



FRIENDS OF
NACHUSA
GRASSLANDS

August 2023

Dear Friend,

What if you had a headache or a stomachache or fever and there were no Walgreens or CVS? What if there were no pharmaceuticals? Native tribes and early settlers also suffered from these ailments and many others... what did they do for relief?

Or what if you were troubled in matters of love? Is there some secret potion that might resolve your problems?

Aside from beauty and food, native plants have served many uses over time. In this issue of *A Prairie Calling* Cindy Crosby will tell you what plants were used for the above complaints.

Cindy is eminently qualified for this task, as many of you know from following her weekly blog, *Tuesdays in the Tallgrass* on Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook. If you look at her biographical info, you will see that she is knowledgeable on many aspects of prairie life, as evidenced in her many books. Her love of prairie shines in all of these accomplishments.

Please enjoy this informative and entertaining issue. I certainly did!

With warm regards from Nachusa Grasslands,

Charles Larry

A Prairie Calling

ISSUE 12 - August 2023



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Left: Wild quinine
Right: Monarch
caterpillar
Photos: Dee Hudson

The Tallgrass Prairie Apothecary

Years ago in Illinois there were no Walgreens, CVS, or other pharmacies. Instead, indigenous people and early settlers turned to the prairie as their drugstore. The plant remedies they concocted were important to them, even when their effects weren't always what was hoped for.

What would you do, many years ago, if you ran a temperature? In *Wildflowers of the Tallgrass Prairie*, authors Sylvan Runkel and Dean Roosa tell us that the leaves of wild quinine (*Parthenium integrifolium*), also known as “American feverfew,” were brewed into a tea that was supposed to have curative effects. The Xerces Society tells us “During World War I, wild quinine was used as a substitute for the bark of the Cinchona tree—as the active ingredient of quinine used to treat malaria.”

Maybe you were a pioneer and had chest pain. You might look for butterfly milkweed (*Asclepias tuberosa*), nicknamed “pleurisy root,” which would be used to treat your lung inflammations and bronchial issues. Today, we appreciate it as an attractive native milkweed that hosts monarch butterfly caterpillars, and an excellent plant for the home garden.

Butterfly milkweed
Photo: Dee Hudson



The Tallgrass Prairie: Apothecary, Department Store, and Love Charm Shop

By Cindy Crosby

The tallgrass prairie is beautiful, but it's much more than just a pretty face. Native Americans and early settlers who moved into Illinois long ago understood that many prairie plants are useful. The ways people utilized prairie plants throughout history are what we call “ethnobotany.” At Nachusa Grasslands, each plant has an ethnobotanical story waiting to be told.

Tiger swallowtail butterfly on wild bergamot.

Photo: Cindy Crosby



Tummy upset? Wild bergamot (*Monarda fistulosa*), which contains the oil thymol, was once considered useful for stomach troubles and sore throats. Runkel and Roosa tell us that some Native Americans, such as the Winnebago, boiled the leaves to make a face wash to help alleviate break-outs. The Omaha also made a hair oil

perfume from the plant, according to David Moerman in *Native American Ethnobotany*. I love the smell of the crushed leaves, reminiscent of oregano. Today, I enjoy planting wild bergamot in my garden, because



Wild bergamot at Thelma Carpenter Prairie. Photo: Dee Hudson

its lovely lavender blooms attract hummingbird moths, bees, and butterflies.

Perhaps the best-known medicinal plants of the tallgrass prairie are the *Echinaceas*: purple coneflower (*Echinacea purpurea*), pale purple coneflower (*Echinacea pallida*), and other species of this genus. Many sources tell us how some Indigenous people found parts of the pale purple coneflower useful in pain relief from



Pale purple coneflower
Photo: Dee Hudson

everything from juice for burns to the chewed root for toothaches, and used preparations from coneflowers to fortify the body against infection from colds and diseases. Today, drinking medicinal *Echinacea* tea (often paired with lemon, slippery elm, or elderberry) is believed by some people to strengthen the immune system (although those with certain plant allergies may have severe reactions to the plant). *Echinacea* tea is easily found in most grocery and health food stores. 🌿

Pale purple coneflower cold infusion tea
Photo: Susan Booker



The Tallgrass Prairie Department Store

The tallgrass prairie once was also a “department store” which contained a plant for just about anything you might have needed. Misplaced your knitting needles? Early settlers knew that stems of big bluestem (*Andropogon gerardii*) could stand in for the lost needles if necessary (although the gauge is variable). Lost your hat and it’s a hot day on the prairie? A large leaf from a prairie dock (*Silphium terebinthinaceum*) tied onto your

head with a piece of grass will give you temporary shade. Trying to sweep an area clean and can’t find your broom? Runkel and Roosa tell us that the stems of the native prairie clovers (*Dalea spp.*), when bound together, would make a serviceable substitute. Going fishing and need some line? Look no further than the Indian hemp, sometimes called dogbane (*Apocynum cannabinum*), from which twine can be made. 🌿

Prairie dock pioneer hat
Photo: Cindy Crosby



Big bluestem
Photo: Dee Hudson

Asclepias speciosa
disturbed upland areas

The Tallgrass Prairie Love Charm Shop

Back in the days when there was no eHarmony or Tinder to help you meet your one true love, prairie plants stood in for match-making and resolving questions of the heart. Had a quarrel with your soulmate? The roots from the hot pink prairie smoke plant (*Geum triflorum*) might be made into a love potion by women who had lost the affections of a partner, according to Moerman, who added that some tribes in the western United States crushed the prairie smoke seeds to make perfume.

Look at the scientific name of bloodroot (*Sanguinaria canadensis*), a plant which pops up in large colonies at the edges of the prairie in the spring, and you'll see where it gets its name. *Sanguinaria* means "to bleed," and indeed the plant appears to, by oozing a toxic red juice. In some Native American circles, when this toxic bloodroot juice was dabbed on a person's palm, it supposedly worked its magic as a love charm, Moerman tells us. It continues to be a popular dye for textiles among some Indigenous peoples.

In some Native American tribes, such as the Ojibwa,

the root of wood betony (*Pedicularis canadensis*), when eaten, was supposed to end quarrels between lovers. Moerman calls it a "love medicine." In other



Prairie smoke. Photo: Cindy Crosby

tribes, such as the Menomini, it was believed that simply carrying the root with you would help you win the affections of whomever you had your eye on. What a plant!

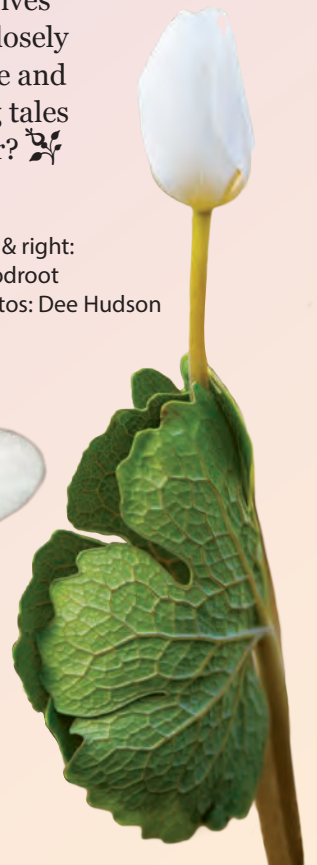
These are only a few stories of the prairie plants that have influenced our history in "The Prairie State" of Illinois. The tallgrass has so many more stories to tell us about how our lives and those of prairie plants are closely intertwined. Why not investigate and see what other interesting tales you discover? 🌿



Purple prairie clover. Photo: Dee Hudson



Left & right:
Bloodroot
Photos: Dee Hudson



Important Note:

These stories are for your enjoyment only. If you want to learn more about prairie ethnobotany, I encourage you to grow these plants at home, study their identification and preparation, and take some classes and preferably find a plant mentor before you ever use them in any way. Remember that many prairie plants are poisonous, especially when misidentified or not correctly prepared. Historical medicinal uses have often fallen out of favor today with the medical community and may be harmful. And—of course—

never take plants or parts of plants from Nachusa or other preserves. That said, learning the stories of plants and devoting time to learning their appropriate uses

and preparations may be a life-long, rewarding study. 🌿



Interesting Ethnobotany Resources to Explore

Want to take a deeper dive into prairie ethnobotany? The information in this article is credited to the following resources, which you may enjoy exploring:

- *Medicinal Wild Plants of the Prairie: An Ethnobotanical Guide* by Kelly Kindscher
- *Edible Wild Plants of the Prairie: An Ethnobotanical Guide* by Kelly Kindscher
- *Native American Ethnobotany* by Daniel E. Moerman
- *Wildflowers of the Tallgrass Prairie: The Upper Midwest* by Sylvan T. Runkel and Dean M. Roosa
- *Xerces Society* — www.xerces.org
- *Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center* — www.wildflower.org

Below: Wood betony, a “love medicine”. Photo: Charles Larry

Right: Indian hemp was used to make twine. Illustration: Betty Higby



Cindy Crosby

Cindy Crosby is the author, compiler or contributor to more than 20 books. Her most recent book is *Chasing Dragonflies: A Natural, Cultural, and Personal History* (Northwestern University Press, 2020). Her full-color book of

photographs and essays is *Tallgrass Conversations: In Search of the Prairie Spirit* with co-author Thomas Dean (Ice Cube Press, 2019). She is also the author of *The Tallgrass Prairie: An Introduction* (Northwestern University Press, 2017). Cindy earned her master’s degree in natural resources from the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point, and did her master’s project at Nachusa. Cindy is a steward for the Schulenberg Prairie at The Morton Arboretum, and coordinates dragonfly monitoring at Nachusa. She blogs each week at *Tuesdays in the Tallgrass*, and you can find her classes and events at www.cindycrosby.com.

This newsletter was produced by Friends of Nachusa Grasslands volunteers:

Editor-in-Chief: Charles Larry

Editor: James Higby

Illustrations: Betty Higby

Design: Dee Hudson

Website: www.nachusagrasslands.org

