

Jake Swamp: There's an opportunity in the world... to come together

Food & Health - Planting a Garden and Harvesting

By Christine Graef
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Jake Swamp

"There's an opportunity in the world right now for people to come together," said Tekaronianeken, Jake Swamp, Wolf Clan sub-chief of the Kahníakehaka (Mohawk Nation). "I can feel it. There are groups working on their own things. Something is going to pull these people together."

At the four-day annual Sacred Circle hosted by the Tree of Peace Society that Swamp founded in 1984, he spoke to a group of people from around the continent about the sharing of knowledge that will give all people a commonality to survive.

Among them was Dale Bellisfield, RN and Clinical Herbalist from New Jersey. As one of the speakers, she led a group around the property with Nancy Slowick, director/naturalist of the Greenbrook Sanctuary Palisades in New Jersey.

Stooping beneath a hickory tree, Bellisfield pointed to a yellow tansy, member of the aster family.

"These were the last to be created in the creation theory," she said. "They bloom late in the season."

The whole plant has medicine, she said. There are more than 600 species of asters in Akwasasne. There are so many grasses in the world, they each have tribes.

Nearby is timothy, a tall green grass looking much like corn plants with the joints in the stems. Further along the walk, she shows a group of people the tart gooseberries on a small tree whose leaves look much like maple leaves. The berries are an anti-oxidant especially good for the eyes. Yarrow, plantain, basswood, thistle, white campion, jewelweed, may apples and a myriad of other flowers growing wild on the property were examined for what they offer in healing.

Bellisfield and Slowick have been working with Swamp for the past 10 years to create a herbarium for educational use housed at the Akwasasne Museum's Cultural Center.

"Eighty percent of the world uses traditional medicines as a primary treatment," said Bellisfield.

Citing statistics, she said that 784,000 people die in America from medical errors, compared to 37 people who die from herbs misidentified or misused.

"We have thousands and thousands of years of safe use in our traditions," she said. "That counts for a lot."

Eighteen years ago, before she knew anything about plant medicine, Bellisfield had a dream she was in her ancestral Ireland home looking over a forest valley. Native people and her people were getting picnic tables ready for a ceremony. Instructions at the event were to be for her.

"(In the dream) I was offered a white plate," she said. "On this plate were all my ancestral plants. I was instructed to eat them."

Bellisfield woke up with the taste of that in her mouth. Soon after, she found her first herbal teacher. She's been studying the plants ever since, including European, American Indian and Chinese traditions.

Now a member of the American Herbalist Guild she currently is the herbalist at the St. Barnabas Health Care System's Siegler Center for Integrative Medicine in Livingston, New Jersey, and integrates her skills with physicians at the Kessler Institute for Rehabilitation, mentors medical students and works in private practice.

"Animals self-medicate," she said. "Even caterpillars, if they have an intestinal fungus, will pick a kind of plant to eat that helps that."

We have relationships with plants that declined in the 19th century and resurged in the last 20 years. Among forms used today include foods, water extracts, alcohol tinctures, capsules, glycerins, essential oils, poultices and syrups."

"Practitioners want to pull out active ingredients," said Bellisfield. "But plants are smarter than that. They have a dynamic of ingredients that strengthen its use."

Slowik, an environmental scientist, showed how to recognize different families of plants by their petals, the swollen seed bladders and identifying marks beneath leaves.

"Flower petals attract insects," she said. "Because plants don't move, they have to make themselves beautiful. This is all about advertising. After they drink the delicious nectar, they'll see another similar flower and land on it."

Many of the plants seen, such as plantain and queen anne's lace, were non-Native but had been studied for medicinal properties when they rooted in this continent.



Wild Orchid and other plants were examined and discussed in order to understand the medical and nutritional value.

Photo by Alicia Graef

The flowers teach us that there are also look-alike imposter plants that are poisonous.

"Put your glasses on and make sure you know what you're looking at," she advised.

Bellisfield cautioned that each person is an individual, not a disease, and prescribed learning the guidelines from persons qualified in administering the medicines.

During the past 10 years, Swamp invited Bellisfield and Slowick to keep a record of the plants on the Tree of Peace Learning Center for Peace, Cultural and Environmental Studies in Rosie, New York, now being relocated to Bangor, New York.

The two women collected 142 plants, pressed and labeled them, listed where they were found and categorized them under their 56 families. They obtained a \$1,600 donation from the Seventh Generation Company to purchase an insulated cabinet that will preserve herbs for more than 100 years. The Tree of Peace Society Learning Center Herbarium has been placed at the Cultural Center at the Akwesasne Museum.

Swamp's daughter, Kaneratiotha Leona Phillips, is working on a field guide of the plants.

"The hope of these plant samples is to keep knowledge of it alive and also, in the bigger picture, keep culture alive," said Bellisfield.

Swamp said, "Through the hard work of Dale and Nancy over the past 10 years, we have a collection of herb specimens. Now other students can have a resource where they can go and learn."

"One hundred years from now, if people want to know the Mohawk, English or scientific name for these plants and where they were found, it's here," said Slowick.

The project will continue as plants across northern New York State are added to the collection and language speakers add the Mohawk name to the plant which, in many instances, is descriptive of the place and use of the plant.

"Wherever we are in the world, there are certain people born with these gifts, wanting to know about medicine plants," said Swamp. "It's part of them. They want to help others."

In the Mohawk naming ceremony, a newborn baby is introduced to plants because he/she will interact with them in the future.

"Sometimes they have a gift but don't know how to use it," said Swamp. "This is a resource."