Chamomile to calm, echinacea to ward off colds, and bitter young dandelion leaves to aid digestion. These are but a few herbal remedies that were commonly found in our grandmother's cupboards, and even longer ago in ancient apothecaries, when we were much more in tune with the medicinal qualities of plants. Today, a walk in the woods, on the beach, or in our own yard can still reveal a bounty of herbal medicines ready for the picking, including everything from flowers and leaves to roots, bark and berries. Atlantic Canadian herbalists and native healers believe that there is room for a more traditional view on health that includes medicinal herbs, and they've been gathering quite a following.

Herbal enthusiasts

Medical herbalist Savayda Jarone is at the heart of the herbal scene in Nova Scotia. Originally from Sheet Harbour on the Eastern Shore, there was no shortage of wilderness for her to explore as a child; though, it wasn't until she visited a herbal apothecary in London, England in her early 20s that her interest in medicinal herbs was truly piqued. She dove headfirst into the weeds and went off to Dominion Herbal College in Vancouver to study herbal medicines. Coming back to Nova Scotia from British Columbia in 2002, the contrast was stark. “It was still virgin territory at the time. There was very little knowledge of nor interest in herbal medicine,” recalls Savayda. It didn't take long to infuse herself into Nova Scotia's small plant circle and form the Herbal Association of Nova Scotia with a handful of herbal enthusiasts that same year.

Ground Ivy vinegar (made in Savayda Jarone’s herbal course).
Laurie Lacey, a medicine maker of mixed ancestry, including Mi’kmaq and Irish, was part of the association’s founding group. A member of the Canadian Council of Herbal Elders, she feels most at home in the forests and swamps of Lunenburg County and lives in Héberts Cross on a homestead that’s been in the family since the 1890s. His white hair waves like dandelion seeds in the wind as he recounts one of his earliest medicinal plant memories of goldthread, a bitter root used to treat canker sores and stimulate digestion. “I remember I was so fascinated because my father collected the goldthread and sold it to a herb company in Montreal in the 1950s. He must have been so careful because he would come home with goldthread that long (motioning a length of about two feet in length). It would look like gold to me.” Watching goldthread roots dry over the woodstove, the smell of balsam fir, and the taste of burdock bitters left their mark on Laurie.

**MI’KMAQ ROOTS**

While an anthropology student at the University of King’s College in Halifax in the early 1970s, Laurie began learning about Mi’kmaq traditions. During his fieldwork, he hitchhiked to Mi’kmaq communities in Nova Scotia and Newfoundland, knocking on doors asking if anyone knew about plant medicine. His gentle, unassuming approach and genuine passion for plants led him to many conversations about Mi’kmaq medicines over countless pots of tea. He learned about plant legends, animal remedies and tree medicines, and so what started as a one-year research project in 1974 turned into his life journey, leading him to become Nova Scotia’s prominent author and illustrator of Mi’kmaq medicine.

Like Laurie, Kevin Barnes is playing an important role in preserving the oral tradition of Mi’kmaq medicines in Newfoundland. He is the western region vice chief of the Qalipu First Nation and the Aboriginal park interpreter in Gros Morne National Park, leading medicine walks and Aboriginal culture programs. Showing an old cut on his finger that was healed with the sap of a balsam fir, Kevin tells how he learned about remedies from his grandmother, a woman from Fortune Bay who later migrated to the Bay of Islands in western Newfoundland to follow the fishing industry. “My grandmother was a real medicine lady. Between the jigs and reels I managed to pick up most of the medicines, her remedies, and her teas.”

What he learned he now shares with a growing number of park visitors, local students, and Qalipu band members eager to learn and reconnect with Mi’kmaq traditions. “I’m just teaching what my grandmother taught me,” he says. Only a few years since Qalipu First Nation was officially formed, Kevin is hearing more and more stories about family herbal remedies from band members who are re-discovering their Mi’kmaq heritage. “It’s definitely a reawakening, no doubt about it.”

Many, including Laurie Lacey, see this reconnection with medicinal plants in particular as a promising sign for preserving Mi’kmaq culture. “The thing that is really encouraging at gatherings (such as powwows) and in Mi’kmaq communities, is that now you see much more interest with the young people in the plant medicines,” says Laurie.

**A BUDDING INTEREST**

From traditional Mi’kmaq use to modern day herbalism, the common use of herbal medicines has waxed and waned over the centuries. Home remedies were once a mainstay in Atlantic Canadian towns, though with the professionalization of medicine and growing pharmaceuticals of the 19th century, herbal apothecaries dwindled in favor of the pharmacy. It wasn’t until changing social attitudes in the 1960s that people began to challenge medical practices and explore alternatives. The last 25 years especially has seen an explosion of alternative medicines and reconnection with the healing power of plants.

Savayda Jarone can attest to the budding interest in herbal medicines. In her first years of practice in Halifax, she observed how, slowly but surely, interest grew in her clinic and dispensary. As it grew, she started offering a year-long course for those wanting to delve deeper into self-care, spending one weekend a month in the woods learning about local plants and their healing properties. The last 25 years have seen an explosion of alternative medicines and reconnection with the healing power of plants.

In the second half of the 19th century, herbal apothecaries have been re-discovered by many, including Laurie Lacey, seeing this as a promising sign for preserving Mi’kmaq medicine and growing pharmaceuticals. From traditional Mi’kmaq use to modern day herbalism, the common use of herbal medicines has waxed and waned over the centuries. Home remedies were once a mainstay in Atlantic Canadian towns, though with the professionalization of medicine and growing pharmaceuticals of the 19th century, herbal apothecaries dwindled in favor of the pharmacy. It wasn’t until changing social attitudes in the 1960s that people began to challenge medical practices and explore alternatives. The last 25 years especially has seen an explosion of alternative medicines and reconnection with the healing power of plants.

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BRIAR HILL

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SALTSCAPES    SEPTEMBER | OCTOBER 2015

Lilah harvesting yarrow. Rooney and daughters Hazel and Hill monthly medicine box; Caitlin New Brunswick Botanical Garden; Chantal Dufour (in purple) and DANIEL AUCOIN

and basil. When not at the Botanical Gardens, Chantal runs identify in their own yards and gardens such as plantain, rose draw attention to common plants that visitors can easily iden-
Chantal, or her colleagues Richard Fournier and Alain Lavoie, identifying plants and their medicinal properties or partici-
picking. To further explore the herbs, there are workshops on floral aromas and delicious tastes of the herbs fresh for the tour of the medicinal gardens taking in the vibrant colours, the summer months.

herbal programming that runs Friday through Sunday during the Botanical Garden in 2011. A unique garden experience in the addition of the medicinal garden and workshop pavilion at steady rise in demand for herbal medicine programming since lead herbalist. “There is a return to a more natural way of heal-
sick this past winter,” she says. She’s already signed up for remedies over the last few months: “I really loved the bitters, Chantal Dufour is seeing the same trend at the New Brunswick Botanical Garden in Edmundston where she is the and garden in Chester Basin on a property they call Briar Hill, aptly named for the brambles growing wild on the land. They grow herbs in their garden and wildcraft what’s readily avail-

MONTHLY MEDICINE BOX

As demand grows, people like Oren Harz and Caitlin Rooney are making it easier for Nova Scotians to access natural reme-
dies. They offer a year round, monthly medicine box for people interested in a regular dose of nature’s medicines. Oren is a clinical herbalist with a passion for herbal education and Caitlin has a keen interest in farming and crafting. Together, they moved their young budding family of five to set up home and garden in Chester Basin on a property they call Briar Hill, aptly named for the brambles growing wild on the land. They grow herbs in their garden and wildcraft what’s readily available for the medicine box. In it, you’ll find herbal salves, syrups, teas and tinctures, nutritive herbal vinegars and seaweeds, as well as their popular herbal aphrodisiac chocolate elixer.
The goal of their Briar Hill medicine box is to provide remedies for general well-being, but more importantly to empower self-care. “They [members] can experience the different herbs and products that they might want or need over the course of the year and really understand all the different ways that herbs can be brought into your life,” says Oren. Annie Murphy from Purcell’s Cove has been using the remedies over the last few months: “I really loved the bitters, elderberry and hyssop—they were crucial to me to not getting sick this past winter,” she says. She’s already signed up for next year and has been passing along remedies to friends.
With the pilot year under their belts, Oren and Caitlin hope to increase the medicine box membership and plan to offer workshops on their land. They balance their work with a full family life with three kids six years old and under—they too are soaking up herbal knowledge. “Our kids can identify several medicinal plants. When Lilah gets a scrape she finds plantain and chews it up and puts it on and makes her own poultice,” says Caitlin.

MUSK’MAQ MEDICINES

The Mi’kmaq have lived in Atlantic Canada for thousands of years and traditionally relied on Mother Nature for nourishment and health. Plant, tree and animal-based remedies were made by medicine mak-
ers for everyday ailments. In his book Mi’kmaq Medicines: Remedies and Recollections (2nd edition), Laurie Lacey explores the Mi’kmaq’s preventative approach to health—wearing plant amulets, participating in sweat lodges and traditional dances, and making herbal remedies to ward off sickness.
Traditionally, a Mi’kmaq healer and medicine maker would hold knowledge passed down through the oral teachings of an elder relative. Some early medicines included drinking spruce tree bark tea to treat scurvy, which was useful for early European settlers, and rubbing owl fat into the skin for aches and pains.
Plant legends were also an important part of Mi’kmaq lore. Though many are now lost, Laurie Lacey writes about plant legends, sharing how it was believed that certain plants could disappear and reappear in different locations, if the proper ritual was not performed when approaching the plant or that one had to follow a specific bird in order to find a medicinal herb.

The arrival of Europeans to North America at the turn of the 16th century for fishing and trading activities meant several changes for the Aboriginal people. The impact was large as it’s estimated that by the late 1570s, there were a total 400 vessels from England, France, Spain and Portugal, with about 12,000 men sent to the region each year. Inevitably, Mi’kmaq lifestyle, diet and health changed and new diseases and illness were introduced. Influenza, smallpox, measles and the plague were new threats and not having built up the immunity to these diseases, Mi’kmaq health and life expectancy saw a sharp decline. Plant remedies were put to the test and it was not uncommon for the Mi’kmaq and European settlers to share their knowledge, so much so that to this day it is hard to decipher the origin of certain remedies.

Although threatened by European contact, residential schools and assimilation policies, the knowledge and practice of Mi’kmaq medicines persevered, at times behind closed doors, inside the family home. Today, herbal stories and knowledge are being celebrated as a way to preserve Mi’kmaq culture, of which the work of Laurie Lacey and Atlantic herbalists plays an important role.

Laurie Lacey and the deceased elder Sarah Denny of Eskasoni won a national Herbal Elders Award from the Canadian Herbalist Association this past June for their work in the field of Mi’kmaq medicines.

Muscles, thyme and elderberries for treatment of cold and flu, and oat seed and straw as a nutritive nerve tonic. Chantal Dufour is seeing the same trend at the New Brunswick Botanical Garden in Edmundston where she is the lead herbalist. “There is a return to a more natural way of heal-
ing and health. I see that a lot,” she says. She’s also noticed a steady rise in demand for herbal medicine programming since the addition of the medicinal garden and workshop pavilion at the Botanical Garden in 2011. A unique garden experience in New Brunswick, people are now scheduling their visit around herbal programming that runs Friday through Sunday during the summer months.
Visitors’ senses are stimulated as they set out on a guided tour of the medicinal gardens taking in the vibrant colours, floral aromas and delicious tastes of the herbs fresh for the picking. To further explore the herbs, there are workshops on identifying plants and their medicinal properties or partici-
pants can try to make their own remedies. In the workshops, Chantal, or her colleagues Richard Fournier and Alain Lavoie, draw attention to common plants that visitors can easily iden-
tify in their own yards and gardens such as plantain, rose and basil. When not at the Botanical Gardens, Chantal runs her own home-business, herbal clinic and garden called VVH- Herbes across the border where she lives in Lepine, Quebec. She’s been deep knee in herbal practice for the past 20 years, wading into it by way of an initial desire to care for her chil-
dren naturally. “I started my herbal training for my kids—to be able to care for them and my family. I never thought that I would become an herbalist, clinician or teacher,” she says.