



Remembering the Garden: Seeding Peterborough's Community Medicine Garden

By Kelly McDowell

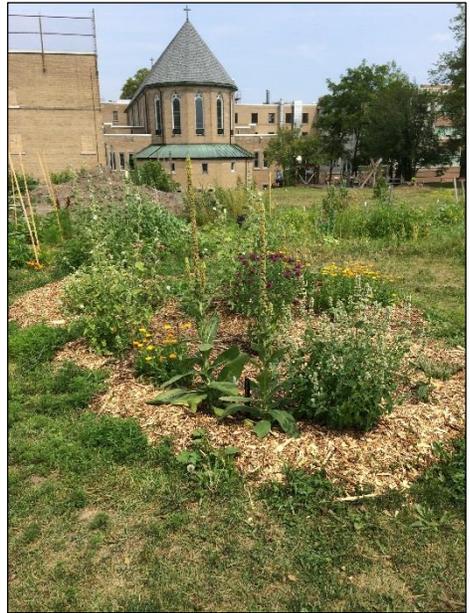
I was standing ankle-deep in the cold wet mud when it hit me. As the slick, soft earth seeped between my toes, my senses heightened in anticipation and absolute presence. Every cell of my body said: "Pay attention to this." I watched my companions on their knees in the mud, struggling to wrangle the treasure of Cattail buds, then radiate with joy upon securing them. There was a childlike wonder in the thrill of mucking about, a scientist's curiosity about the ebb and flow of wetlands and the different uses of Cattails and then there was the fellowship. *In that moment, I felt a deep visceral knowing: this is the way we were meant to be.* Together. Foraging together, preparing food together, learning, eating, mourning and celebrating together.



I was studying with my teacher Steven Martyn, in Golden Lake, at the Sacred Gardener School. We were there to learn about medicinal plants, medicine making, foraging, and homesteading. But more than anything we were there to explore something much greater; to learn how to listen to the land and to remember our rightful place with her. Although the official school is a two-year program, in truth the learning that was initiated could not but otherwise continue through to our dying days and beyond. Moving through and perhaps beyond the depth and breadth of our (de)colonization is the work of generations. And so, in graduating we were gifted with the necessity to humbly show up and step back over and over again.

Returning from the school was always tragic. Once you see the level of desecration and abject poverty of our everyday world, you cannot unsee it. Within the grief and cognitive dissonance of it all, a vision arose, formed a seed, and was cast out. Imagine; tending the soil together, harvesting together, and making and sharing medicine together, here in Peterborough-Nogojwanong. And so, nourished by a few herbalists, gardeners, The Mount Community Centre, the Rotary Club of Peterborough Kawartha and Nimigon Tree Service, a modest community medicine garden was planted. Unlike the usual community gardens, which consist of individual allotments, ours was to be collectively 'owned'. Whoever is a part of the planting, tending and harvest is welcome to the bounty. The balance is shared with the broader community through free workshops. Side by side we would share the old ways of working with the plants and together we would bring this knowledge, health, and wealth back to our people.

There was a time when almost every Grandmother knew how to use plants to heal colds, coughs, and simple wounds. These plants that we so often disparage as weeds had, in fact, saved our ancestors time and time again. Those plants not indigenous to Turtle Island were brought along intentionally and for good reason. They were food and medicine that the settlers knew they would need. As a species, we have co-evolved alongside these beings and by consciously working with them, we can come into an embodied understanding of our interconnected place in creation. Plants have so much to teach us if we have the willingness to get off our high horse, get on our knees and be of service.



Many esteemed herbalists have spoken about the practice of herbalism as being an act of remembrance. Remembering in the sense of re-remembering or the act of making whole again. Working with medicinal plants reminds us of the infinite ways we are nourished, supported and healed by the earth and all of her other than human beings. Working with plants reminds us and brings us back into relationship with the land, our histories, ancestors and the traumas that severed our relationships to begin with. In the spirit of remembrance, the Peterborough Community Medicine Garden has recently partnered with The Hutchison House Living Museum. Together we are revitalizing the property's medicinal gardens and offering free medicine making workshops.

As the very foundation of our civilization becomes more precarious, it is clear that we need to make some very big changes. Realigning or coming into right relationship with nature is essential for future generations, as will be the need for herbal knowledge. This project aspires to reacquaint us with these herbal healers and to restore our capacity to sustainably work with them and care for each other.

The initiative is working as an emergent self-organizing collective. This means it is a community/capacity building initiative determined by who shows up. If any of this is of interest to you, we would welcome your presence. Follow us on Facebook at [ptbocommunitymedicinegarden](#) or email ptbocommunitymedicine@gmail.com . To learn more about Steven Martyn and the Sacred Gardener School, check out their website at <https://thesacredgardener.ca/>