

# LIFESTYLES

## Workshops introduce friendly wild plants

*Pine, we learn, is also good for cleaning wounds, and pine and spruce pitch will seal a wound after cleaning.*

By Patricia Robertson  
News Correspondent

Fifteen of us — 14 women and one man, plus two children — are gathered on a cool sunny morning around a campfire off the Carcross Road, rubbing our hands with wild mint.

We're here on a day-long workshop to learn all we can about local plants and their medicinal uses from Yukon herbalist and aromatherapist Bev Gray, who hosts these events on her beautiful 2.4-hectare property overlooking Rat Lake.

The participants range from a Yukoner who's lived here for 38 years to a woman who moved here two months ago, and include a school secretary, a federal government worker, two of Gray's neighbors and a family group from Haines, Alaska, who produce birch tree syrup.

We've all given different reasons for taking the workshop — Catherine wants to add to her already extensive knowledge about plants, Mandy wants to learn how to make salves and tinctures, Evan wants to find out what to snack on in the bush.

The mint is a grounding exercise that will help us to be in the present, explains Gray, noting that mint is a stimulant as well as good for digestion.

We breathe deeply from our mint-covered hands and then follow Gray along a trail that skirts a low hill, the land falling away from us to the unseen creek below.

We're to spend the morning visiting several mini-ecosystems on the property, gathering different plants in each for use in a hands-on medicine making session in Gray's studio that afternoon.

We stop by a patch of wormwood, also known as wild sage, and Gray explains that it can be made into a herbal infusion and used to expel worms from the body (hence the name) as well as for giardia.

It can also be used as a smudge and helps dry up breast milk when a mother has finished breastfeeding.

"It's important to show respect to plant communities by offering something in return," explains Gray before we fan out

to do our harvesting.

"I always acknowledge and respect the plants, because they're giving us something."

She sometimes uses the traditional First Nations gift of tobacco, but she often uses a strand of her hair instead, demonstrating by winding a strand among a clump of

tains a chemical which changes the composition of urine — as well as toadflax, soapberry and twinflower.

By now we're moving uphill, onto a rocky outcrop where we have a clear view of the Grayridge Mountains and Minto Mountain, with the highway and Rat Lake far below.

and offers us samples.

"Chickweed juice enhances our digestive juices," she tells us, though I decide it's an acquired taste.

Gray's studio is a kind of modern apothecary's shop, filled with plants hanging from drying racks, large bamboo screens for mixing, and jars and

beard, a lichen with anti-fungal and anti-bacterial properties.

Gray adds olive oil this time — different carrier oils pull different medicinal properties out of the plant, she explains — and places the mixture over a low heat for 20 minutes before straining it through cheese-cloth.

Finally she places two cakes of beeswax in the top of a double boiler and adds the strained oil, with a little Vitamin E to help its preservative qualities.

We each fill up small jars of salve and bottles of the now-strained healing oil to take home with us, adding our own choice of essential oils and carefully labelling and dating the contents.

Gray finishes up the workshop by showing us how to make a tincture, a concentrated plant solution, by emptying a full 26-ouncer of vodka into a large jar half-filled with yarrow.

Alcohol, like oil, is a solvent for drawing different properties out of the plant, she explains.

"The people at the liquor store must think I'm an alcoholic, because I go in and buy several bottles at a time," she laughs.

Once the tincture is ready — at least a month, says Gray — it can be used to treat colds by drinking 10 drops in a cup of water three times a day.

Gray's passion for and knowledge of Yukon plants is evident both in her generous sharing of information and in her scrupulous approach to plant harvesting and preparation.

"I can't wait to learn more, I love it," says participant Catherine Forest, a newcomer to the Yukon who's already taken two of Gray's workshops.

She'd like to pursue herbalism as a career and has successfully used plant medicines to help control panic attacks.

Mandy Ramsey, who wanted to learn how to make salves and tinctures as well as how to use the plants that grow around her in Haines, is also delighted with the workshop.

"I learned all those things and Bev has inspired me," she says.

For more information about Gray's August workshops, contact Aroma Borealis in Whitehorse at 867-667-4372.



NEWS photo by Derek Crowe

**NATURAL WORLD...** Herbalist Bev Gray offers workshops on local plants and their medicinal uses.

wormwood.

We offer our own gifts before we do our gathering and then move on to a patch of yarrow, a styptic or blood-stanching plant that Gray calls "great bush medicine."

She demonstrates how to make a spit poultice by breaking off a small piece, chewing it, and placing it on her arm.

Like wormwood, yarrow can be made into a herbal infusion, then used as a febrifuge or fever-reducing plant.

Goldenrod, our next plant, one with many varieties in the Yukon, is used to treat kidney stones and other kidney problems.

"The myth about goldenrod is that it causes hay fever, but the pollen is too heavy to be airborne," says Gray.

We go on to identify bearberry — used for kidney and bladder infections because it con-

Here Gray demonstrates how to harvest the inner bark of spruce and pine — good survival food, she points out — passing small pieces around for us to chew on as we sit on the rocks among lichen and saxifrage.

Pine, we learn, is also good for cleaning wounds, and pine and spruce pitch will seal a wound after cleaning.

By now we're ready for the delicious lunch awaiting us back at Gray's geodesic dome house: a wildweed soup made of chickweed, pigweed, stinging nettle, and spinach, a salad of wild greens and flower petals, and a spinach pie with wild plants substituting for the spinach, followed by dandelion root coffee and blueberry muffins.

As a last step before we head off to her studio for the medicine making, Gray blends chickweed and water in a blender

bottles of various sizes containing tinctures and essential oils.

We're to begin by making a healing body oil, tearing up handfuls of chickweed and mint and adding pine needles, juniper needles and berries, and the inner bark of pine and spruce.

Gray adds sweet almond oil to the prepared plants as a solvent to remove certain medicinal properties, and lets the mixture slowly infuse over low heat.

While the plants are seeping into the oil, Gray shows us how to make salve — "easier to travel with because you avoid spillage," she says — for the healing of cuts, insect bites and minor burns.

This one consists of rose petals, goldenrod, yarrow, wormwood, plantain, shepherd's purse, calendula and pineapple weed, plus a small amount of usnea, or old man's