

## **Bigfork herbalist teaches benefits of medicinal plants**

*by Sally Finneran (copied from Bigfork Eagle), posted June 5, 2014*

Spring is here, plants are waking up and Swan Valley Herbs is replenishing stocks.

With the sunshine and blossoming plants, Swan Valley Herbs owner Tom Tracey and staff gather wild plants, herbs and fungi needed for medicinal purposes.

Herb enthusiasts gather along the Swan River, near Polson and Bigfork, harvesting wild medicinal herbs instead of buying them. "Some of the companies, they send you stuff and it's garbage," Tracey said. "You can walk and within five minutes get almost everything."

Tracey and his team gather enough herbs to last them through the winter.

"We're wildcrafting as much as we can," he said. "Plants come up and they go, you've got to be right on it."

Tracey leads an annual herb walk to educate residents on the value of the plants growing around Bigfork.

Friday he led about 20 people on a quick stroll around Wayfarers State Park pointing out plants and explaining how they can be used.

Just out of the parking lot Tracey asked if everyone is familiar with dandelions. Dandelions are more than a common weed. They are edible, a diuretic and good for your liver, he said.

He explained you can also make a good flower essence out of dandelions in a similar fashion to making sun tea.

"You're working with states of consciousness with flower essence," he said.

Along the walk Tracey pointed out ocean spray, an anti-viral clematis that helps with headaches by opening blood vessels in the head. He also showed where to find berries on a hawthorn tree that are good for the heart. He mentioned the antiseptic power of a birch tree, and anti-inflammatory properties of willow. Needles from evergreen trees such as pines and junipers are high in antioxidant, elderberry is good for the heart and lungs and gromwell root can help with hot flashes.

"I remember my daughter rattling me out," he said. "' Mom! Dad is making tea out of the Christmas tree!'"

Tracey drew particular attention to lomatium, or desert parsley which is good against viruses and upper respiratory problems. He said during a flu epidemic in 1917 people who took desert parsley survived.

"I wanted to show people desert parsley, because that will save you," he said. "Once you see it you never forget it. This place is loaded with it."

Oregon grape, he said, "is just plain good for everything." In addition to the berries making a good jam, the root contains berberine, a yellow substance that is active against infections.

Montana has especially good arnica, which is used on bruises and for trauma.

"Montana is famous for its arnica," he said. "It's got the best arnica in the world."

## Spring Herb Walk with Tom Tracey, Swan Valley Herbs, May 23, 2014

Columbia Falls herbalist Veronica Honthaas attended Tracey's herb walk for the first time.

"I've been trying to get to one of Tom's herb walks for years," she said.

Unlike Tracey, who owns Swan Valley Herbs in downtown Bigfork, Honthaas doesn't have a shop, but serves customers out of her home. She grows plants at her house, as well as collects. She uses many of the same herbs as Tracey, and agrees with him that it's important to use local plants. And if you don't go and gather them yourself, you should be sure to purchase from someone who does.

"I can't stress the importance of quality enough," she said. "Everything you need is right out here."

But, she warns, one herb walk doesn't make you an expert.

"I think people need to realize you don't just go for an herb walk and think you're fluent," she said.

Tracey thinks it's good to learn some local plants and what they can do for you. People aren't aware of their health and the things around them they can use to stay healthy, he said.

Once a one-man operation, Swan Valley Herbs now has trainees and a staff, and Tracey focuses largely on herbal consulting.

Tracey discovered medicinal uses for herbs after being injured in the military.

He's been working as an herbalist for over 30 years. In the last five years he's seen business pick up and more people turning to natural remedies.

"Western medicine is good, but it's gone too far," he said.