the month?

By now I've learned there's much more to nettles than the sting. They're a gourmet delicacy and a vital herbal ally. They taste so good and have so many important properties that I keep dried nettles on the shelf year-round. But finding, harvesting, and serving the fresh ones that grow wild is a real thrill.

Nine of the world's 30 species of nettles grow in the U.S., but the one you're most likely to find on the east coast is *Urtica dioica*, the common stinging nettle, which came to this continent as a weed with European settlers and their livestock. I have found it in vacant urban lots, at streamsides in farm country, and along the hiking trails that border the Potomac River in suburban Washington D.C. Like dandelions—another hardy and edible colonizer—nettles are among the first to show green in early spring. At this point, they are low clumps of spinach-colored, pointed leaves with sawtooth margins, always in pairs along a squarish stem. Later—during summer—they'll grow to three or four feet tall with greenish tassels of "flowers" festooning out from the base of the upper leaf-pairs. (These are the female flowers; the male ones grow near the top of the stem or on different plants and are even less conspicuous.) Again like

dandelions, the summer growth is not considered edible. If you're thinking of gathering, do it in the first two months of spring, before these flowers form.

If you look carefully, you can see that the undersides of the leaves and the stem carry delicate pointy hairs. These are filled with formic acid which causes the stinging when they penetrate our skin. Expert gatherers claim that



NETTLES IN SPRING

only accidental or clumsy contact invites the sting. If you approach nettles mindfully, assertively squeezing the little hairs into the firm stem, the acid cannot do its thing. I have tried mindful harvesting with some success, but I've also protected myself with surgical gloves and even plastic bags for my hands or have taken long-handled scissors out to snip the leafy green shoots into a bag. The riskiest part is washing them and breaking the tougher stems off back home in your kitchen when you're getting ready to cook them. If you do get "stung," you can try applying the juice of the crushed leaves and stems, which is supposed to counteract the pain.

Why bother to harvest them, you ask? Well number one, the adventure of it. There is fairy-

tale heroism in turning this demon plant into a friend. Number two, nettles are an absolutely delicious green vegetable just crammed with minerals like calcium (about 700 milligrams per ounce—nearly half our daily requirement). Other nutrients are iron, magnesium, vitamins A, B, C, and even D. The first time I tried nettles, after finding a clump outside my back door back in the 70s, I was sure I had found my "soul" food (as in "soulmate"). The taste of the plain greens and tender stems, steamed, was hearty and deeply appealing. Since then I've gotten attached to one of Susun Weed's recipes: steam two cups of fresh nettles along with two cups of chopped collards, kale, or cabbage and two cups of violet leaves (another very nourishing early green potherb) and sprinkle with lemon and tamari. Also good with garlic and warm olive oil. If you need a number three reason, you will astound family and friends by serving this food. (I have not seen it in even the most pretentious gourmet grocery.) Any teasing they may offer (if they are like my extended family) will melt in their mouths when they experience how truly delicious fresh nettles are.

It always appeals to me to use healing herbs as food. Susun Weed (*Wise Woman Herbal*) uses nettles either as cooked greens or as an infusion (pour one quart



NETTLES IN SUMMER

of boiling water over one ounce of dried herb and steep four hours for the highest mineral content) to stimulate the kidneys and adrenals and for digestive

problems, to strengthen the respiratory system (and in tincture form for relief of acute asthma). Nettle leaves, she says, can nourish the skin and hair, stop bleeding, and help during pregnancy, lactation, and menopause. In treating wounds, they are also styptic and antiseptic. Perhaps most interesting, Weed uses nettles to help strengthen people suffering from chronic conditions like allergies, repeated colds, infertility, and inexplicable exhaustion—because she says it stimulates change and energy in one's entire system.

Perhaps this is not far from a use of nettles attributed to Native Americans and called (by Europeans) "urtication." Apparently indigenous Americans treated aches and pains by lashing the surrounding skin with nettle stalks. The stinging formed a counter-irritant. Nettle is also used in many homeopathic remedies, and the fibers of the plant can be woven into a fabric like linen or the now-fashionable hemp.

I would like to know how many of my readers go out foraging for nettles this spring. Do you agree with me about their value? How well have you avoided the stings? And in case you want some of the benefits without the risk, I can also recommend the dried form of nettles available among the bulk spices at Harvest. They are always delicious and nourishing by the handful in soup stocks and in the following wonderful, calcium-rich condiment (also thanks to Susun Weed). Toast one cup sesame seeds in a skillet, stirring constantly, until they begin to brown and smell good. Then grind them with 1/4 cup dried nettle leaves and a big pinch of salt in either a blender or a mortar and pestle. Sprinkle onto grains, vegetables, soups, or salads. You will find it disappears very quickly.

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Louise Dunlap teaches yoga and writing and is working on a book called *Writing for Social Change*.

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