

Wilderness Medicines: A world of treasures

by Wally Olson
for the Tundra Times

Alaska's Wilderness Medicines: Healthful Plants of the Far North, by Eleanor G. Viereck, Alaska Northwest Publishing Co., Edmonds, Wash. 1987.

JUNEAU — This book was published two years ago, and how I missed it I don't know! Although it is only 100 pages long, reading it was like pulling a curtain back a few inches to look out and see a whole world of treasures.

Eleanor G. Viereck takes just 38 Alaskan plants and goes through them individually, looking at each in terms of its description, distribution, constituents, medicinal uses and some warnings about possible dangers in using them.

Now that seems simple, but it is not. I am sure the study of each plant takes months of research. It is not as simple as it sounds.

First, it requires that Native people or long-time residents provide the original information about the plants and their medicinal uses. Secondly, a botanist has to identify the plants by their scientific names and their distribution. Next, a person with a background in organic chemistry has to determine just what ingredients are found in each of these wild plants.

Native informants work with field researchers to go over the medicinal uses and prepare any warnings that are necessary in the use of these plants.

The result of all this so far is a small, but very valuable book. For generations to come, people will now know that certain plants are not just pretty or have edible berries, they will understand that the leaves, bark, roots and seeds may have important medical uses.

Around our house we have raspberries, roses, spruce, strawberries, cur-

rants and dandelions — every one of which has medicinal uses that we never knew about before. Like ourselves, many Alaskans have no idea of the value of the plants growing right in their back yard.

For example, in Southeastern "Devil's Club" is said to be useful for many medical problems, and today research is continuing to see about its possible use in the control of diabetes. Common Yarrow has been used as a medicine in many parts of the world for a variety of problems. What some people consider a weed may actually be medically important.

The author has done a great service by putting together this small booklet. She has shown us what can be learned about the plants around us if we use the wisdom of Native elders and medical and chemical specialists to discover the curative powers of local plants.

After looking at *Alaska's Wilderness Medicines* I became increasingly aware of the need to gather this kind of information before the knowledgeable elders pass away. A statewide project to inventory the medical plants of Alaska could have many kinds of benefits.

For example, Native nonprofit corporations, university researchers and medical specialists could all cooperate. Think of the bridges of international cooperation that might be built if the research were extended to the Soviet Union and Canada where Native people also have a wealth of information. There must be grants and funding available for this type of practical study.

Some people may see this as just another way to take traditional information and turn it into a profit for non-Natives. I think the problem might be solved by setting up a trust fund for

A BOOK REVIEW

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all profits, or at least all royalties, derived from this research. Those funds could be used to help the elderly or provide scholarships for Natives who want to work in the field of health and medical services.

Such a project would be a lot of work if it were to be done right. But think of the possible benefits. For instance, just last summer, Elwood Thomas of Klawock, was telling my wife and I about a medicinal plant that a Haida had used to alleviate heart pain. He called it "Hadia heart medicine."

However, Elwood did not know which plant the Haida used. Maybe there are "wonder drugs" growing wild in our own neighborhood that could save lives if only we knew where to look. Many of our modern medicines were discovered by studying the use of plants by local people.

Viereck's book is small, but it is filled with practical information, and it is proof that we have a lot to learn from elderly people who have a knowledge of the medicinal uses of plants. Most of the information is slowly disappearing.

I recommend that high schools use *Alaska's Wilderness Medicines* as a short textbook on local plants and their uses. It can lead to not only factual information, but mutual respect between Natives and non-Natives, between elders and young people, between those looking for scientific information and practical application.

I didn't see this book when it first came out, but now that I have found it, I am putting it in my special collection of important books on Alaska.

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