

# Seattle Post-Intelligencer

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## NW Gardens: Good medicine for your garden

Plants with a history of healing have their own stories to tell

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SPECIAL TO THE P-I

When most of us look out on our gardens, most of us see flowers, shrubs and trees, but some see a long tradition of herbal care for ailments and the possibility of medicine to come.

At the University of Washington's Drug Plant Garden -- as it was known in 1911 when first planted, now called the Medicinal Herb Garden -- we can see common garden plants that have been used by different cultures as a cure for or to alleviate symptoms of disorders.

Some of these plants, though not used by us for medicine, make good garden plants.

Keith Possee, garden curator, enjoys knowing both the medicinal qualities of the plants and their garden qualities. He has held the full-time job for seven years and now grows everything from seed, taking advantage of the botany greenhouses across the street.

Possee clears up one common question I've had about sneezeweed, the name for *Helenium*. It doesn't make people sneeze -- just as goldenrod (*Solidago*) doesn't cause allergies -- but what else could "sneezeweed" refer to? Turns out, it was used as snuff.

The many species of *Helenium* are native to North and Central America and have spawned many cultivars (my favorite: *H. helianthoides* 'Prairie Sunset,' which has purple stems, golden yellow daisylike flowers with a dark ring around the base of the petals).

Generally, the medicinal or recreational qualities of plants -- even when their attributes are proved through rigorous research in addition to cultural wisdom -- are difficult to nearly impossible to extract from garden plants. But then, quality control isn't what we are after when we plant coneflowers; we just want the color and form.

That doesn't mean, however, we can't enjoy knowing that even our coneflowers have medicinal powers, a fact recently re-proved in a study that showed *Echinacea* does protect against colds (as reported in the Seattle P-I in June:

[seattlepi.com/local/321278\\_echinacea26.html](http://seattlepi.com/local/321278_echinacea26.html)). "It's been vindicated!" Possee says.

The plants that Possee tends stretch along Stevens Way on the UW campus. Currently, the garden is about 2 1/2 acres, but in the 1940s and '50s, before Benson Hall was built, Possee says, it stretched all the way to Meany Hall. Still, he has about 1,000 plants to tend in today's garden, in both full and partly sunny beds.

In one of the open, sunny areas, the Mexican hat flower (*Ratibida columnifera*) blooms. This late-blooming perennial, native to North American prairies, is a spritely look for the hot, sunny garden. The bright yellow petals sit well below the cone (or "hat") in the center.



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This striking morning glory grows in a spot at the University of Washington's Medicinal Herb Garden that gets more than six hours of sun each day, a must for good blooms on this traditional cottage garden vine.

*Ratibida* leaves and flowers have been used as a tea with slight analgesic properties, and a decoction of the leaves and stems has been used as a wash to draw out rattlesnake poison (don't try this at home).

In sun to part shade is another North American native that many gardeners know well: the cardinal flower. *Lobelia cardinalis* is a tall, showy plant with shockingly bright, lipped flowers.

It's native to damp places throughout the United States, except for the Northwest. But it grows well here and suits a pond-side garden perfectly.

A chemical in the leaves and seeds of the cardinal flower was used by native people to control bronchial spasms.

There are some garden plants that have been the natural precursor to synthetic drugs of today. Foxgloves (*Digitalis purpurea*) were the source of a heart drug, and willows (*Salix*) have long been known to ease headaches.

The salicylic acid in willows, Possee notes, is also present in *Filipendula*, meadowsweet, which has fragrant flowers reminiscent of cherry candy.

The white flowers on *Eupatorium aromaticum* are a change from other species in the genus. The huge and hugely impressive *Eupatorium* 'Gateway,' an 8-foot-high joe pye weed, is seen around in gardens and stands at the top of the hill in the Northwest Perennial Alliance Borders at the Bellevue Botanical Garden.

Lesser snakeroot, a common name of *E. aromaticum*, is native to the eastern part of the country, along with many other eupatoriums.

In the shady garden, Possee grows *Actaea pachypoda* (syn. *A. alba*). One of the common names of this woodland plant is doll's eyes, because of black spots on the white berries. But if that name creeps you out, you can call it baneberry. Although Native Americans used the roots for a tea, the berries are poisonous and all parts of the plant are considered toxic.

The sap of *Silphium integrifolium* (rosinweed), another North American native prairie plant, was chewed to clean teeth.

Although the Aztecs reportedly used seeds of the annual morning glory vine (*Ipomoea tricolor*) as a hallucinogen during religious ceremonies, gardeners are happy if they can just get the darn thing to bloom. Its clear blue flowers may resemble the obnoxious bindweed (which is a *Convolvulus*), but the true morning glory doesn't try to take over.

Food plants are included in the garden, too -- some that we hear much about, but rarely see in cultivation. That includes quinoa, a highly nutritious grain from South America. Grow it to enjoy its unusual flower heads, then buy the grain at a store.

*Amaranthus* (also known as love-lies-bleeding), is what is called a "cosmopolitan" plant, which makes it sound as if you might run into it in Belltown, but really means "belonging to the world." It creates quite a show with its crimson flower heads that often are so heavy, they droop; it's a fine annual for the garden or containers.

Passionflowers grow well in our gardens, including the Southeast native maypop -- *Passiflora incarnata*. In addition to its uses as a sedative, its ripe fruit, says Possee, is delicious. And it makes a great vine with highly unusual, multilayered flowers.

Many plants are entirely strange to us and to our gardens, but have intriguing qualities. *Porophyllum ruderale* is a herb from the Southwest (it comes as far as California). Its leaves have a flavor that Possee likens to a cross between cilantro and watermelon rind.



ANDREW BUCHANAN

Coneflower (*Echinacea purpurea*) has been used for years to treat symptoms of the common cold.

"I'm convinced that Wolfgang Puck or someone like that is going to make this famous," he says.

We don't need to make medicine from our gardens, but knowing that our garden plants have stories of their own makes for a more interesting landscape.

## RESOURCES

**Medicinal Herb Garden** -- Visit it any day. It is situated on the University of Washington campus on Stevens Way, across from the College of Forest Resources. Keith Possee can be found working in the garden on weekdays. More information: [nmlm.gov/pnr/uwmhg](http://nmlm.gov/pnr/uwmhg)

### Books

"Herbal Emissaries" by Steven Foster and Yue Chongxi (Healing Arts Press, 368 pages, \$19.95)

"Native American Ethnobotany" by Daniel Moerman (Timber, 927 pages, \$79.97)

"Smithsonian Handbook: Herbs" by Leslie Bremness (DK Adult, 304 pages, \$20)

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