

## Finding an Herbalist

Every day new headlines appear trumpeting the dangers of herbs or telling us that some authority is agitating to ban a particular herb. What is equally obvious is that Americans are taking more herbs in greater quantities than ever before, and in a bewildering number of forms and combinations. Most rely on health food stores or popular books as a source of their information, but an increasing number of individuals are looking for expert advice. Where are they to turn? Most doctors are afraid of herbs, or if neutral, admit to knowing a little about them. Practitioners of Chinese Medicine are usually trained in the use of Chinese herbs and similarly, Ayurvedic practitioners are trained in the use of Indian and Asian herbs. If one is lucky, one can find the rare soul trained in England or Europe; but clinical training in America is hard to come by. A handful of schools offer full clinical programs. So how is one to find an herbalist, and what sort of education should one expect?

Here are some options:

**Chiropractors/Doctors:** Most chiropractors have little or no training in herbalism, so if they use or recommend herbs it is best to inquire about their training. If they have only had one course while in training or as a post graduate add-on it is best to assume they are not expert. Likewise with Doctors, a medical license does not qualify them to speak authoritatively about herbs. An exception would be an Anthroposophical Doctor, these MDs receive extensive training in the European phytotherapy system. The local Anthroposophical society can help you find a doctor. Two well know local physicians are Drs Ross and Andrea Rentea.

**Oriental Medicine Practitioners:** They will usually use Chinese herbs and should be board certified by the National Certification Commission for Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine (NCCAOM). This indicates that they are fully trained in the use of Chinese herbs and that they have passed a national exam to determine their competence.

**Western Herbalist:** These are practitioners who have studied western healing herbs. One excellent criterion would be whether or not they are professional members of The American Herbalist Guild. This would indicate that they have passed a strict peer review board and that they have substantial clinical experience. In the next year the AHG and Botanical Medicine Association will jointly sponsor the first national board certification in Clinical Herbalism. This should become the gold standard for clinical herbalists, naturopathic physicians, nutritionist and medical personnel who practice herbal medicine. It would indicate a high level of competence both in the use of herbs, and in their contradictions or possible interactions with standard drugs. In order to take the exam, applicants would have to demonstrate formal training that includes the study of mainstream medical sciences such as biology, chemistry, pathology, anatomy and physiology.

Because of the lack of formal educational training until quite recently, some very good herbalist are self taught, or they have apprenticed with a master herbalist. If your prospective herbalist cannot demonstrate formal training, inquire about how they have learned. Did they study with a number of teachers, and have they studied western science at all? Would they be competent to have a conversation with your physician? Are they certified by anyone, and if so, by whom? Was the certificate for a weekend course, a one week course, or a program over several years? Was their

program accredited or approved by their state board of education? A number of good programs currently exist such as the 3 Year Certificate in Medicinal Herbalism of the Chicago College of Healing Arts (which is clinically based), the Rocky Mountain College program in Medicinal Herbalism, the Bastyr University B.S. Completion Program in Herbalism and the Tai Sophia MA in Herbalism. All of these programs are approved by their state Board of Education and have a variety of focuses. The Bastyr Program, for example, is research oriented rather than clinical. The Chicago College program is fully clinical, and includes supervised practicum. The Rocky Mountain College program includes some clinical supervision, but does not provide enough hours to qualify as a full training program. Be sure to inquire if the focus of your herbalist's program was clinical or research based, and whether or not it included supervised clinical practice.

**Naturopathic Physician:** Some Naturopathic physicians have substantial training in herbal medicine, others do not. In addition, some Naturopaths have attended four year accredited programs that are residential, while others have taken correspondence courses. Be sure you know which you are seeing, and what their herbal training has been. It is not a safe assumption that they have much training in herbs.

**Nutritionist:** Most nutritionist are interested in herbs, but their training is in supplements. Unless they have had supplemental training they are not likely to be more knowledgeable than your average health food store employee.

**Shamans / Native Healers:** Individuals who claim training in traditional systems are hard to judge. Generally they are no the real thing if they have not spent a fair amount of time studying with someone considered a master in their tradition. Native/ethnic traditions are often very rich and complex, but they are usually learned via the apprenticeship model, which is not a speedy one. So if the training of your Shaman or apprentice consist of spending a summer with someone, they are not qualified to practice herbal medicine.

I am particularly suspicious of practitioners who choose herbs by some system such as applied kinesiology, pendulums, channeling or any system which substitutes psychic or intuitive operations for actual knowledge. If one possesses knowledge and uses intuition to fine-tune choices, that is a different thing from not possessing the knowledge at all, and trusting your "guides" to choose from a list of herbs, or your patient's body to pick the herb by signaling via muscle testing. On the other hand, someone who has spent a lifetime learning from their Cherokee grandmother is most likely a good prospect.

Correspondence courses, while useful for learning some aspects of Herbalism, are not a substitute for on-site clinical training. The better ones, such as Michael and Leslie Tierra's, also offer an opportunity for limited internships, but your prospective practitioner should have some other clinical training. Some good resources for finding practitioners are: The American Herbalist Guild Practitioner Guide at [www.americanherbalist.com](http://www.americanherbalist.com), and the NCCAOM national directory at [www.nccaom.org](http://www.nccaom.org). These organizations apply comprehensive standards and utilize test and or peer review. The AHG is particularly good in that they provide a route for the genuinely gifted self-taught and native trained healers to get validation from a credible source. Some states may provide registration or licensure, but they are rare. However if your state does provide either, your practitioner should possess it.