

Nvwoti; Cherokee Medicine and Ethnobotany

by David Winston, A.H.G.

Cherokee medicine is an ancient system of medical and spiritual knowledge and practices that developed over the last 3,000–4,000 years. This system, known as Nvwoti, is still practiced in the mountains of North Carolina¹. Although there has been tremendous change for the Cherokee over the past 300 years, a core of indigenous belief and plant use remains. Training in Cherokee medicine takes 15–20 years and the apprentice (chila) needs to master seven interconnected areas of knowledge:

- Herbal Medicine:** an in-depth knowledge of 600–800 plants, their medicinal and ceremonial uses as well as the plants “personality”.
- Physical Medicine:** including the unique Cherokee massage (Hiskoliya) using persimmon wood stamper, moxabustion, minor surgery, and midwifery.
- Dreamwork:** not only how to interpret dreams, but how to use them for personal growth, healing, and to gain knowledge.
- Language/Myths/Laws:** Cherokee is a language of amazing subtlety and power. The chila learns not only the subtleties of every day spoken Cherokee, but a separate “medicine” language. Stories, myths, and laws give meaning to the world and help us to understand our place in the Great Life.
- Ceremonies:** the Cherokee traditionally had 7 major ceremonies that marked the important yearly cycles, such as the Spring planting, first harvest of green corn, mature corn harvest, falling leaves, and winter solstice. Most of these ceremonies are still done today and are as meaningful now, if not more so, than in times past. Ceremonial practice includes various types of personal, family, community, and national ceremonies that help maintain balance within the individual, the family, the community, and the nation.
- The laws of nature:** keen observers, the Cherokee have for thousands of years paid attention to the world around them. This collected body of knowledge is extensive and it explains why things act as they do and the cause and effect of their interrelationship—why animals behave certain ways, how the sun and moon interrelate, how men and women interact, the nature of water, the fire, the earth (ela), etc.
- Conjuring:** although there is no really good word in English to describe this, various words – conjuring, magic, manipulation – partially explain this practice. This is the ability to enlist the aid of spirits and elemental powers to change things, to heal or doctor, to “change one’s mind”, to bring luck, and to protect the sick or weak from negative influences.

When the world was still young, the Cherokee (Ani Yvwiya) received much of their traditional medicine and ceremony from two sources. Stone Clad (Nvyunuwi), an ancient wizard (ada’wehi), showed the

people the dual nature of life. First he preyed on the Cherokee, then later when they killed him he gave them many of their songs, ceremonies, and formulas. The other source of Cherokee medical knowledge was the plants themselves.

This is a story my uncle told me when I was a boy: In the beginning of this world when life was new, all manner of new creatures came into this world. There was Awi the deer, Yvna the bear, Justu the rabbit, Gili the dog, Suli the buzzard and many others. Last of the creatures born was a strange new animal called man. In those days every living thing could communicate with one another because they spoke a common language. People could talk to animals or the water, the plants, the fire or the stones. All beings respected and understood each other and took only what each needed to live. But gradually within man something began to change. People forgot they were a part of one Great Life: they neglected to maintain a harmonious way of being (duyukta). They would take more than they needed and showed disrespect for other creatures. Instead of taking one deer, they would kill an entire herd, taking only the choice meat and leaving the rest to rot. They poisoned whole pools of fish instead of catching a few. They trampled insects and other small creatures through dislike or carelessness. As people continued to separate themselves from the rest of the Great Life and disregard the Laws of Nature, they forgot how to speak the original language. When the animal nations came together in council, they would ask “What do we do about the problem of man?” The bear nation held a council and the Great White Bear asked his people this question. Their answer was to declare war on man. To give themselves a chance against the more numerous and aggressive man, they decided to make themselves a bow and arrow. When it was made, one of the warrior bears drew back the bow and fired. The arrow flew wildly landing nowhere near the target. The bear offered to chop off his claws so he could be a better bowman, but the Great White Bear stopped him, reminding the bears that the Great Life had provided the bears with their claws and teeth to feed and defend themselves. If they tried to change what they were, then they became no better than man. Hearing this, all the bears agreed and the council disbanded.

Over the years other animal nations held their councils but they too could come to no conclusion what to do about the problem of man. Finally the creeping, crawling nation—the insects—held a council and they decided to give man disease. As they shouted out the name of each disease—liver disease, heart disease, pain in the joints, fever—these illnesses came into the



David Winston

David Winston is an herbalist and ethnobotanist with over 32 years of training in Cherokee, Chinese and Western herbal traditions. He is an internationally known lecturer and teaches frequently at medical schools, symposia and herb conferences. In addition, David is a founding/professional member of the American Herbalists Guild.



Chelone glabra

world. Every man, woman and child was afflicted, and many died, but a few began to recover. So in order to rid themselves of man completely, the chief of the insects, the White Grubworm went to the chief of the Green People, Grandfather Ginseng (yvwi usdi). He asked Grandfather Ginseng to help the insects totally destroy mankind. The plants are a patient people and the ginseng plant asked for four days to pray and think about the decision. After four days Grandfather Ginseng said, "We have heard your words and there is much truth in them. People have hurt and abused us as much or more than they have you. But we also understand that man is still young and foolish, and we are all part of the same Great Life. So we have decided that if people come to us in a good way, a sacred way, we will help them by giving them the cure for every disease which you, the insects, have made."

This is a promise made to us by the Green People and to this day they honor their pledge by providing us with food and medicine. It is still a common practice among Cherokee herbalists to walk through the woods allowing the needed medicine to announce itself by unusual shaking or other obvious signs.

The botanical diversity in Western North Carolina is extensive; it is estimated that in times past the average Ani Yvwiya would have been familiar with 100–200 plants and a medicine priest (didahnewisgi) might know as many as 800 useful plants. From this tremendous quantity of available plants, many commonly used Cherokee medicines made their way into American medical practice. We can thank the Cherokee and other Eastern native peoples for introducing many of our most popular botanical remedies. (See table on page 47)

While many useful plants became widely used by herbalists and physicians, others were underutilized or totally neglected. Today, many herbalists limit their materia medica to a small variety of herbs. This over-reliance on a few plants has contributed to the decimation of many wild plant populations. (i.e. ginseng, ladies slipper, goldenseal, bethroot, and more recently *Echinacea angustifolia*, Lomatium, and Helonias). Are we using these plants with respect? The Cherokee use a great variety of medicines not only to prevent over utilization of species, but also because they believe that every plant has its specific use in relationship to human ailments.

Contributions Towards a Cherokee Pharmacopoeia

Each plant in this obviously partial listing is an effective medicine and, equally important, is abundant throughout large areas of the U. S. or is easy to cultivate*.

*BALMONY (*Chelone glabra*)

Taste: bitter

Energy: cool, dry

Part Used: herb

Western classification: aperient, anthelmintic, bitter tonic, cholagogue.

Balmomy or Turtlehead is a beautiful herb with either white or pink flowers (*C. lyoni*). It grows in damp deciduous woods and is frequently found along side of small branches (creeks). Balmomy is an effective digestive bitter stimulating saliva, gastric, liver and gall bladder secretions. It is especially useful for people with poor fat metabolism, usually accompanied by gas, nausea, belching and a chronically sluggish bowel. Associated skin problems (psoriasis, eczema, or acne) and non-hepatitis jaundice respond to its effects as well. Mixed with other anthelmintics (elecampane, garlic, wormseed, quassia) it is useful in treating pinworms and giardia.

Dosage: Herb tea: 1 tsp. dried herb to 8 oz. of water, steep 1 hour. Drink 4 oz. before meals. Extract: 30–40 drops, 3 times per day.

DOGWOOD (*Cornus florida*)

Taste: bitter

Energy: cool, dry

Part Used: bark, flower, berries

Cherokee Name: Kanvsita

Western Classification: anodyne, antiperiodic, anti-spasmodic, astringent, bitter tonic.

The dogwood is a small, shrubby tree, with lovely early spring flowers. The white flowers (they are actually sepals) have been used as a substitute for chamomile for colds, colic and flu. The bark was once used similarly to quinine for malaria and other periodic fevers. It is still useful for many chronic low grade fevers, especially if accompanied by diarrhea or muscle aches. Lower back pain, prolapsed uterus and muscle spasms (legs and feet) all respond to regular use of the tea. Mixed with butternut bark, dogwood is effective for pinworms in children. Externally the bark poultice can be used as a wash for bed sores and ulcers.

Dosage: Bark tea: 1/2 tsp. dried bark to 8 oz. of water. Decoct 15 minutes, steep 1/2 hour. Drink 4 oz. 3 – 4 times per day.

DWARF GINSENG (*Panax trifolium*)

Taste: sweet, bitter

Energy: cool, moist

Part Used: root, leaf

Cherokee Name: Yunwi Usdi

Western Classification: adaptogen, carminative, nutritive.

Common name	Latin Binomial	Traditional Cherokee Use
black cohosh	<i>Actea racemosa</i>	rheumatism, andodyne, emmenagogue, backache
bloodroot	<i>Sanguinaria canadensis</i>	coughs, fungal infections, antiseptic
blue cohosh	<i>Caulophyllum thalictroides</i>	nervine, parturient, andodyne, rheumatism
butternut bark	<i>Juglans cineria</i>	laxative, liver tonic
collinsonia	<i>Collinsonia canadensis</i>	swollen breasts, sore throat
ginseng	<i>Panax quinquefolius</i>	adaptogen, bitter tonic, nervous problems
goldenseal	<i>Hydrastis canadensis</i>	stomachic, bitter tonic, antiseptic
lobelia	<i>Lobelia inflata</i>	emetic, antispasmodic-palsy, expectorant
mayapple	<i>Podophyllin peltatum</i>	laxative, cathartic
passionflower	<i>Passiflora incarnata</i>	liver pain, earache, nervine
pink root	<i>Spigelia marilandica</i>	vermifuge
pleurisy root	<i>Asclepias tuberosa</i>	expectorant, heart trouble, bronchitis, pleurisy
poke root	<i>Phytolacca americana</i>	rheumatism, skin conditions, as poultice for swollen breasts
prickly ash	<i>Zanthoxylum spp.</i>	arthritis, joint pain
sassafras	<i>Sassafras albidum</i>	skin problems, rheumatism, eyewash, carminative, gout
slippery elm	<i>Ulmus fulva</i>	bulk laxative, diarrhea, sore throat, heartburn
tobacco	<i>Nicotiana rustica</i>	antiseptic, expectorant, emetic, antispasmodic, tetanus, snakebite
wild indigo	<i>Baptisia tinctora</i>	emetic, purgative, as poultice for inflammation and gangrene
wild yam	<i>Dioscorea villosa</i>	heart pain, intestinal pain, menstrual pain
witch hazel	<i>Hamamelis virginiana</i>	sore throat, bath sores, bruises, rheumatism, tuberculosis

The small, delicate dwarf ginseng is a common spring ground cover in Eastern deciduous woods. The small bulbs are edible (rather bland and starchy) and can be cooked in winter stews to strengthen the lungs and resistance to colds. The leaves (which contain ginsenosides) are added to almost any traditional herb formula to increase its effectiveness and activity. The dwarf ginseng, like its larger relative, is used for fatigue, nervous exhaustion, allergies, anorexia and depleted conditions such as chronic fatigue, TB, and mononucleosis.

Dosage: Leaf tea: 1 tsp. dried leaf to 8 oz. of water, steep 1 hour. Drink 2–3 cups per day.

RABBIT TOBACCO (*Gnaphalium obtusifolium*)

Taste: sweet, bitter

Energy: cool, dry

Part Used: herb

Cherokee Name: Katsuta Equa

Western Classification: astringent, carminative, diaphoretic, expectorant, nervine.

Common in fields and clearings, rabbit tobacco is frequently found in Cherokee homes as a remedy. The tea is used for colds, flu, coughs, diarrhea, strep throat, and children's fevers. Mixed with other medicines it is also used for colitis (with wild yam and catnip), asthma (with lobelia, wild cherry bark, and sweet cicily) and vaginal candidiasis (with yellow root). Externally the tea is applied to cuts, sore muscles and bruises. The leaves are chewed by some people in preference to tobacco, others mix the two to moderate tobacco's emetic qualities.

Dosage: Herb tea: 1–2 tsp. dried herb to 8 oz. of water, steep 40 minutes. Drink 2–3 cups per day.

SOURWOOD (*Oxydendron arborum*)

Taste: sour

Energy: cool, dry

Part Used: leaf

Cherokee Name: Udoqueya

Western Classification: antiseptic, astringent, diuretic, nervine.



Cornus florida

Martin Wall



Martin Wall

Rhus glabra

Sourwood with its racemes of white bell-like flowers is a favorite pollen source for mountain bees. The honey from this source is famous for its unique taste and fragrance. In contrast to the honey's sweetness the leaves are tart and drying. The leaf tea is an effective urinary tract antiseptic primarily due to its arbutin content. Chronic UTIs with burning urine respond well to its soothing action; it is also beneficial for BPH. The tea is also frequently used for aphthous stomatata, thrush, edema, chronic prostatitis, diarrhea, nervous stomach and frazzled nerves (a nice hot cup of the tea with a generous dollop of sourwood honey works wonders!).

Dosage: Leaf tea: 2 tsp. dried leaf to 8 oz. of water, steep 40 minutes. Drink 2–3 cups per day.

SPICEBUSH (*Lindera benzoin*)

Taste: pungent, sweet

Energy: warm, dry

Part Used: bark, leaf, fruit

Cherokee Name: Nodatsi

Western Classification: antiseptic, carminative, diaphoretic, emmenagogue, expectorant.

Spicebush is one of the most common understory shrubs throughout second or third growth Eastern forests. Early in the spring it is covered with small yellow flowers which perfume the air. Every part of spicebush (also known as spicewood) is medicinal; the tea of this herb is used extensively for colds, flu, coughs, nausea, indigestion, croup, flatulence, and amenorrhea. The inhaled steam is used to clear clogged sinuses and the decoction of the twigs makes a soothing bath for arthritic pain (some of the tea is also taken internally). Spicebush is also commonly used as a beverage tea and the fruits can be used as a spice in baking.

Dosage: Bark/Herb tea: 1 tsp. dried herb to 8 oz. of water, steep 1 hour (covered). Drink 2–3 cups per day.

SUMACH (*Rhus glabra*, *R. copallina*, *R. typhina*)

Taste: sour

Energy: cool, dry

Part Used: berry, bark

Cherokee Name: Qualagu

Western Classification: alterative (bark), antiseptic, astringent, diuretic.

Sumachs are small shrubby trees that have highly visible clusters of bright red berries each autumn. Its toxic relative poison sumach (*R. vernix*) has white fruit and prefers swampy areas instead of the dry open environ-

ment where other sumachs are found. Sumach berry tea is highly effective for urinary tract infections (it acidifies the urine), thrush, aphthous stomatata, ulcerated mucous membranes, gingivitis and some cases of bed wetting (due to irritated bladder). The fruit tea can be taken hot or chilled as a refreshing beverage similar in taste to hibiscus or rose hips. The bark is a strong astringent (used for diarrhea, menorrhagia) and it has a pronounced effect on the female hormonal system. Traditionally, the bark is used for alleviating menopausal discomfort (hot flashes, sweating) and as a galactagogue. Externally the berry or bark tea has been used as a wash for blisters, burns and oozing sores.

Dosage: Berry tea: 1 tsp. dried fruit to 8 oz. of water, steep 30 minutes. Drink 2–4 cups per day.

Bark tea: 1/2 tsp. dried bark to 8 oz. of water. Decoct 15 minutes, steep 1 hour. Drink 4 oz., 3 times per day.

SWEET CICELY (*Osmorhiza claytoni*)

Taste: sweet

Energy: warm, moist

Part Used: root

Western Classification: carminative, demulcent, expectorant, immune tonic, nutritive.

Sweet cicily is a small herbaceous member of the Apiaceae family. Growing in moist woodlands, it is easy to overlook until you sample its sweet anise-tasting root. Cherokee have long considered this root to be an important medicine for increasing strength, weight, and resistance to disease. The tea can be used for colds, sore throats, dry coughs, flu, and digestive disturbances (gastritis, nausea, gas). Sweet cicily strengthens what the Chinese call the “wei qi”, making it useful for preventing colds and other external pernicious influences. The root can be used as a substitute for licorice or astragalus with many similar applications.

Dosage: Root tea: 1 tsp. dried root to 8 oz. of water. Steep 2 hours (cooking 3–4 hours is even better). Drink 2–3 cups per day.

TULIP TREE (*Liriodendron tulipifera*)

Taste: bitter

Energy: cool, dry Part Used: bark

Cherokee Name: Tsiyu

Western Classification: anodyne, astringent, bitter tonic, febrifuge.

Tulip tree or tulip poplar is a large, straight growing member of the Magnolia family. Its yellow, green and

orange flowers are large and showy and they mature into a densely packed cone of winged seeds. The smooth young bark harvested in the spring makes a wonderful basket perfect for gathering herbs or berries. This same bark is used as a medicine for periodic fevers, diarrhea, pinworms, as a digestive aid, and for rheumatic pain. The decoction is used as a bath for fractures, sprains, and hemorrhoids and is applied to snakebites received in dreams (if left untreated, traumatic arthritis will often develop in the area bitten).

Dosage: Bark tea: 1–2 tsp. dried bark to 8 oz. of water. Decoct 20 minutes, steep 1 hour. Drink 4 oz. 3 times per day.

***YELLOW ROOT** (*Xanthorhiza simplicissima*)

Taste: bitter

Energy: cool, dry

Part Used: root

Cherokee Name: Dalanei

Western Classification: antibacterial, antifungal, anti-septic, bitter tonic, cholagogue.

Yellow root is a shrubby berberine containing plant that is found growing along branches and springs. It is abundant throughout the southeast and is regularly substituted for the increasingly scarce golden seal. *Xanthorhiza* is milder than *Hydrastis* but is more appropriate for long term use. It is especially effective as a digestion/liver bitter for people with sluggish bowels, a tendency towards hemorrhoids and faulty fat digestion. Mixed with fresh black walnut hull extract and spilanthes, yellow root is an effective treatment for local (thrush, vaginal candidiasis) and systemic candidiasis. The tea makes a soothing gargle for strep throat, aphthous stomatata, ulcerated mucus membranes, herpes, and pyorrhea. Externally it is useful for conjunctivitis, bedsores, bleeding hemorrhoids, ringworm, and athlete's foot.

Dosage: Root tea: 1–2 tsp. dried root to 8 oz. of water. Decoct 10 minutes, steep 1 hour.

Drink 2 cups per day. Extract: 20–40 drops, 2–3 times per day.

To the Cherokee, the use of herbs is only one tool of many necessary for regaining one's health. Traditionally it was (and still is) believed that it is crucial to not only heal one's body, mind and spirit, but to re-integrate the ill person with the family, the community, and the Earth. This is a holistic perspective beyond our culture's limited understanding. None of us can truly be well unless we recognize our connection to the rest of the Great Life.

The Cherokee reservation is in Western North Carolina. It consists of three separate pieces of land: the largest, Qualla Boundary, is the location of Cherokee, N.C., the seat of the Eastern band's tribal government. The second smaller and more remote piece is called Cheowa Twp. or Tutiyi (Snowbird Indian Community) near Robbinsville, N.C., and the third is a number of smaller parcels of land near Marble, N.C. Much of what has been recorded (i.e. Mooney, Olbrechts) comes from Qualla. Very little has been recorded from Tutiyi where they speak the Atali dialect and still retain some traditions lost in the more developed Qualla.

(This is an expanded version of an article previously published in *American Herbalism: Essays on Herbs and Herbalism* by members of the American Herbalists Guild, Tierra, M. [Ed.], Crossings Press, 1992, now out of print)

To the Cherokee, the use of herbs is only one tool of many necessary for regaining one's health. Traditionally it was (and still is) believed that it is crucial to not only heal one's body, mind and spirit, but to re-integrate the ill person with the family, the community, and the Earth.