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Review of *Medicinal Wild Plants of the Prairie: An Ethnobotanical Guide* by Kelly Kindscher

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Medicinal Wild Plants of the Prairie: An Ethnobotanical Guide. Kelly Kindscher. Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1992. xi + 340 pp. Maps, plant drawings, glossary, reference, index. \$25.00 cloth.

This is a book for the advanced amateur. It comes five years after Kindscher's *Edible Wild Plants of the Prairie* which was also an outgrowth of the author's master's thesis (University of Kansas).

Kindscher set two goals for his new book and I believe that he will achieve both. He hoped that it would foster more understanding of the prairie and the uses of its constituent plants, and he wanted to encourage protection, conservation, and reestablishment of the prairie grasslands wherever possible. These goals are shared by many today, but the prairie speaks softly while competing interests such as farming, ranching and commercial development represent loud and politically powerful constituencies. Kindscher points out that people tend to relate to and show more concern for individual species such as pandas, bald eagles, and rare orchids than they do for biological communities like wetland or tall grasslands.

Medicinal Wild Plants of the Prairie contains some good, original maps of the prairie bioregion. The discussion of the Native American tribes who dwelt upon the tall and short grasslands is a brief one and to the point. For some reason the author chose not to include the Ioway tribe. Another deficiency is that the author's information seems almost entirely drawn from extant sources. His original information derives from three visits made to the Rosebud Sioux Indian reservation in South Dakota. Concerning the latter, the author writes:

The traditional Lakotas believe in an oral tradition—that learning comes through experience, discipline, and rituals. From their perspective it is not appropriate for some “white guy” like me to drive up for a few days, ask questions about medicinal plants, then go home and publish his field notes.

Kindscher's account of this interaction is succinct and revealing, and he offers no way around what is a major stumbling block for any non-Indian who wishes to enter the world of Native American healers and return with genuine knowledge or skills. Here both author and book must stand pointed criticism, for without a way to bring new knowledge to the readership, this book and others like it are little more than compendia of previously published opinion, often obtained with the same limitations. While there is no doubt that valuable medical, scientific, and technological information is present and operative in the

native healers' armamentarium, most of the medicines that we use today in the western world had their origin in Central or South America, not in North America. Perhaps this represents some kind of neglect of prairie sources, or of prairie aboriginal culture, or perhaps it is due to the relative sparsity of life forms in the tall grasslands in comparison to the tropical rain forests. Or maybe the native healers of the plains and prairies have guarded their secrets more jealously and effectively. Whether for these or some other reasons, we have not received many useful medicines from the prairie bioregion.

Kindscher's book adds an interesting feature not found in many books in this genre. Each of the forty-three featured species has a discussion of current scientific research. Of the 250 odd plants of the tall grass prairie Kindscher gives detailed account of 43 and a lesser account of another 60. There are no color plates. This is unexpected in a book whose topic is a continual cascade of color from last frost to first frost. But the drawings by William S. Whitney are lyrical. The entire book has a spare elegance about it. (And like many elegant things, it lacks practicality, especially inasmuch as one must go from text to prairie, there being no taxonomic or field guide to facilitate going from prairie to text.)

The glossary is imprecise in places. An example is *carcinoma*: a malignant tumor of the outermost body tissue. This is not correct. The commonest carcinomas are those arising in lung, large intestine, rectum, prostate, uterus, cervix, ovary, kidney, pancreas, and other internal organs. What should have been said is that carcinomas are those malignant neoplasms that arise in tissues derived from primitive ectoderm or endoderm, which are the outer and inner layers of the embryo. (The middle layer of the embryo, the mesoderm, produces tissues that give rise to sarcomas.)

The literature cited section does not list an author named Howard who is the reference source for some significant claims for *Acorus calamus*, sweet flag. The index lists antitumor activity for a half dozen plants but not for the most promising species of all this group, *Glycyrrhiza lepidota*, American licorice. Our North American species contains more glycyrrhizin than *G. glabra*, the commercially used species of Mediterranean origin. And recent data show the products of partial hydrolysis of glycyrrhizin by glucuronidas possess substantial antitumor initiating and promoting activity. (The oleanane triterpenoid glycyrrhizin forms an aglycone, glycyrrhetic acid, which exists in 18 alpha and 18 beta stereoisomeric forms. Both of these are promising antitumor agents.)

I recommend the book to those aficionados of settler Anglo folk medicine and to those who are interested in Native American healing practices. But it is neither an herbal nor a practice manual. But there are not many such compendia

of prairie medical plant knowledge as this. I hope to see more from this author, and more original observations, too. **David J. Harter**, *Director, Department of Radiology, Immanuel Medical Center, University of Nebraska Medical Center, Omaha.*