

# The Healing Power of Plants

Supplement sales are skyrocketing, but where do the herbs come from?

By Kristin Vuković

Herbal medicine is ancient, and today people still look to plants to help themselves heal. And it's a big business: Due to COVID-19, sales of immune-boosting elderberry have skyrocketed, and *Nutrition Business Journal* projects that supplement sales will reach the highest level in 20 years, surpassing \$50 billion. With consumers spending so much on supplements, it's important to consider the source: Where do these herbs come from, and how are they processed?

In her book, *The Business of Botanicals: Exploring the Healing Promise of Plant Medicines in a Global Industry* (Chelsea Green Publishing, 2021) Ann Armbrecht, director of the Sustainable Herbs Program of the American Botanical Council, explores the inner workings of a complex worldwide herb industry. Armbrecht says the quality of attention that's given from the source to the finished product is key. "Certified organic feels like a baseline," she says. "FairWild is the gold standard for harvesting plants. Pick companies that you believe in, whose values you support."

Armbrecht looks for companies that have an herbalist onboard, and some of her favorites include Herb Pharm (*herb-pharm.com*), Traditional Medicinals (*traditionalmedicinals.com*), Gaia Herbs (*gaiaherbs.com*), MegaFood (*megafood.com*), Pukka Herbs (*pukkaherbs.com*), and Banyan Botanicals (*banyanbotanicals.com*). For medicinal spices you can cook with, including anti-inflammatory and immune-boosting turmeric, she loves Diaspora (*diasporaco.com*) and Burlap & Barrel (*burlapandbarrel.com*).

"It could be a big-scale, huge company, as long as people are treated fairly, the soil is being cared for, the plants are cared for, the ecosystem is cared for," she says. "That attention is being paid to wellness and health all along, not just to the user who takes the finished product. We have to see that it's creating health for everybody."

Creating health for everybody means keeping Mother Earth healthy. We desperately need to change our relationship to the earth, including our relationship to soil and how conventional farming practices—in particular, the use of pesticides and fertilizers—are destroying it. Regenerative agriculture reverses climate change by rebuilding organic soil matter and restoring degraded soil biodiversity. "[Regenerative farming] is gaining so much traction because of new science around the health of the soil—first triggered by the Soil Carbon Initiative report," Armbrecht says. "UN climate scientists say we have 60 years of healthy soil left."

Naturopathica Skincare was founded on the belief that herbalism, naturopathic medicine and holistic wellness should be coupled with cutting-edge science to offer deeper beauty to all. In early 2022, the brand will launch products made with plant extracts obtained through aeroponics—an innovative type of agriculture that relies on a mist of nutrient-rich moisture and air to grow plants rather than soil. "Sourcing herbs sustainably has always been an important pillar of Naturopathica's ecosystem," said Paula Provenzano, VP of Education.

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Grown holistically, medicinal plants strengthen the immune system by nourishing and supporting the body's capacity to heal itself. Armbrecht writes, "When you ingest plant medicine as a tea or tincture or even as a capsule, you take in the life force of the plant. And that life force is healing." The potency and efficacy of plant medicine is an interconnected web. "Whether and how plant medicine works also depends on what herbalists refer to as the spirit of the plant and the relationship of a healer to that spirit," she continues. "Intention matters, too—the intention felt by those who grow, harvest and process herbs; the intention of the people who make the medicine from those herbs; even the intention of the person who ingests or applies the medicine."

To cultivate a closer relationship to plants and sustainable sourcing, Armbrecht recommends exploring your own backyard for opportunities to connect with healing herbs. For urban dwellers like me, it can be challenging to connect with plants. In the New York City area, Armbrecht recommends Herbal Underground (*herbalundergroundnyc.com*), an herbalist collective that offers community classes taught by their graduates. Whether you choose to commune with the plant world through ingesting herbal teas or tinctures or visiting an herbal collective, it's crucial to be mindful of the whole supply web.

In his book *Gardens: An Essay on the Human Condition*, literary philosopher Robert Pogue Harrison wrote about the loral value of an object: the quality that arises from being in relationship with the world behind the object. It is a quality felt but not seen, and requires a kind of depth perception that is no longer characteristic of this age. Armbrecht writes, "The promise of herbal medicine is that it offers products that bring wellness not only to each of us, but also to humanity and the earth. But that is only the case if individuals and companies are truly committed to wellness at each step of the journey, not just in the finished product on the shelf. Loral value captures this fuller meaning of tending the whole." Relationships, Armbrecht says, are where change is possible.