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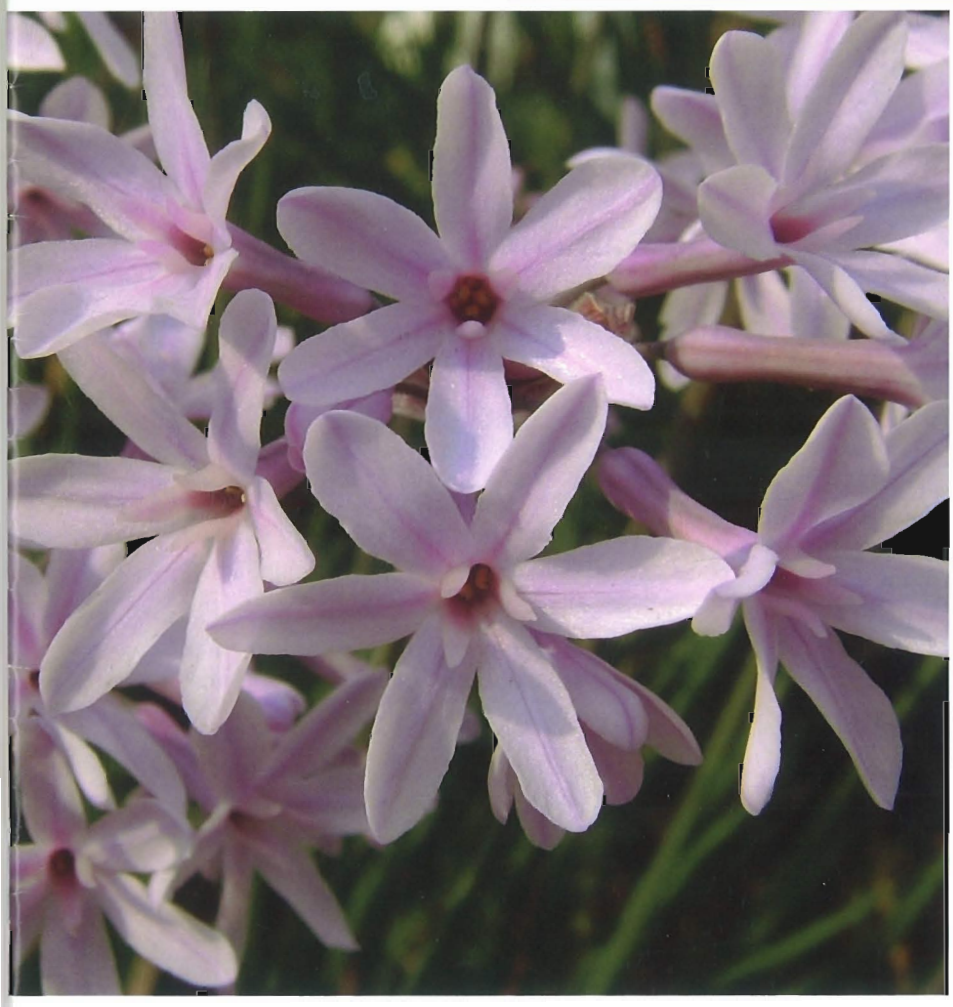

TULBAGHIA • CANADIAN FOLKLORE •
PROVENCAL LAVENDER

WEST SIDE STORY

Gareth Evans discovered more questions than answers on his travels in British Columbia, where the Haida Nation guard their plant lore carefully and never underestimate the influence of human interaction in folk medicine

It's possible that you were taught as I was that scientific discovery followed a sequence of steps down the ages and 'the truth' about the world gradually became evident. In consequence we would control the natural world more completely.

When scientists began focusing on the native use of plants as potential sources of new medicines, we admired the ethnobotanist who learnt the native language and became the 'shaman's apprentice' It was also often taken for granted that traditional healers would give up their knowledge for the common aim of healing.

But why should we have assumed that anyone would always readily give up knowledge that had value in the confines of their own society? And while the ethnobotanist could be said to be in search of pure knowledge, the resulting work would be put into the scientific domain and exploited commercially.

On a recent visit to British Columbia such questions were brought to mind. There are many unresolved issues with the position of the native peoples or First Nations of Canada but in British Columbia there has been an active study into the varied cultures. At the University of British Columbia Nancy Turner has spent much of her academic career researching the culinary, medicinal and technological use of plants by the native cultures of the Canadian west coast. Her starting point was how the Haida, who live on the Queen Charlotte Islands off the Canadian north-west coast, the Salish and Okanagan peoples used herbs and has now broadened to include the cultural and spiritual contexts of plant use.

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This approach brings to the fore the question of how we can comprehend a spiritual relationship with the natural world that is so different from our own. For example, a plant or plant material will often feature in folk stories or narratives that reveal a many-sided and sacred appreciation of the natural world. Because of this, asking 'how do you people use this plant?' is too simplistic a question.

For instance, some plant preparations are made by only one Haida family and their medicinal use is considered to be private information. For native people the years of living side by side sharing a rich cultural history lead to intimate knowledge of each other. This plays an important role

in the decisions made about herbal medicines and patient compatibility, dosage and combinations of herbs. Such knowledge runs the risk of being obscured in the recording and transmission of how, when and why traditional medicines are used.

For example, living on and by the ocean the Haida's personal accounts of the cycle of searching, harvesting and preservation of berries, their fascinating stories of the collection and eating of herring roe during its spawning season, may have grown out of a response to biorhythms that have become sequenced with different seasons. This interdependence is bound to affect the decisions made when formulating herbal medicines.

Ancient forests

Owing to the buffering effect of the Pacific, the north-west coast of Canada has a more uniform climate than one would imagine, stretching as it does from the 49th parallel to Alaska. From Vancouver Island, where I stayed, to Haida Gwaii further north there are largely the same types of vegetation. The whole coastal strip is known for the temperate rainforests made up of conifers rich with lichens, mosses and ferns. The more ancient forests, long untouched by fires or storms, have gigantic Douglas firs more than 1000 years old.

The understorey is weakly lit and plants such as the devil's club (*Oplopanax horridum*) gather what light they can with their large leaves. The spines borne on the stems irritate and can fester under the skin and so lend the plant its English name. It is an important plant for all the Nations of the region and is an example of how the term 'medicinal' is sometimes difficult to pin down. There are 'medicines' for dancing and berry-picking, and the devil's club is a medicine for acquiring property. It is found in narratives describing the attainment of wealth and fortune and gamblers use it as a good luck charm.

The south east of Vancouver Island lies in a rain shadow thanks to the island's central mountains. Mooted as the sixth Mediterranean-type climate area of the world it certainly looks like one, filled with garry oak (*Quercus garryana*) the bark of which is included in a treatment for tuberculosis by the Salish people of Puget Sound, and arbutus, or Pacific madrone (*Arbutus menziesii*).

The peeling arbutus bark is blamed on a lack of pitch and is explained in local folklore in the following narrative: 'Pitch used to fish in the early morning before the sun become too strong, but one day when he got to back to the shade too late he melted in the sun's heat. People rushed to the beach to share him.

'Douglas fir was first and got most to cover his head and shoulders, Grand fir gathered only a little and by the time Arbutus arrived there was none left and he is bereft of pitch to this day. . '

The long, sandy beaches on the west of Vancouver Island are strewn with driftwood piles made up of whole tree trunks bleached by the intense sunlight glancing off the Pacific. Washed up among them are the Medusa-like tangles of bull-whip kelp, which, tied end to end was used for fishing black cod to a depth of 200 fathoms. Higher still on the beach

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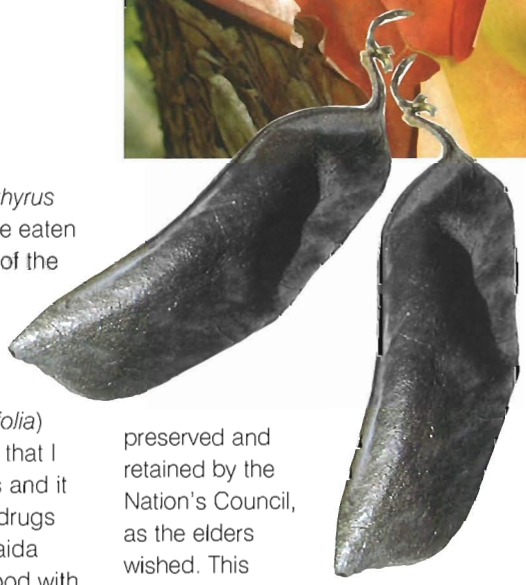
> Haida folklore has it that the peeling bark of *Arbutus menziesii* is owing to a lack of pitch. The arbutus was too slow when it was being handed out and the Douglas fir collected it all



are clumps of the beach pea (*Lathyrus japonicus*). These pea seeds were eaten by some, but the symbolic value of the black dried pods (right) gives the plant its Haida name 'Raven's canoe'

Walking in the woods with friends a Pacific yew (*Taxus brevifolia*) was pointed out to me. It's a tree that I have talked about for many years and it highlights the issues in sourcing drugs from the natural world. From a Haida point of view it is an important wood with the strength and resilience to make tools such as clubs, spears, boxes, awls, wedges, halibut hooks, paddles and bows. Medicines were also made from the tree and because of the recent history of the Pacific yew the First Peoples of the region are reticent about sharing their knowledge of medicinal plants.

One of the most important plant-based anti-cancer drugs of recent years was first isolated from the bark of the this yew and has been the source of the taxanes used in the treatment of breast and ovarian cancer. Before the discovery of more sustainable sources, including the leaves of the English yew (*T. baccata*) there was widespread and indiscriminate felling of this slow-growing tree, putting it in real danger of being over-harvested.

Trust

When a culture is under threat the intervention of the ethnobotanist can have a positive effect. By winning the trust of her collaborators Nancy Turner has collected information on how the Haida use their medicinal plants and this can be preserved and retained by the Nation's Council, as the elders wished. This research goes further than the preservation of 'intellectual rights'. An ongoing education programme will also benefit the Haida nation by bringing everyone closer to what it means to be part of their ancient culture.

Nancy Turner's book *Plants of Haida Gwaii* is the result of 30 years' work with the Haida nation. It is written with their close collaboration and in terms of their collective culture. However, the treatments using medicinal herbs are not described in this book. This has been reserved for the Haida Gwaii education system and is respectful not only of the wishes of the elders of the nation, but also of the complexity of many traditional remedies. The book explains the knowledge and understanding that has enabled the Haida to use the resources of their islands sustainably for thousands of years, and identifies and depicts the individuals whose memories and knowledge are recorded.

Back home in the UK I thought about our own efforts in collecting the oral tradition of plant medicine, especially in areas such as Wales where village and home healers are still well remembered. But I wonder if the admirable efforts to record folk medicine in the oral tradition (by Ethnomedica at Kew, for example) might be missing the point?

> A plant-based anti-cancer drug was developed from the bark of the Pacific yew and indiscriminate felling put the tree in danger

We should not underplay the role of human interaction in the healing process. By focusing only on recording the plants and methodology we risk missing the cultural and social contexts of their uses, as well as the importance of the individuals who aspired to heal.

Gareth Evans works for the interpretation department of the National Botanic Garden of Wales, Carmarthenshire. He is also working on the historical collection of the Welsh School of Pharmacy, Cardiff.
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Nancy Turner is Distinguished Professor in the School of Environmental Studies at the University of Victoria. Working closely with many First Nations, she has helped develop and support programmes for retaining, enhancing and promoting the rich heritage of traditional botanical knowledge within communities

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