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Wild Medicine: Review of *Medicinal Wild Plants of the Prairie* by Kelly Kindscher

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WILD MEDICINE

Medicinal Wild Plants of the Prairie. Kelly Kindscher. 1992. University Press of Kansas, Lawrence, KS. 340 pages. \$25.00 (cloth), \$9.95 (paper).

I am highly enthusiastic about this book as a reference work. It summarizes the literature on the medicinal uses for more than 103 prairie plants. For 43 species, Kindscher gives common, Indian, and scientific names; description; habitat; parts used; Indian uses; medical history; scientific research and cultivation; and information on about 100 of their relatives. Another 60 entries are condensed to 2-4 paragraphs. Full-page line drawings by William S. Whitney of the major species are generally excellent, and all 103 entries have distribution maps. The introduction discusses the region covered, with helpful maps. There's an index, a glossary and a 14-page bibliography. The book is a gold mine of information.

The book dramatically demonstrates how little we know. For all but two species, another, related, species is mentioned to complete the information. Often only a European relative has had its chemical or medicinal properties studied. Every entry suggests several research projects; the information needs are that great!

The book begins with the standard disclaimer, ending "... this book contains descriptions not prescriptions." Then who is expected to buy the book? Only a few people collect useless facts. The book's handsome format suggests a wider market, and that is worrisome. Even repeated accurately, much of the medicinal information on prairie plants is flawed, because of misidentification of the original plant, and taxonomic and linguistic confusion. There is so little scientific study that these errors are being disseminated more rapidly than they are discovered. Unfortunately, using Native American medicinal plants is very stylish and very hazardous.

Kindscher compounds the problem by including several species in the same section. This is no problem for the professional, who is wary of species differences and will notice that it was *Lithospermum incisum* the Blackfeet used but *L. ruderale* that has been analyzed for natural estrogen. I am not sure everyone will. And, for lack of information, Canada milkvetch (*Astragalus canadensis*) is discussed, but the chemical information is from other *Astragalus* species; flowering spurge (*Euphorbia corollata*) is the heading, but at least four other species are discussed, etc. Safety warnings are present but not emphasized. Much medicinal detail is given, but plant identification is not stressed and genera are basically lumped, making mistakes easy.

Curiously missing from the otherwise intriguing information on harvesting and cultivating are warnings about over-collecting wild plants. Aren't we concerned with this for prairie plants? The part used for 26 of the 43 main species is the root: any sustained collecting will seriously reduce abundance.

Despite my concerns, *Medicinal Wild Plants of the Prairie* is an important resource containing information not readily available elsewhere, and a book I'd quickly replace if I lost it. I recommend it highly as a reference, marking the contents "don't try this at home."—Kathleen H. Keeler, School of Biological Sciences, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Lincoln NE 68588-0343.