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The Gift of Healing Herbs
Plant Medicines and Home Remedies for a Vibrantly Healthy Life
Green Treasures from Mother Earth
Robin Rose Bennett

Foreword by Rosemary Gladstar:

You hold in your hands a treasure, a book of green wisdom that delves deeply into the heart and soul of herbalism and retrieves an abundance of emerald jewels for us to savor. I have the good fortune to know Robin; we dance in the same herbal circles and play in the same green meadows. A true wise woman, deeply compassionate and heartfully giving, Robin Rose brings a joyful spirit and an open heart to all she does. So it's not surprising that her books on herbal healing (this is her second in what we hope will be a series) are so heartfelt, wisdom-filled, and imbued with spirit. I read them as much for spiritual insights as I do for herbal information; both are so richly interwoven, embedded together, wedded like body and soul.

Robin's own life was transformed by plants. In her late twenties she went through a period of great physical exhaustion and discovered she had severe anemia. While using herbs to bring her body back into balance, she also discovered a joyful awakening of her spirit: "Plants transformed my health and my life, and enriched my spiritual practice by connecting me deeply with Earth." It is this soulful or spirited side of healing that she is most attuned to, and shares so enthusiastically, so gratefully, in all she does. As you read *The Gift of Healing Herbs*, expect to journey deep into the soulful healing of the plant world.

Herbal healing is far more than just a physical system affecting our physical bodies, and the pages of *The Gift of Healing Herbs* contain far more than the simple directives found in most herb books—what herb to take for what illness, proper dosages, and safety issues. While this information is, of course, shared—there are very thorough instructions for using all of the herbs and herbal recipes—Robin goes beyond the sharing of simple recipes and erudite information about herbs. She invites us to look at healing as a soulful journey, and plants as spiritual teachers: "Soulful healing asks that while you are healing your body you look for the meaning ... as it relates to your whole being." And with simple and clear direction, she offers us techniques and gifts to do this—how to relate more deeply to the plants, how to seek their medicine gifts, how to offer them gifts in return....And how to listen to our bodies. "Bodies don't lie," she admonishes. "They tell the truth, no matter how uncomfortable or inconvenient that truth may be." And she goes on to instruct us how to listen to and love our bodies, because, when all is said and done, "Love is what heals." But—lest you think you'll find only wise adages and spiritual passages in Robin's book—let me assure you, in the tradition of the best of those well-written herb books, *The Gift of Healing Herbs* is filled with the practical as well. There is a full compendium of herbs, all of which Robin has worked with personally and knows well, so the writing is in-depth and thorough. There are excellent herbal recipes and remedies, and instructions for treating a variety of common health issues. There are suggested dosages and safety issues. In other words, one finds the practical advice one needs to put this information to good use. But it's how Robin shares that's so unique.

She teaches through stories. If there's a case to be made, or a teaching to offer, there's a story to tell. It's the way I learn best, and the way many people learn best—and this book is rich with

story. In page after page, Robin presents heartfelt sharings of her own healing journey and the healing journeys of those she's worked with in her herbal practice and met through her classes. We not only learn about red clover, yarrow, motherwort, and a host of other common medicinal herbs, we actually hear real cases of how these plants have helped various individuals that Robin has personally assisted. Each person is unique, so the formulas vary and change. There's no standard "this remedy for that illness"; instead, Robin wisely attends to each person as an individual on his or her personal healing journey: "I have found that if I tend to a person's illness, rather than to a person, I treat that person as if they *are* their illness."

As I read, I kept discovering gemstones: "Healing, like life, doesn't often progress in a straight line. It spirals." Working with individuals with chronic conditions, Robin, like most compassionate healers, has learned that healing isn't always an end goal—that often the journey is the healing process. Robin presents a practical and useful book, but the teachings are profound—and delightful as well. Imagine for a moment a little girl running joyfully towards her parents, a huge smile on her face, as she presents a single dandelion blossom. A wise child then, a wise woman now, Robin offers years of experience that she's gleaned from working soulfully with plants and people, and offers it to us so gracefully in this book, *The Gift of Healing Herbs*. Rosemary Gladstar, author of *Herbal Healing for Women* and *The Family Herbal*, founder of the California School of Herbal Studies and United Plant Savers

Preface

Journal entry, New York City, 1991 What is it about plants? What is it about feeling the Earth under your feet or under your fingernails, about seeing the wild plants and grasses pop up through the cracks in the sidewalks or lining the city streets? I can't fully explain how it happens, but I know that plants help people remember how to be happy, how to feel our natural joy. I see it in eyes that begin to shine during an afternoon's medicinal plant walk in any of the city parks. Saying hello to this plant and that, discovering their virtues, uncovering our own. Plants love us. They help us reclaim our health and our whole selves. Plants are healers.

I was not brought up to know the Earth in intimate detail. No one I can remember from my childhood ever suggested that the land I lived on and was surrounded by contained anything important to me. My sense of kinship was connected to my house, my bedroom (my one almost personal space), my family, and my friends. I had no conscious sense of connection to the wild; the closest I came was that I deeply loved the trees in our small suburban backyard.

Recently I was guiding a walk focused on identifying and learning about wild medicinal plants in the woods near my home in New Jersey. My friend Marian was there. We've known each other since we were three years old and our families lived a few doors down from each other. When I introduced everyone to a sassafras tree, Marian excitedly announced that there had been a sassafras tree in my backyard when we were growing up. I told her that I didn't remember any sassafras tree there. Surely she must be mistaken. But would I have known if it had been there? It's not a tall and impressive-looking tree, and since no one at home would have taken me outside and pointed out the wonder of three different-shaped leaves on a single tree, or titillated my senses by giving me a leaf to rub and smell for the unforgettable root beer-like fragrance, I could easily have missed the inconspicuous sassafras tree. I have since learned that this tree is gifted at turning itself invisible—but that's another story for another time!

I sit now and try to remember whether there really was a sassafras tree growing behind the house in which I grew up. These days I love sassafras so much it amazes me to think I might have grown up with one right in my own small backyard. I gather sassafras leaves for tea every summer and fall, and dig some roots, too.

But I don't remember this tree at all because I didn't know her, though I clearly remember a tall

oak tree I was especially fond of, a young maple tree out front, and an old weeping willow tree out back that I dearly loved. Despite my tearful protests, the willow was eventually chopped down to make room for a patio. I enjoyed the patio, but have never forgotten the lovely willow.

It is only over the past twenty-five years of my life that I've become aware of the gift of healing herbs, Earth's green treasures—her medicinal and nourishing herbs, plants, and trees. For the first twenty-five years of my life, I was not conscious of the plants at all. I knew, certainly, that trees and plants and wildflowers were beautiful, but not much more.

When I was first heading upstate from my home in New York City to study herbal medicine at the Wise Woman Center in Saugerties, New York, my father told me he could understand my wanting to learn about herbal medicine (a progressive attitude in 1985), but he didn't quite understand why I needed to go and live in the country and learn about *plants*. I tried to answer him but didn't do a very good job. I knew it was important, but I didn't know why—or if I did, I couldn't articulate it, I was that disconnected. Even though I knew it intellectually, I didn't really, truly understand that the herbs I could buy in jars and bottles were plants, and that there were things I needed to learn about and from plants! I did know it though, in my gut and in my bones. The most telling compliment I receive upon teaching an herbal medicine class is, "You're helping me remember something I feel like I've always known." It was the compliment I gave to my first plant-medicine teachers, and exactly how I still feel anytime I learn the truth about something fundamental.

When I was growing up we took a lot of 8-mm home movies. We had countless reels of them. One day my mother said, "We'll never watch these old things. I'm going to have a couple of hours' worth of video made out of all these years' worth of movies." She took that project on, and one day my family sat down to watch them together. The very last shot in the final video is of me at about two years old. I am running toward the camera with one arm fully extended in a purposeful gesture. As I arrive right in front of the camera we can finally see the huge smile on my face as I present a just-picked dandelion flower for all to see and admire. I laughed with delight when I saw this, and couldn't help noticing that I was holding it out exactly the same way I often do today on a teaching walk! Maybe I knew all along, as we all do.

My introduction to medicinal plants transformed my health and my life, and enhanced and expanded my spiritual practice by connecting me deeply with the Earth, changing my life in the best, most enjoyable ways possible. I am forever grateful. The plant medicines have helped just about everyone I know who's ever used them. When they are used as green treasures—as plant medicines that are healers in their own right and not merely as drug substitutes, the plants are at their safest. They are also most effective that way, though not necessarily in an exactly-the-same-each-time-for-each-person sort of way. Over several decades of studying, teaching, harvesting, medicine-making, practicing with others, and using the herbs myself, I have seen how very well the plants work. I trust you will find many helpful ideas and recipes here that will improve your health, deepen your sense of joy at being alive, and help you live a vibrantly healthy life with the help of the healing plants. Mother Earth's medicine chest is full of healing herbs of incomparable worth. These precious green treasures are too often misunderstood or ignored. This book is written to share their stories, and to share the wealth.

Let's turn the key and open Mother Earth's green treasure chest of healing herbs together, shall we?

February, 2010, Upstate New York