

LIFESTYLES

Herbalist leads hands-on workshops

By Patricia Robertson
News Correspondent

As a child of 12, growing up in Ottawa, Bev Gray made her first herbal lip balm.

Little did she know that her first foray into making herbal products would lead to a professional career of handling and learning from plants.

"I always found comfort in being in the woods," she says, as a child of a military family transferred from Europe to the East Coast of British Columbia.

"When I moved into a new community I didn't have friends, so I would go to whatever woods were around and collect pine cones and look at the plants."

Now a professional herbalist and aromatherapist, Gray has spent the past 12 years learning how to identify, harvest and use local plants in everything from salads to medicinal salves.

And she wants to pass on her extensive knowledge in a series of workshops that she's offering this summer through her Whitehorse store, Aroma Borealis.

The all-day workshops will take place on Gray's several-hectare property near Rat Lake and will provide a hands-on opportunity to make herbal medicines and skin-care remedies.

The workshops began last summer in response to questions from many people about wild plants and what to make with them, and were quickly sold out.

Now Gray has expanded the range of workshops (an earlier one on creating a herbal first aid kit has already taken place) and is offering them throughout the summer.

The herb walk, talk, and medicine-making workshop will take place on July 20, August 9 and August 17.

"The day starts out around the fire pit, and I go over what the day will look like and what plants we'll look at," says Gray.

"I also go over what herbal medicine is, what its place in history is, and the use of boreal forest plants in healing injuries, nutrition, and cleansing the body."

Participants then go on a herb walk through four mini-ecosystems found on Gray's property.

Plants they will encounter include yarrow and soapberry on the sandy slope of Gray's hilltop home; juniper and death camas found on a rocky bluff; creekside plants such as berries, mosses, willows, and Labrador



SLICE OF PARADISE... Bev Gray and her daughter, Markie Mae, hike above their Carcross Road area home. NEWS photo by Derek Crowe

tea; and plants in disturbed areas, including dandelion and chickweed.

If time, participants also get a tour of Gray's herbal garden, which includes perennials such as valerian, tansy and chamomile.

Gray also teaches the ethics of harvesting wild plants, such as how to approach a plant community and when not to harvest.

The morning session is followed by a herbal lunch, which includes wildweed soup, a wildweed spanakopita (a spinach pie with wild plants instead of spinach), wildweed salad, and wild blueberry and cranberry muffins with dandelion root coffee — all delicious, says Gray.

Those "wild weeds" include chickweed, stinging nettle, and lamb's quarters.

"People are always really surprised at the whole lamb's quarters and chickweed thing, because they've been yanking them out of their gardens for years, and then they realize that those plants actually have food value," she says.

After lunch participants make herbal infusions, oils, salves, and tinctures using plants collected during the morning walk.

Last summer, for example, participants made an immune-boosting tincture from usnea, a

lichen that grows on spruce trees.

Gray also provides a comprehensive 40-page booklet so that participants don't have to keep taking notes.

"It covers northern plant profiles, wild harvesting, herbal preparations, and recipes," says Gray, reeling off some of the topics covered: herbal teas, vinegars, elixirs, solar and lunar infusions, cold compresses, poultices, and liniments.

The nature's remedies workshop focuses on herbal skin care and will be offered on one day only, August 10.

Participants will learn how to use plants in their herbal skin care regime and will explore the use of herbs in teas, foot soaks, face steams, facial muds and moisturizing.

Gray calls it a "hands- and face-on workshop," adding that participants will make a herbal facial cream.

"It's a pampering day," says Gray, noting that "people love to watch cream being made and they realize they can do it themselves."

Gray says she has learned much of what she knows from the plants themselves, although she's a chartered herbalist who studied at the Dominion Herbal College in Burnaby, BC.

She's also studied aromather-

apy and has attended many workshops with prominent herbalists such as Rosemary Gladstone and Susan Weed (appropriate names, Gray agrees!)

She started out as a journalist, however, and came North to work in Yellowknife as a reporter and photographer after finishing her studies in Ottawa.

Together with her partner Mike Bailie and first child, she moved to the Yukon 12 years ago.

They wanted to buy land, but it wasn't until Gray saw the Rat Lake property that she knew it was the right place.

"It's an eight-sided log geodesic dome house surrounded by mountains with a beautiful creek and it's all woods, and it's on a hill in the valley so it's just gorgeous," says Gray.

The clincher in the decision to buy was the name of the mountain range — the Grayridge Mountains — spelled the same way as Gray's own last name.

She called Bailie, away working in Yellowknife, and said, "This is it, Mike, we're buying this house," she recalls.

Bailie himself grew up in the orchard country of Okanogan and built an extensive irrigation system on the property, though Gray discovered that the rose-

mary and lavender of formal herb gardens don't do well in the Yukon.

"Now I've let fireweed take over a lot of my gardens because I don't have the heart to pull them out and I use them medicinally," she says.

"My philosophy is whatever wants to grow here will grow."

Gray says she draws indirectly on First Nations traditional knowledge because they were the original users and discoverers of local plants.

"My neighbor used to bring up a healer from Alberta, who taught me how to harvest respectfully and give tobacco to the plants."

Gray says she doesn't always have tobacco handy, but always gives something back, whether it's a piece of her hair or simply a stone.

"I always acknowledge and respect the plants, because they're giving us something. Plants have energy just like we do, and I don't feel it's proper to go in and just grab."

Her plant surroundings are her "cathedral," she says.

"I've always had a reverence for plants and the forest and the natural world."

For more information on the plant workshops, or to register, contact Aroma Borealis at 667-4372.