



What Is an Herbalist?

Jackie Johnson

Heart members were discussing this question at our meeting last month. The answer seems to be quite perplexing.

Is it someone who cooks with herbs? Or cleans with herbs? Is it the person who has grown them in their backyard for the past forty years and has incorporated them into all facets of their life? Or the person who used them to the point they felt they wanted and needed formal schooling to learn their chemistry, history, and research? Is it the person who gives herb classes? Or the person who hangs out a shingle? Can you be an “herbalist” at 30? Or do you have to be 40 or 58?

In the 90’s and early 2000’s Frontier Natural Products, Norway Iowa, hosted wonderful HerbFests annually. The speakers were off the bookshelves. They were knowledgeable, helpful and willing to share.

Two statements made to me by nationally known herbalists, impacted my herbal being. One was in the context of the person’s career in helping others. He spoke about a client whom he was helping with a particular extract/tincture. He said he had a choice - he could have the gentleman come back every other day for a \$5 tincture, or he could teach him to make it himself. He chose the latter. One can easily appreciate his philosophy.

Another herbalist/author/teacher was asked what it took to become an “herbalist”. He replied “You’ll know when you’re ready to say ‘I am an herbalist’ ”. Rather than setting the bar low, he had set it very high and I think he knew that.

There are many paths to the same destination; there are various types of herbalism. Is one better than the other? No, but perhaps one is a better fit for a particular personality type. If you study any of them, you’ll find each will get the herbalist to a very close result. Maybe not the exact same herb, but with overall similar results - no matter which continent their herbalism is based upon.

What is better - the four year degree from an herbal university, an herbal internship, or 25 year veteran of learn as you go? Is the degree worth the paper it’s written on? It depends. Is 25 years experience worth the title of herbalist? It depends. Does authoring a book make one an herbalist? It depends.

Which one would I want beside me if needed? Personally, my skeptical left-bran personality would prefer someone with both. I value practical experience. But I also want the discipline and focus that comes in the earning of that degree. I remember when earning by BS (in Criminal Justice - true left brainer) thinking why on earth I needed some these classes. Now, years later, I understand. It gives me a greater

perspective; the opportunity to recognize there may be several choices and methodologies to solve a problem.

Whichever method you feel is your best fit, check out the “other” methods. Each is fascinating in its own way and could offer growth and wisdom.