

Herbs and Healing in 2020: Adapting to Peak Oil and Climate Change

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'Be the change in the world you want to see'. - Mahatma Gandhi

It seems very likely that we are in for some big changes in the field of herbal medicine and healthcare. Although it is of immense importance I am not concerned here with the regulatory process, but with the effect that peak oil and climate change may have over the next decade or two. It would be surprising if they did not have a significant impact upon the herbs we use and the food we eat. I am considering here what we may benefit from doing to adapt and survive this period of change.

There have been some very good articles in the last two editions of Natures Path on climate change and peak oil by David Jonas and Graham Game (Winter 06/07 & Spring 07 editions), so I am not going to repeat that information here, it is worth reading them as this article continues on from them.

The impact of peak oil: Everything made from oil will become increasingly expensive and restricted and this will affect just about every aspect of life including the cost of producing and importing foods, herbs and other medicines. The farther away that they come from the more they will rise in cost, and methods of transport that use more fuel like flying will probably increase even more.

A lot of the wholefoods, vegetarian/vegan and organic foods we consume in this country come from far away e.g. soya and other pulses, seeds and nuts, brown rice and other grains. As well as many of the herbs the typical Western herbal practitioner uses, and almost all of those that practitioners of Ayurveda and TCM use. I know I am really going to notice the difference when my favourite American, Ayurvedic and Chinese herbs become increasingly expensive.

The only country in the world that has experienced a form of peak oil (created by the economic blockade by the USA), and that has successfully adapted to it is Cuba. We can learn a lot from their experience. The good news is that although the first few years were very difficult they have adapted and now have a healthier and happier population and a more sustainable economy in many respects than they did before. To learn more about the amazing story of how they did this visit www.communitysolution.org and I highly recommend their DVD 'The Power of Community: How Cuba Survived Peak Oil'.

'It is not the strongest species that survive, nor the most intelligent, but the ones who are most responsive to change' - Charles Darwin

The impact of climate change: There seem to be two main scenarios for the effects of this. The first scenario is that our climate is going to continue to get warmer and more dramatic (draughts, storms, floods). The other that after a period of warming the melted freshwater from polar areas will reduce the salinity of the oceans thus stopping the movement of the Atlantic conveyor that brings warm waters to us from equatorial areas. This will make our climate like that of Canada because we are at the same latitude, in other words a lot colder than it is now.

Whatever happens we are going to experience sea level rises and more flooding due to storms. Apart from the loss of lowland plants/herbs and agricultural areas this is going to cause the seawater contamination of some underground freshwater supplies (wells, springs, bore holes etc) and will impact on what can grow in those areas.

These changes will obviously affect the ecological balance and the plants, herbs and other species that live here. We will be able to grow some frost sensitive herbs more easily, whilst some native species will become scarce in the wild and harder to cultivate. If we first get used to warmer weather and then are faced with a sudden change and have much colder weather (the second scenario above) this would cause a lot of problems if we were not prepared for it.

It would be worth considering the types of beneficial herbs and foods that do well in a cold climate e.g. Rhodiola rosea, Buckwheat, Siberian and Canadian herbs, and also those that do well in areas influenced by salt water (coastal plants etc). Investing in greenhouses, cold frames and rainwater collection would be wise to reduce the impact of storms, draughts and sudden changes in temperature on production.

Thinking globally and acting locally: It is responsible and logical to think about these influences and what we can do to prepare for them, and it would be good to know that we have done something to protect herbal and natural healthcare for our children. It is however also not surprising if we feel overwhelmed and a sense of despair and powerlessness due to the immensity of the problems we seem to face. If you do I recommend you look at the work of those involved in deep-ecology such as Joanna Macy by visiting www.joannamacy.net and also the work of the psychologist and shaman Sandra Ingerman in her book 'Medicine For The Earth'.

'When an inner situation is not made conscious, it appears as fate'. – Carl Jung

There are many helpful things that are being done, and a lot of experience, knowledge and technologies are available for us to use. We just need to know about them and start to use them! And fortunately the Cuban's have also given us a fantastic example of how to approach this situation; they mainly adopted a different way of thinking about it in the form of Permaculture and the power of community.

In many respects Permaculture principles are very simple, and I trained as a Permaculture designer many years ago because it was just common sense. One principle is that you use the resources that you have around you as much as you can (which saves time and energy). In terms of the herbs we use a good example of this is in the final paragraph of David's article on peak oil from the last edition of Natures Path '*As herbalists we can simply follow the traditional guidance of the late Dr. Christopher, and make sure we are sourcing our healing power from herbs grown in our back gardens and wild harvested from our local environment.*' I agree, but have to admit to having become complacent about growing and wild-crafting because we have such high quality herbal suppliers in this country that do the job so well for us, and if like me you run a busy practice it is hard to make enough time for a lot of home production. I will probably always want to obtain some herbs from other suppliers but it is I feel becoming crucial to grow and wild-craft more than I do now.

I think we could also continue to source herbs from organic/biodynamic commercial growers providing they grow as much as possible in the UK or nearby countries. And I would like to encourage herbal companies that supply most of our needs to consider investing in growing more here, and sourcing more from countries close to us rather than from great distances away. Although at present production in many countries is cheaper than it would be here this will almost definitely change, and both suppliers and herbalists would benefit from a transition plan for more production nearer to home. I would also love to have some CPD aimed at improving my wild-crafting and herb identification skills to encourage me to use more local herbs (if anyone has any ideas about this please let me know?)

'Getting ready is the secret of success.' - Henry Ford

Thinking locally and not acting globally: One of the problems with thinking about changing the way we do things is that we often think about it on an individual basis, which can make things much harder, it tends to duplicate work and increase the amount of time and resources used. If like me for example you feel overwhelmed by the prospect of complete self-sufficiency one solution is to work together (like the Cuban's have), to consider for example forming a network of small growers and wild-crafters that trade herbs with one another. We would be using what we have already which is the 'community of herbalists' and what grows around us. It makes not only common sense but economic and energy sense to share resources in this way, and this is empowering not overwhelming.

We need to relearn how to think and work as communities because we have been conditioned for a long time to do the opposite. The focus has been on creating more individual (or family) wealth and success, personal material possessions and development, looking good etc. To prepare for the changes that now face us it is necessary to balance this by valuing the whole equally as much as the individual. The reality is that we are a part of the whole, so we can only gain from this. There are fortunately lots of ways that this manifests and that we can share in, and they are all about community, local thinking and all tend to employ aspects of Permaculture. The great thing is that by thinking and acting locally in this way we naturally will have less to do globally, thus reducing the impact of peak oil and our carbon footprint. Some good examples are the Transition Town Movement: www.transitiontowns.org, and the Slow Movement: www.slowmovement.com

'For fast acting relief of stress, try slowing down'. - Lily Tomlin, American actress and comedienne.

Herbs and foods for a better future: A lot of work has already been done on this so I am not going to repeat it here, but simply point to various websites, books and researchers in this field. In particular for those of you interested in Chinese herbs and TCM I recommend you visit www.jeremyross.com ('Combining Western Herbs and Chinese Medicine' by Jeremy Ross), and also www.rchm.co.uk for the article by Steve Kippax 'Useful Western Herbs for Practitioners of Chinese Herbal Medicine'.

For those of you interested in Western herbs for use in an Ayurvedic way see the book 'The Yoga of Herbs' by Dr. Vasant Lad. And also 'The Energetics of Western Herbs', Volumes 1 & 2, by Peter Holmes, that has references to TCM, Ayurvedic and the Greek energetics on some Western herbs. An excellent and fairly new book on non-foreign local herbs and medicinal uses is 'The Healing Power of Celtic Plants' by Angela Paine.

For all things to do with Permaculture and low maintenance food production visit: www.permaculture.co.uk and for an excellent book that gives you everything you need to know about Permaculture for Britain and temperate climates I highly recommend 'The Earth Care Manual' by Patrick Whitefield. Or, a good introduction is 'Permaculture in a Nutshell' by Patrick Whitefield.

For the growing of foreign herbs and unusual but very useful foods in this country visit: www.pfaf.org and read the book 'Plants for a Future: Edible & Useful Plants for a Healthier World' by Ken Fern. The Plants for a Future website has a list with detailed instructions for the growing of many herbs and food crops here that we normally associate with foreign countries, you will be pleasantly surprised by what they have achieved. One of my favourites is Quinoa that has also been grown near where I live. They have created a wonderful example of Permaculture in action and offer us many potential solutions for herbal and food supplies for when peak oil and climate change really starts to bite.

What next? Apart from looking at the websites and books listed above for ideas about what to do please consider the following as a few simple ways to help start the herbal transition:

1. Ask your herbal suppliers to point out where their herbs are sourced, and if any are flown here? Investigate how many alternatives you can use which are more local and gradually switch over. Only continue to use those from far away for which there is no local alternative. Do the same for the foods and drinks you consume.
2. Consider how many herbs you could reasonably start to grow or harvest locally over the next few years?
3. Network with other herbalists that are in your local area and nationally to discuss potential areas of co-operation and sharing of herbs or other resources.

'Look deep into nature, and then you will understand everything better.' - Albert Einstein

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