

THE WILD WISDOM of Weeds

13 Essential Plants for Human Survival

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Foreword

MOST OF THE WEEDS FEATURED in this book are old friends of mine; a few are new acquaintances I look forward to getting to know better. When I find myself in some new place, these old friends generally greet me and provide me with a sense of familiarity. I graze on them when I feel hungry, and use them as medicine when I feel sick or run down. I have confided in them and listened to them. They have been a steady and reliable presence in my life.

Decades ago, when I was still living in my native New York City, my yoga teacher, Judith, invited me to visit a community garden in our neighborhood with her. I imagined we would be harvesting vegetables, but chickweed and nettles were what she was after. She started pointing out dandelions growing in cracks in the pavement and other irrepressible wild plant presences in the urban jungle. Later, she took me on harvesting expeditions to big parks. What had previously been, in the words of the late Frank Cook, my friend and a gifted and generous plant teacher, a “green wall”—the undifferentiated and barely noticed world of plants around me—took on a new significance, as I began to notice familiar friends everywhere I went.

In our contemporary society, most people grow up with minimal connection to the natural world around us. Most of us can identify many more corporate logos than plants. Yet plants are incredibly important and without them we could not exist. They are essential parts of our biological context. This disassociation leaves a void within us and around us, and there exists a widespread hunger to reclaim our knowledge of and connection to plants, from growing and harvesting, to cooking and fermenting, to foraging and wildcrafting. We crave a greater sense of connection and interconnection, a more balanced life, in tune with nature and sensitive to our environment and resources. On the one hand, this is so simple. Go outside. Look around. Observe. Ask questions. Interact. And yet there are so many plants, so many animals, so many insects, so much we cannot even see. How can we know it all?

The answer is that we cannot and we do not. But in our hunger for reconnection, we have to start somewhere, and looking at the most common weeds, found almost everywhere people exist, is a great place to start. One of the things I love about this book is that rather than attempting to be encyclopedic, Katrina Blair keeps it really simple and approachable. Whether you are in a big city, in a remote rural location, or a suburban subdivision, you can probably go outside your home, find some of these common plants, and begin interacting with them and making them part of your life. Her recipes have also inspired me to experiment with new ingredients in my ferments.

These thirteen common plants that thrive especially in human-disturbance zones are tough and resilient survivors. We need their tenacity and ability to adapt, and their proximity and plenty make them more relevant than exotic or rare elixirs, superfoods, and remedies. Katrina Blair urges us to graze on them, use them as medicine, ferment them, eat them fresh, dry them for tea, and let them soothe your skin. This book will give you great motivation, information, and inspiration to start (or continue) getting to know some of your nearest and most important neighbors.

—SANDOR ELLIX KATZ

Preface

The Great Spider Myth

ONCE BEFORE THERE WAS TIME or even space, there was just the Great Spider. She contained everything in the universe in her deep-black body. The universe was very unified as One. It was void of any dialog or difference. Although spacious, the lack of another made the universe a stagnant and empty place. The Great Spider began to feel a sadness overcome her that was rooted in a sense of loneliness. Her lonely feelings grew inside her like a glowing ember. One day, the Great Spider brewed in her belly a fire from these feelings that was so hot that it ignited the spark of life. In her belly, the essence of life was brewing. Her belly became red and hot and full to the point of bursting. All of a sudden, she opened her belly and a diversity of life exploded into the world like the most colorful fireworks imaginable. No two creatures were alike.

One by one the unique life-forms move into every possible environment. Some were able to fly and live in air, some were able to swim and lived in water, and some were able to breath and live on land. Even though they each were different, they all were family and related to each other as kin because they came from the same mother, the Great Spider. Every creature was born with a unique and special gift to share with the world. The gift revealed itself when each creature followed the passionate feeling of joy found deep within its heart. This passion was a guide for living in health and happiness while offering a gift in service to all others. The Great Spider knew that if all creatures lived out their passionate service, the world would be a place of sustained harmony for eternity.

In joy she sang her song of creation . . .

Ohla la bohuna ya laho yeh he la lo koyando aho ohm bo holano.

Sure enough, life began to unfold itself in so many unique expressions—algae, fungi, flowers, trees, worms, snakes, insects, birds, wolves, lions, polar bears, dolphins, monkeys, human beings, and banana slugs.

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Such variety! Within all the diversity of life, there was a natural give and take. A passion of one would give over to another and a cycle of life evolved like a kaleidoscope of beautiful, interweaving, changing expressions. For millennia this formula of life worked harmoniously.

Then one day something in the great exchange of all life began to shift out of balance. A dominant force was growing and it was beyond any individual life-form. This powerful influence became known as the Big System (BS). The BS was cultivated by the two-legged ones, the human beings who walked upright on the Earth. Humans created the Big System (back when it was only just a small system) with the intention to control nature. It was a way that the humans could get more by giving less. They started to control plants and made them grow in rows to get more with less work. Then they began to control animals and fence them in pens to get more meat, milk, and eggs with less giving back. The Big System grew year after year until it started to have a life of its own. The Big System was hungry and needed to be fed every day. Pretty soon it even started to control the humans. The Big System forced humans to sacrifice their original passionate gift and become its slaves.

The Great Spider observed the wildness within the humans slowly being refined out by the never-ending needs of the Big System. Humans became so enslaved by the Big System they began to accept this state of domestication as being normal and civilized. Symptoms of civilized living included eating distorted foods void of life, drinking drugged water no longer from the creeks and rivers, staying inside buildings shielded from the sun and outside air. Gradually a hazy fog of pollution was accumulating in the skies, the waters were becoming toxic, and the land was being tilled over by developmental progress. The Big System was demanding more and more of the humans' spark, sapping their passion, and dimming their connection to their purpose.

The Big System continually needed more Earth resources to keep it alive; it needed tons of water, and much more land. It did not care about the trees and animals and other creatures living on the land and in the water. The Big System only wanted to grow bigger and bigger and not give back. The Big System lacked the heart that all other creatures were born with when they emerged from the belly of the Great Spider. The Great Spider witnessed all of life suffering.

In sorrow she sang . . .

Wala lena yaha hola ya nay ho la ho waah la lena ho ya ho no.

For many years the Great Spider felt a deep sorrow, watching the destruction of her family due to the Big System. Her sadness grew so strong that the feeling began to develop inside her like a glowing ember.

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Again the Great Spider brewed in her belly a fire from these feelings that became so hot that it ignited a new spark of life within her. In her belly millions upon millions of tiny seeds were born. These seeds were the wild weeds of the world. When the moon was new, she opened her belly and released these seeds to thrive on every land, near every ocean, and in every city on the Earth. She gifted these seeds with the ability to travel the world and live in diverse conditions to be close to every human on the planet. Great Spider created these wild seeds to be able to withstand the cold, high elevation, droughtlike conditions, and disturbed grounds. Millions of these wild weed seeds traveled the world by wind, water, animals, birds, feet, and pockets of the two-legged ones.

The Great Spider knew that if humans could create the Big System, the humans could also get rid of it; but it was so out of control, they needed help. Reigniting the passionate feeling of service in the human heart would be the key to unraveling the Big System. The wild weeds were sent as messengers to help. Once the seeds sprouted and grew into strong, resilient plants, they had the potential of imparting strength back into the humans and reawakening the primal memory of interconnectivity deep in their hearts. Could the wild weeds bring humanity back into harmony with the rest of creation?

These seeds were spread throughout the entire world and took root. The Big System recognized the wild weeds as invaders and a threat to its very existence. The Big System initiated a war on weeds to try and eradicate every single one of them. It used concentrated poisons, weed whackers, and backhoes to eliminate them. These tactics slowed them down a little, but the weeds came back year after year. They had brilliant survival skills! No matter how hard the Big System tried to kill them off, they would not be defeated.

Eventually some humans began to take notice of what was growing underneath their feet. The brave ones living in the four corners of the globe began tasting and sampling these common wild weeds. They actually liked their flavor and even loved the way they made them feel. Word spread like wildfire around the world, and one by one humans gained momentum in eating the wild weeds. They harvested them by their homes, cities, and in neglected fields. They started using the plants for healing medicine. A new kind of intelligence and deep wisdom entered into the cellular matrix of each body. As the weeds entered into the bodies of the humans, a primal knowing awakened. They remembered a thread back to their original ancestry. This memory ignited a light within their being. They began to reconnect to their intuition, and embrace their wild instinctive abilities to survive without the Big System.

The more humans ate the wild weeds, the more they noticed a feeling was stirring in their hearts. This feeling tapped into a distant yet deep

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memory of their true source of creation. This tickle turned into a burning desire that became unstoppable. It was like a web of passion leading each of them back to their purpose for being alive. The feeling grew so strong in each human's heart until they knew. They knew why they were here on Earth! They were here to be of service and to participate in the great giving and receiving interconnected web of life. The humans were waking up and dropping out of the Big System. No longer were they driven to feed it, to be its slaves; no longer were they willing to let the Big System destroy wildlands, pollute water, and undermine all of life. The humans returned to knowing their basic needs and being satisfied with the simple pleasure of being alive. The wild weed-eating humans became revolutionaries and little by little started unwinding the BS. The Big System was never born with a heart of its own, so it quickly collapsed and composted into the bosom of the Earth where we can now see the smiling flowers of dandelion, mallow, plantain, purslane, lambsquarter, mustard, thistle, knotweed, amaranth, grass, dock, clover, and chickweed. Today all of life is thriving in service to each other while sharing their gifts in harmony with the joyful exchange of giving and receiving.

Let us rejoice! Together in celebration with the Great Spider, we all sing . . .

*Heyla ho yalandana hela he me landa ho la mahe la yanda he ho la
hey yanda la he la he he la ho yalandala heyandala ho yah he landa
ho lande mana lo landa la ho alalaho!*

—KATRINA BLAIR, 2014