

Wrangling an “Herban” Legend

By Jessica Kellner

More than 25 years after being dubbed the “Herbal Cowboy,” American Botanical Council Executive Director Mark Blumenthal is still slingin’ the information on herbs far and wide.



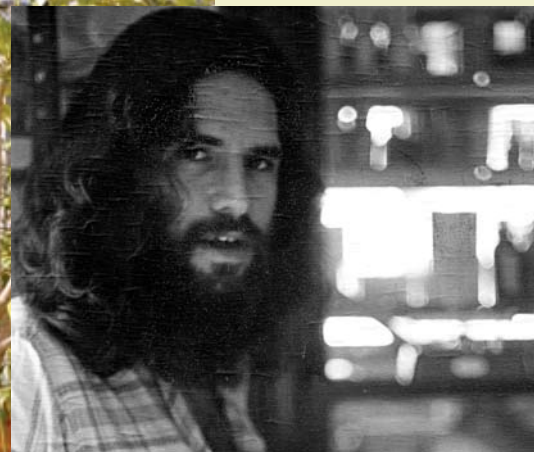
Mark Blumenthal may play a bigger role in your life than you realize: If you subscribe to the quarterly journal *HerbalGram*, he informs you about the latest herbal news; he’s a good part of the reason you’re reading these pages right now; and he might just be why you know about herbal medicine at all.

Modern-Day Pioneering

One of the world’s most-quoted herbal authorities, Blumenthal is the founder and executive director of the American Botanical Council (ABC) in Austin, Texas. He created and is editor and publisher of the ABC’s *HerbalGram* and is the editor of the bimonthly literature review service HerbClip. Blumenthal was senior editor of *The Complete German Commission E Monographs—Therapeutic Guide to Herbal Medicines* (1998), *Herbal Medicine: Expanded Commission E Monographs* (2000) and *The ABC Clinical Guide to Herbs* (2003).

Not only is he one of the original disseminators of herbal information in this country, making appearances at dozens of conferences, conventions and other events each year, but he’s a really nice guy!

Though he doesn’t like to use the word “pride,” he will admit



A 1985 photograph (at left) of Blumenthal posing with a ginseng soda is a takeoff of the 1980 film "Urban Cowboy." The nickname stuck for the Texan herb enthusiast.

that some of his accomplishments stand out in his mind. He began *HerbalGram* in 1977 as a newsletter called *Herb News*; it evolved into *HerbalGram* six years later. *HerbalGram* was a real pioneer—the first publication in the United States to systematically report on the growing body of herbal literature and scientific research. "I envisioned a *Scientific American* of herbs, a magazine that deals not just with scientific issues but also covers a lot of industry issues and conservation issues," Blumenthal says. "*HerbalGram* probably has some of the widest coverage of any herbal publication, and I think we've done it in a way that's engaging because it's colorful and editorial."

Blumenthal became even more involved in the burgeoning herbal medicine field by starting the ABC in 1988 as a nonprofit research and educational organization. Born and raised in Texas, the "herban cowboy" (Blumenthal's e-mail alias has long been "HerbCowboy") says the one thing in his career that gives him the most satisfaction is that three of the most venerated elders in the herbal community—James Duke, Norman Farnsworth and Varro Tyler—helped him start the ABC and were on the board of trustees and offered guidance. "To me, if I were to take pride in something, it's that three of the leading experts and elders of the herbal community in the United States from a science point of view all helped found and guide the early years. I find that very rewarding and empowering," he says.

And you can count *Herbs for Health*, sister publication to *The Herb Companion*, among Blumenthal's credits, too. It was Blumenthal's *HerbalGram* material that originally formed the basis of *Herbs for Health*. "I will take partial credit with my good friend Steven Foster for being part of the genesis of *Herbs for Health*," Blumenthal says. "Steven and I would take some of the research reviews from *HerbalGram* and rewrite them to make them more accessible, and [*The Herb Companion*] did a two- or

four-page insert called *Herbs for Health*," he says. "Then they realized they were getting such high response from the readers that *Herbs for Health* became a spin-off publication."

Blumenthal, along with James Duke, Steven Foster, Rob McCaleb, Christopher Hobbs, Art Tucker and the late Varro Tyler were the original advisory board for this publication, and we take pride in the fact that many of those names still advise us today.

Self-Educate, Self-Medicare

Blumenthal strongly believes that the herb community needs to increase well-designed research studies and increase awareness among the public and health-care practitioners' of herbal medicines. Herbs and other natural remedies, he says, should be the first choice in health care and pharmaceutical medicines the second or third down the line, when appropriate. "Herbs are the first medicine. That's why *droog*, which means 'to dry' in Old Dutch, became the basis for the word 'drug.' The whole concept behind the word 'drug' refers to herbs," he explains.

A growing group of people in this country are realizing they can self-medicate at home, simply with teas and herbal supplements, Blumenthal says. "But here's the proviso: Self-medication requires self-education. You can't be a good self-medicator unless you have good education, and that's something you've got to do on your own in the current regulatory environment."

While acknowledging that self-education is a good thing to do with any type of medicine, Blumenthal hopes the government eventually will develop reasonable standards for herbal medicines so that labels can include information on the documented benefits of supplements. He argues that the United States needs a system similar to Germany's Commission E that will review the entire body of evidence on an herb—including its history, chemistry and human and animal studies—to determine



Mark Blumenthal has edited several herbal reference books and is the editor and publisher of the journal *HerbalGram*.



government-approved benefits that can be printed on the label." I see that as part of our future. I think it's inevitable that it will happen because consumers will demand it."

The Science Behind It All

So many herbs have been shown by historical use to be beneficial, yet literally thousands of herbs haven't been clinically tested or have been minimally tested, Blumenthal says. "Do we need more studies on tested herbs, like ginkgo or garlic? The answer is yes because the medical establishment has a double standard. They're very willing to accept one anecdotal or poorly documented report or clinical case report of adverse effects, but even after a dozen or two dozen clinical trials showing benefits or safety, even when they're meta-analyzed, even then many people in the conventional medical community are very reluctant to accept the benefits," he says.

According to Blumenthal, a big problem plaguing current herbal medicine studies is a lack of specificity regarding what herbal constituents are being tested and what lengths of time and dosages are needed to see results. Because of a lack of standards in test design and practices, studies on herbs come back skewed or just wrong. The media then picks up on these skewed results and reports the ineffectiveness of herbs, without understanding the base problems with the studies. This was the case in last summer's failed echinacea study, in which researchers used the less medicinally recommended variety of echinacea (*Echinacea angustifolia* rather than *E. purpurea* or *E. pallida*) and less than one-third the recommended dose—then they declared echinacea ineffective. The general public, as well as many members of the mainstream medical community, will never hear the problems with the study, nor any further details about it, Blumenthal says. All they will hear is the media's sound bite: Echinacea doesn't work against colds and the flu.

Blumenthal and the ABC are taking steps to change this problem. "I do a one-hour presentation [several times a year at universities and conferences] showing the results of certain clinical trials on herbs and supplements and the headlines. We

show the disconnect that happens sometimes between the actual results of the trial and the way it was reported to the media," Blumenthal explains. "When looking over a group of studies, unless it was a specific brand ... if they say 'ginseng extract from China,' was it 1:1? Was it 4:1? What are we talking about here? We need for there to be better characterization of the herb being used," he says.

Many companies are discouraged by the current situation, Blumenthal says, and they are reluctant to fund and organize further studies until there is some kind of consensus regarding study requirements so that everyone can agree on the specific trial's results. He cites another recent study: "They did an eight-week designed trial in the Mayo Clinic. ... They didn't really have an eight-week trial, however. Instead, it was a four-week trial, then a 'washout' period, then another four-week trial. Of all the clinical trials on record of using black cohosh for hot flashes, all of them are anywhere from 12 to 24 weeks. This trial was one-third to one-sixth the duration. It never should have been funded because there was no evidence that women will respond in four weeks. ... There needs to be better review of some of these trial designs."

Herban Renewal

Despite the challenges of herbal research and education, Blumenthal is optimistic about the future of herbal medicines. He says the growing green movement in this country will help carry the herbal agenda forward. "The green movement—renewable energy, green building materials, reducing, reusing, recycling—is all an outgrowth of a deeper awareness of people who understand that we need to live in a sustainable symbiotic way with our environment," he says. "But some people who are environmentally sensitive may care more about what people dump into a river than what they dump in their mouths. People must recognize that the environment is us and we are the environment. There's no distinction between what we allow to be put into the river or the air and what we put in our bodies and on our skin. It's all part of the same matrix." †

Jessica Kellner is coordinating editor of Herbs for Health.

