

SageWoman

Celebrating the Goddess in Every Woman

Herbal Goddess

**Celtic Traditional Plant Magic · A Sisterhood of Healers
Meet the Nordic Healing Goddess "Eir" · A Passion for Plants
Seduced by the Greenwood · Moon-Centered Herbalism**

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A Sisterhood of Healers

The Magical World of Women's Herbal Conferences

Whether a Hispanic curandera, Appalachian root doctor, a scientifically trained herbal clinician or an informal community provider, the role of the plant healer has been the standard for accessible and effective health care since the earliest of times. Women have, for millennia, made up the majority of herbalists in the world, and we continue to be so today.

Never has this role been more important than today in a society filled with technology-based medicine. Through the empowering study of herbalism, we can be a part of our own family's or neighborhood's health, as well as the ongoing healing of humanity's relationship with the living Earth. This vital work requires only the gifts of natural plants, our personal healing abilities, and the wisdom of herbal healing.

DISCOVERING THE HERBAL WORLD

One of the most delightful ways to learn a great deal about herbalism from a number of different teachers is to attend herbal education events. Whether billed as “conferences,” “symposiums,” or simply “gatherings,” such events are chances for us to gather together with other like-minded and like-hearted people, unite with old friends and allies, engage in ceremony, and build real and lasting community. From their joyful opening ceremonies to bittersweet partings, the experience is one of affirmation, stimulation, and celebration. Our participation in such events can jumpstart or deepen a lifelong herbal practice, and the relationships developed there continue to grow long after. The “Godmother of American Herbalism,” Rosemary Gladstar, recently wrote about her conference experiences.

Every women's herbal conference I have ever attended share the same or similar core values. It is a time to gather, honor our ancient herbal and healing heritage, to relax, play and empower ourselves. It is a special time of renewal and restoration. Of learning and sharing.

So what inspired her to host the very first women's herbal conference in 1978?

I think it must have been a message straight from the Goddess herself. You must remember this was in the seventies, the women's movement was in full swing, and we were hungry for change! We were wild women! We sang, we drummed, we danced round the fire, we prayed, and we drummed some more. Between all of this, we studied, shared and learned about herbs together. Herbs were the unifying force that wove us together into a rich and colorful tapestry.”

Rosemary still helps to organize the **New England Women's Herbal Conference (womensherbalconference.com)**. Originally founded by Gail Ulrich, the event serves as a fund raiser for both the United Plant Savers plant conservation organization and the Gail Ulrich Herbal Education Memorial Fund. It's held every August in New Hampshire. Rosemary describes this

venerable event. *The WHC celebrated its 25th anniversary recently, so we've watched a generation of girls grow up there. Women who first came as babies are now young mothers at the event. Their mothers are the elders. It's not uncommon to have several generations of one family in attendance. It's a place where we come to ignite and spark one another, and to create healing not only on a personal level, but planetary as well.*

The venerable **Northern California Women's Herbal Symposium** began in 1991, inspired by the Women Herbalist's conference in southern Oregon. This event is unique in that it has two or three sessions every year, in the late spring and early autumn. Held at Black Oak Ranch in Mendocino County, at a beautiful site that is home to Wavy Gravy's circus and performing arts children's Camp Winnarainbow, organizers describe it this way.

Women from many backgrounds of life gather together in great celebration for four full days of inspiring Herbal and Sustainability classes, gourmet vegetarian meals, talented campfire capers, amazing handcrafted marketplace items, Rites-of-Passage Ceremonies, powerful campfire drumming and dancing, refreshing swimming hole dips, and conversations with remarkable and inspiring women!

During the days we are a gathering of women and children studying, teaching, learning, networking, and talking about plants, healing, and healthy lifestyles. When the sun goes down, we become a playful and celebratory group, chatting, chanting, singing, showing off our talents, drumming and dancing into the night around the campfire.

Corinna Wood is the founder and organizer of the **Southeast Wise Women Herbal Conference** (www.sewisewoman.com.) Founded in 2005, the conference is attended by as many as a thousand women every October in the lovely Blue Ridge Mountains of North Carolina. Its mission is to provide what Corinna calls “a strong, inspirational container for women to learn, celebrate, and connect.” She recalls the very first weekend of the first conference.

It became clear what those women were experiencing was amazing, a special opportunity for herbal education but also something that went far beyond herbs. It was about loving ourselves, nourishing ourselves with food, embracing our bodies and our sexuality. We were offering tools for healthy and joyful living in times that often felt challenging to women. Susan Weed gathered the attendees together and had them arrange themselves by age order, hand-in-hand, youngest to oldest. Gesturing to the empty space beyond the octogenarian grandmother at one end she said, 'there are all the women that ever were,' and to the space beyond the pre-pubescent girl at the other end, 'there are all the women who are yet to come. You are part of an incredible continuum – this is an unbroken spiral of women.' Each year, it helps grow the web of wise women, and the women grow with it.

Another beloved event is the yearly **MidAtlantic Women's Herbal Conference** (reearthfarm.org/whc). While only in its fourth year, it has already attracted an enthused cadre of teachers and attendees. Inspired by the WHC, it aims to create a community of women in the MidAtlantic region who can teach, heal, and support each other in their herbal journeys. It's held out of the city, every October on a very pretty 100 acre Pennsylvania farm.

MidAtlantic's founder Kate Gilday describes the vision of this conference.

Although modeled after its New England mother, our conference took on its own spirit from the beginning in 2011. The biggest difference I noticed was the number of attendees who knew very little about herbal medicine, but who were eager to learn, not as practitioners, but as women who want to live a healthier life style that is kind to the earth. This presented a bit of a challenge for the teachers who were used to speaking to more advanced crowds, but offered a delightful reward in knowing that so many women walked away with new knowledge and inspiration about using plants as medicine.

With the support of a community of women, Linda Conroy launched **The Midwest Women's Herbal Conference** in 2012. The first conference was held at The Christine Center in Willard, WI. In order to accommodate the overwhelming interest, the conference expanded in 2013 and relocated to a camp situated on 380 acres and beautiful Lake Beulah in Mukwonago, WI. We've heard nothing but great reports from those who attended. Kristine Brown and Rebekah Dawn describe what's special about this event, now held in early June.

Every person we talked to at the MWHC was so energetic and involved in something amazing, each of these women blooming where they are planted, many of us without a large peer or support group in our sometimes conservative midwestern communities, but here we found a tribe and proof that though the path may be lonely at home we are part of a great family working to enliven the folk medicine tradition.

The sense of joy that attendees feel is shared by the hard working organizers. Kate Gilday beautifully describes the experience of putting on an herbal event as *filling my heart to overflowing, witnessing the excitement between the women, seeing friendships born, listening to the teachers, seeing kids joyfully experiencing nature, and knowing the plants at our feet will be used to bring new healing throughout the year... these things fill me with the deep satisfaction of life purpose in action, the most healing balm I know.*

HerbFolk (a co-gender conference) founder Kiva Rose speaks to the way that these events affect the larger folk herbal movement and our society in general. She remarks that, as folks heading home from the gathering take their inspiration,

information, friendships and alliances, ideas and dreams back with them, starting businesses, volunteering for free clinics in and outside of the U.S., teaching herbalism to their kids, organizing to confront oncoming regs and restrictions, planting little gardens, offering plant walks in their town and cities, living their lives with more awareness and gusto and delight, believing in themselves and trusting their calling and fulfilling their potential.

No matter which events we attend, we find much to learn, and discover many new options to decide on. As Rosemary says, *every herbal conference hosted in this country has played a big part growing our herbal communities and in creating respect and honor for the various green paths we choose to follow... and the footsteps we follow in.*

Events always come to an end, but the good work, the friendships, the alliances and the celebration go on. We're shown many paths of healing. Now it is for us women to choose our personal plant healer's path, and then joyously walk it! ☺



LOBA is a supporting partner and columnist in *Plant Healer*, an enchanting magazine for herbal practitioners and plant lovers of all kinds: www.PlantHealerMagazine.com. She very happily served as a columnist for *SageWoman Magazine* for many years, produced the *Wild Women's Gathering*, and is finally getting close to completing what will be a truly unique cookbook. She also hosts folks for on-site work trades at her magical *Anima Sanctuary* home in S.W. New Mexico, teaching wilderness homestead skills: www.AnimaCenter.org. Loba's writing can often be found on the *Anima Blog* www.AnimaCenter.org/blog and she can be reached at: mail@animacenter.org