

Herbs and Healing

Tour notes



The herb walk in Malleny Garden

*Greenyonder's Herbs and Healing day tour visits three very different gardens to see how connecting with plants and gardening is good for mental and physical health. Here, Greenyonder's Jean Bareham talks to **Julia Cook**, the qualified herbalist who leads an afternoon herb walk.*

Our herb walk is around the National Trust for Scotland's Malleny Garden at Balerno, a beautiful traditional garden, still small and relaxed enough to feel intimate. It's maybe unusual to have a herb walk in a garden rather than out in the wild. Julia says 'As a herbalist I use plants which are much nearer to their wild species than the garden varieties. So when Greenyonder first asked me to lead the herb walk in Malleny Garden, I thought it would be a challenge.' Yet for me, the tour has made herbalism accessible, as Julia shows us familiar plants I grow in my own garden, like roses, hydrangea, lavender, and lady's mantle, and explains the current medical uses these old friends have in their wilder forms.

One of Julia's own favourites is black cohosh (*Cimicifuga racemosa*), originally from North America, and currently rather trendy in British gardens. She says 'A lot of the plants I point out at Malleny are North American and are used widely by herbalists there, drawing on the North American Indian tradition. Black cohosh is a great woman's herb which is used to aid childbirth and to treat menopausal problems. It's also used to relieve pain and reduce blood pressure.'

Nature's pharmacy

While fascinated by how plants are used in other cultures, Julia is also passionate about people understanding the bounty we have right on our doorsteps, in waste ground and hedgerows: 'Nature is the original pharmacy, and the wonderful thing



Elder, which used to be known as 'the medicine chest of the people'

is that it's often the humblest of local weeds which do us most good - the plantain, dandelion, couch grass, 'sticky-willies' and nettles. Nettle roots help alleviate prostate complaints. Couch grass is a soothing diuretic used in the treatment of cystitis.'

Versatile herbs

Malleny is beautifully cared for, meaning of course a distinct lack of weeds - not so great for a herbalist! However, Julia always points out one very common native

tree in evidence among the choicer plants - the humble elder: 'It's lovely that a highly sophisticated garden like Malleny still has room for elder which is so versatile as a liquid food **and** a medicine - indeed it has so many nutritious and medical uses that it's often called the medicine chest of the people. It is used for respiratory problems like sinusitis, hay fever, and the common cold. Elderflowers combined with peppermint and yarrow makes a great tea to take for a fever. As with many herbal remedies, elder is a soothing, gentle, immune boosting herb.' I'll never call the elders in my backgreen weeds again!

We also admire the fantastic collection of culinary herbs laid out in traditional potager style at Malleny. They include some unusual herbs such as meum and woad, but it's the more common ones like sage and fennel which Julia speaks about: 'Many of the culinary herbs act as digestive tonics, they relieve bloating and wind, and by relaxing the muscles of the gut are useful for decreasing spasms.' At this point, Julia lets us try some fennel seeds and encourages us to take a few after a heavy meal.

Julia is a very hands-on teacher, producing from her basket tinctures and ointments for us to taste or smell, and showing us their practical uses. There's a real sensuousness about some of the plants, like frothy fennel and fragrant lavender, and she always encourages people to touch the plants she talks about. This is something she extends to her medical practice: 'I don't only prescribe from the bottle - wherever possible, I like to take patients out to collect herbs.'

Credibility

Julia has qualifications in botany, horticulture and herbal medicine, and while at Napier University completed a dissertation on the use of herbs in childbirth. She always begins her talk at Malleny by emphasising the credibility of medical herbalism: 'Medical herbalists study orthodox medical sciences and are trained to use the same diagnostic skills as GPs. A medical herbalist treats

holistically by looking at the whole person, and will try to identify the underlying cause of health issues. The herbal treatment prescribed will be specifically tailored to suit the patient's individual needs.'

Nevertheless, she talks of a division at the heart of modern herbalism: 'At present there are two branches of herbalists - the traditional herbalists whose practice is earth-based, with a wide knowledge and grounding in plants, and, secondly, the scientific, medical model. The perfect 21st century herbalist should be a mix of both. We do have to research and justify our uses of plants at a scientific level. However, a few practitioners have in my view gone over too much to a scientific model and have zero plant identification skills! They are prescribing from a bottle. Whereas I see myself carrying on a tradition as a medical herbal practitioner which goes all the way back to the Wise Women who have used plants for healing right back to prehistory.'

There is a link here with the healing power of gardening that we've seen earlier in the day at Redhall: 'Herbalism is more than just taking a plant medicine, it allows a reconnection with the earth. I'm aware that sounds rather ethereal, but our society is facing a mental ill-health epidemic at the same time as it is losing its connection with the earth and the true value of life. I do believe that people have an intrinsic need to be connected with the natural world. People don't know their herbal allies, the local herbs we can use to heal ourselves. They are crying out to have their hands in the soil. Yet I do believe we all have an innate plant wisdom which we must rekindle.'



Julia has founded Healing Tree, a clinic and apothecary above Roslin Glen.

Julia Cook, Healing Tree Medical Herbalist
tel: 0131 440 4303
email: julia.healingtree@tiscali.co.uk