

Free Food Production Prairie

A Response to the
Eroding Ecology of Illinois

text and pictures by Rob Scott



urbana

Prairie: Free Food Production

all art done in ballpoint pen

copyleft, 2001

FARMING CREATES DESERTS

Attention Illinois: the only hope for future human society in your area of the planet is land reform. The oceans of agribusiness are destroying the land you're dependent on - every year farm soil erodes at twice the rate at which a climax forest ecosystem can create soil[1]. The poverty of biodiversity here is a disaster. More than half of Illinois is farmed is row crops, 90% of which is corn and soy. To protest this system is to assume this system, it doesn't tell us how to save the land; generating alternatives is imperative.

In "America's Heartland," environmental conditions over the past 12,000 to 15,000 years favored the development of a grassland biome. This text will focus on a few species of the tallgrass prairie, "an ecosystem that once covered almost 264,000 square miles (68,278,112 hectares) from Canada to Texas and Nebraska to the Great Lakes"[2]. Almost all of it vanished in less than 50 years - it was plowed into farms and overgrazed by domestic livestock. Few conservationists had any interest in prairie before the 1970's and approximately 99.99% of the tallgrass prairie has been destroyed. There is no prairie national park; only part of the remaining 00.01% is protected[2]. Pristine tallgrass prairie is North America's rarest biome.

The Americans who destroyed the prairie, also sealed its linguistic fate, naming many of its plant species "weeds" "worts" and "banes". These "pioneers" didn't come to the midwest to protect nature, but they didn't intend to start the process of desertification either. They didn't foresee the coming waves of industrialization, the breakup of farming communities, or the corporate capitalization and consolidation of land in very few hands. Our farmers have come to make fewer and fewer of their own choices.

Today, the midwest is dominated by less than 5 species in an agribusiness system with disasterous erosion levels and soon-to-be unfarmable soil. The problem can be summed up in three words, CAPITALIST ANNUAL MONOCULTURE, none of which refer to natural

ecosystems. Those who are conscious of food politics should take note that an organic biodynamic vegan diet is compatible with capitalist annual monoculture. Prairie restoration is not, nor could it ever be. Prairie ecosystems exist in perennial polyculture; prairies don't work for capitalism and capitalism doesn't work for prairie.

This is not just a protest pamphlet, it proposes an alternative in production: indigenous prairie species. The protestable "flaws" of the current system of production will disappear when all the soil has eroded away and there are no more farms, and the capitalist annual monoculture kills the human race.

There is no hope for future human society without an economic revolution, but first ecologic revolution, lest the economy become our ecology. A revolting anticapitalist prairie, with people augmenting the number of especially useful species, could attract more people, projects, and proposals for change.

ON THE MEDICINAL USE OF PLANTS

Using plants for medicine is not superstitious. Of all prescription drugs, 25% contain ingredients from flowering plants [3].

As a practice of preventative medicine, a diet balanced with nutritious herbs can fortify the body in ways that staples alone cannot. Staples are rich in vitamins, minerals, carbohydrates, protein, etc.; medicinal herbs contain "secondary" products, which are complex chemicals with various healing properties, such as:

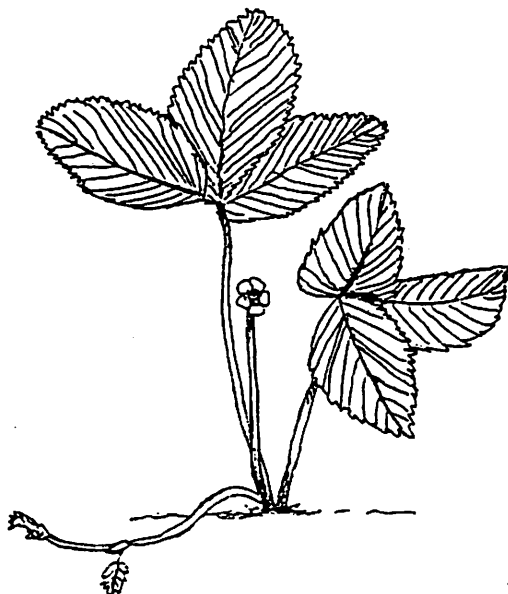
- alkaloids, which are known to affect the human nervous system;
- anthraquinones, which are purgatives and also dyes;
- bitter principles, which stimulate the secretion of digestive juices;
- cardiac glycosides, which can increase the power of the heart-beat;

essential oils, which are aromatic, antiseptic and strengthen the circulatory system;
mucilages, which soothe the whole system and reduce inflammation;
phenolic compounds, which are antiseptic and reduce pain;
saponins, which reduce inflammation and are used as purgatives; and
tannins, which have an astringent effect and aid the sealing of wounds.

There are several other terms which are related to the medicinal uses of various prairie species which are glossed in the final pages of the text. All medical prescriptions are worthy of skepticism... so research your herbs!

The project of using of these plants is still in an experimental phase.

- Rob Scott, July 2001



Fragaria virginiana, **WILD STRAWBERRY**

Height: 4-8 inches

Flowers: white with yellow stamens, mid April up to mid June

Habitat: medium dry

Soil preferences: very adaptable

The fleshy, red, globular fruit is eaten raw, cooked or made into preserves. The succulent fruit is small (about half an inch in diameter) and sweet.

The dried leaves are a very pleasant tea substitute[4, 5, 6] rich in Ascorbic Acid (vitamin C)[7].

The fruits may be used as a tooth cleaner[4, 5] by rubbing them on the teeth, to remove tartar[8].

The whole plant is antiseptic, astringent, emmenagogue, galactagogue and odontalgic[9]. It has been used to regulate the menstrual cycle[9].

A tea made from the leaves has been used as a nerve tonic and is slightly astringent[2].

A poultice made from the dried powdered leaves mixed with oil has been used to treat open sores[8].

A tea made from the roots is diuretic[2]. It has been used in the treatment of diarrhea, irregular menses, gonorrhea, stomach and lung ailments[2, 8].

Allium cernuum, **NODDING WILD ONION**

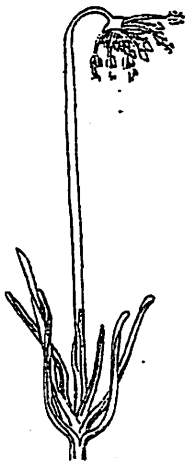
Height: 1-1.5 feet

Flowers: white-pink-lavender flowers in a cluster points downward, mid July to August.

Habitat: medium

Soil preferences: thrives in calcareous soils

Like all Alliums, it produces an edible bulb underground. It is a very strong onion and its use is often limited to



flavoring purposes. The bulb is about 1.5 inches tall and 0.5 inches wide.

The leaves may be eaten raw or cooked. They have a very strong onion flavor. Try the leaves in salads. The leaves are available from spring until the autumn.

The flowers too may be eaten raw or cooked. A delicious strong onion flavor, somewhat stronger than the leaves especially if the seeds are starting to set. They make a pretty and tasty addition to the salad bowl.

The whole plant has mild medicinal activity similar to the action of garlic (*Allium sativum*)[2]. It is used specifically as a poultice on the chest for the treatment of respiratory ailments and the juice has been used in the treatment of kidney stones[2].

The juice of the plant is used in treating colds, flu, sore throats etc.[8].

A poultice of the plant is applied externally to various infections such as sore throats, sores, swellings, chest and lung pains[8].

The juice of the plant is used as a moth repellent. The whole plant is said to repel insects and moles[10]. The juice can be applied to exposed skin in order to repel biting insects[8].

Asclepias tuberosa, BUTTERFLY MILKWEED
(PLEURISY ROOT)

Height: 1-2 feet

Flowers: yellowish-orange in umbels, late June to mid August

Habitat: medium dry

The plant is poisonous if eaten in large quantities[5, 10].

The flower buds are eaten cooked, and they taste somewhat like peas[11].

Butterfly milkweed is distinguished as the only milkweed which does not excrete a latex sap when its stems and leaves are cut.

The young shoots are eaten cooked and are considered to be asparagus substitute[6, 11, 12, 13, 14].

The tips of older shoots are have been cooked and eaten like spinach[11].

The young seed pods may be eaten cooked. They are most appetizing when one inch long, and before the seed floss begins to form[11, 12, 13, 15, 16,].

The flower clusters can be boiled down to make a sugary syrup[6, 11, 12, 13,]. In hot weather the flowers produce so much nectar that it crystallizes out into small lumps which



can be eaten like sweets, they are delicious[17].

An edible oil is obtained from the seed[18]; the small size of the seeds make oil extraction a labor-intensive project

The root may be eaten cooked[11, 12, 13, 14, 16, 19]; it tastes nutty[20]. Some reports say that it is poisonous[6].

Butterfly Milkweed increases perspiration, relieves spasms and acts as an expectorant[21]. It was much used by the North American Indians and acquired a reputation as a heal-all amongst the earlier white settlers[8, 22]. It's best known for relieving the pain and inflammation of pleurisy.

The root is antispasmodic, carminative, mildly cathartic, diaphoretic, diuretic, expectorant, tonic and vasodilator[13, 14, 15, 20]. The root was very popular as a medicinal herb for the treatment of a range of lung diseases, it was considered especially useful as an expectorant[13, 22, 24]. It has never been scientifically examined and warrants further investigation[24]. It has also been used internally with great advantage in the treatment of diarrhea, dysentery, rheumatism etc[13]. Use with caution[15], This remedy should not be prescribed for pregnant women[21]. The root is harvested in the autumn and can be used fresh or dried[21].

A poultice of the roots is used in the treatment of swellings, bruises, wounds, ulcers, lameness etc.[2, 21].

Bark fibers make quality twine, cloth etc[18]. It is easy to harvest in late autumn after the plant has died down by simply pulling the fibers off the dried stems[25].

The seed floss may be used to stuff pillows (etc.) or is mixed with other fibers to make cloth[25]. It is a kapok substitute, used in life jackets or as a stuffing material[25]. The seed floss is very water repellent. The floss has also been used to mop up oil spills at sea.

Candle wicks can be made from the seed floss.

The seed contains up to 21% of a semi-drying oil[18].



Hierochloe odorata, VANILLA GRASS

Height: 1-2 feet

Flowers: amber spikelets grow 2-3 inches long and to one side in May

Habitat: medium wet

Soil preferences: thrives in moist calcareous soils

The fragrant, vanilla-scented grass contains coumarin, which is toxic if taken internally[25] and is sometimes considered to be carcinogenic[2], but may be used as a pesticide (fish poison).

The seeds may be eaten cooked[19], though they are small and fiddly to use. It almost certainly does not contain coumarin and should be safe to use.

An essential oil from the leaves is used as a food flavoring in sweets and soft drinks. It has a strong vanilla-like flavor[6]. The leaves themselves are added to vodka as a flavoring[21].

It can be used as a coloring agent[6].

A tea made from the leaves is used in the treatment of fevers, coughs, sore throats, chafing and venereal infections[2, 8]. It is also used to stop vaginal bleeding and to expel afterbirth[2]. The stems can be soaked in water and used to treat windburn and chapping and as an eyewash[8]. Use caution when taking it internally. The leaves are harvested in the summer and dried for later use[21].

Smoke from the burning leaves has been inhaled in the treatment of colds[8].

The dried leaves are used as an incense[14, 16, 26], and have been used as a stuffing in pillows and mattresses[8]. They have also been used as an insect repellent in clothes pantries where they impart a sweet smell to the clothes[21, 26].

The leaves are used to make aromatic baskets[14, 16, 25, 26, 27]. The wet leaves can be sewn together, dried until they are tight and then resin used over the stitches to make a waterproof container[8].

The leaves can be soaked in water to make a tonic hair wash[8].

An essential oil distilled from the leaves is used in perfumery where it acts as an excitant and fixative for other aromas[21].

The plant has a very aggressive root system and has been planted to stabilize banks[28].

Ceanothus americanus, NEW JERSY TEA

Height: 1-3 feet

Flowers: white, late June to July

Habitat: medium

New Jersey Tea is a prairie shrub which can fix atmospheric Nitrogen in the soil.

A refreshing and stimulating tea is made from the dried leaves; it is a good substitute for black tea though it does not contain caffeine. The leaves are gathered when the plant is in full bloom and are dried in the shade[6].

A green dye is obtained from the flowers[33].

A cinnamon-colored dye is obtained from the whole plant[13].

A red dye is obtained from the root[7, 34].

The flowers are rich in saponins, when crushed and mixed with water they produce an excellent lather which is an effective and gentle soap[25, 33]. The flowers were much used by the North American Indians as a body wash, especially by the women in preparation for marriage, (they leave the skin smelling fragrantly of the flowers) and have since been used to wash clothes.



The roots and root bark of New Jersey Tea was used extensively by Native North Americans to treat fevers and problems of the mucous membranes such as catarrh and sore throats [22]. Today people use the roots because it's strongly astringent (8% tannin), expectorant and antispasmodic, antisyphilitic, hemostatic and sedative[2, 15]; it is employed in the treatment of complaints such as asthma, bronchitis and coughs[22].

The roots and root-bark have a stimulatory effect on the lymphatic system[21], while an alkaloid in the roots is mildly hypotensive[2]. The plant is used internally in the treatment of bronchial complaints including asthma and whooping cough, sore throats, tonsillitis, hemorrhages etc.[2, 13, 21].

A decoction of the bark is used as a skin wash for cancer and venereal sores[24]. The powdered bark has been used to dust the sores[24].

The roots are unearthed and partially harvested in the autumn or spring when their red color is at its deepest. They are dried for later use[21].

Echinacea pallida, NARROW LEAVED CONEFLOWER

Height: 1.5-3 feet

Flowers: light purple petals, brownish-black disk, mid June to mid July

Habitat: medium dry

Soil preferences: undisturbed prairie conditions

One of the most frequently used of Native American herbal remedies. The root of the Echinacea plant has a wide range of applications, many of which have been confirmed by modern science. Studies have linked Echinacea use to increased T cell count and increased rates of phagocytosis (factors in immune system health); polysaccharides are likely the main constituent which helps fight infectious bacteria.



The stimulating effect on the immune system is well known in Germany, where over 200 pharmaceutical preparations are made from Echinacea[2], including extracts, salves, and tinctures, used for wounds, herpes sores, canker sores, throat infections (including Strep), prevention of influenza and colds. It is considered insecticidal and bactericidal.

The plant is also used in treatment of the following conditions: blood poisoning, fevers, boils, acne, eczema, bites from poisonous insects and snakes, erysipelas, gangrene, diphtheria, tonsillitis, sores and infections, wounds (especially hard-to-heal), pustules, abscesses, lymph glands, strep throat, excellent blood cleanser, syphilitic conditions, peritonitis, prevention of growth and development of pathogenic organisms, stimulation of the immune system, typhoid and indigestion. [23]

The roots and the whole plant are considered particularly beneficial in the treatment of sores, wounds, burns etc, possessing cortisone-like and antibacterial activity.

The plant was used by N. American Indians as a universal application to treat the bites and stings of all types of insects[24]. The Native Americans had the victim of a snake-bite chew the leaves and roots of the plant. Swallowing the juice when chewed, the pulp was made into a poultice for the wound area after the bite was lanced with a knife and venom sucked out until blood was flowing. It was thought that doing so, the patient would soon be free of snake-bite symptoms.

The plant is also considered by some to be adaptogen, alterative, antiseptic, depurative, diaphoretic, digestive, sialagogue[13, 15, 16, 20, 24].

It is good to harvest and dry in autumn, saving it for later use.

Pycnanthemum virginianum, MOUNTAIN MINT

Height: 2-3 feet

Flowers: white, July to August

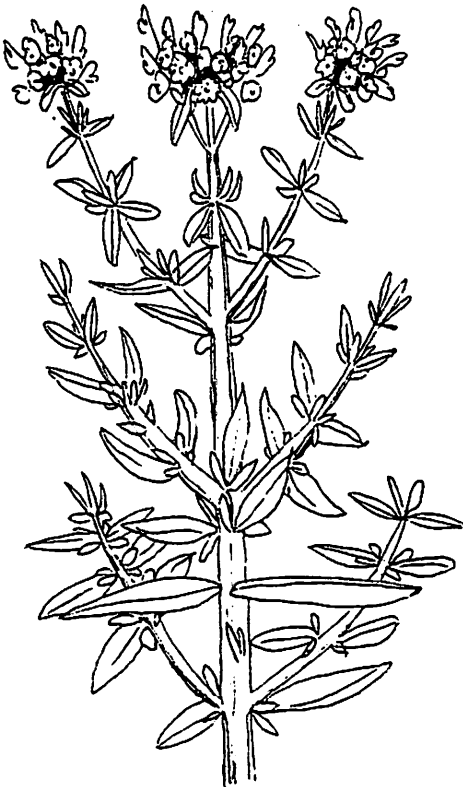
Habitat: medium wet

Soil preferences: adaptable; may grow in dry prairies

Flower buds and leaves may be eaten raw or cooked. They have a strong mint flavor, and may be used as a condiment[6, 16, 21, 29].

The fresh or dried leaves are brewed into a refreshing tea.

A tea made from the leaves is used for fevers, colds, coughs, colic, stomach cramps; said to induce sweating, relieve gas. A poultice of the leaves is used in the treatment of headaches[2].



A tea made from the leaves is alterative[8]. The tea is also used in the treatment of menstrual disorders (amenorrhea or dysmenorrhea), indigestion, and chills[8, 21]. The flowering stems are cut as flowering begins and they can be used fresh or dried[21]. There is a suggestion that this plant can cause abortions, so it is best not used by pregnant women[8]. Natives to North America washed inflamed penis with the tea.

Monarda fistulosa, WILD BERGAMOT (BEEBALM)

Height: 2-4 feet

Flowers: lavender, July to August

Habitat: wet to dry

Soil preferences: will grow in disturbed soil and along forest edges

The leaves are edible raw or cooked. The entire plant above ground level can be used as an herb for flavoring boiled food[6], though it is rather strong smelling and tasting. It is also used as a flavoring in salads and other cooked foods[6, 14, 19, 24]. Try growing it in a pot in the kitchen for seasoning purposes.

The flowers make an attractive edible garnish in salads[6].

The fresh or dried leaves are brewed into a refreshing aromatic tea, and are mixed with black tea in the manufacture of the popular "Earl Grey" tea.

The leaves have also been used as an insect repellent[8].

Wild Bergamot was often employed medicinally by several native North American Indian tribes who used it to treat a variety of complaints, but especially those connected with the digestive system[8]. It is still sometimes used in modern herbalism.

The leaves and flowering stems are carminative, diaphoretic, diuretic and stimulant[2, 13]. An infusion is used internally in the treatment of colds, catarrh, headaches,

gastric disorders, aching kidneys, to reduce low fevers and soothe sore throats[8, 21, 24]. Externally, it is applied as a poultice to skin eruptions, cuts etc. and as a wash for sore eyes[8, 21]. The leaves can be harvested before the plant flowers, or they can be harvested with the flowering stems. They can be used fresh or dried[21].

The plant contains the essential oil 'bergamot oil' which can be inhaled to treat bronchial problems[24].

The leaves also contain 'thymol', an essential oil that can be used to expel gas from the digestive tract[24].



Amorpha canescens, LEAD PLANT

Height: 2-4 feet (height accumulates as with all shrubs)

Flowers: blue-violet-purple, late June to July

Habitat: medium dry

Soil preferences: thrives in undisturbed prairie conditions, will tolerate poor soil

A drought-resistant legume with gray colored leaflets, Lead Plant is one of the few woody prairie shrubs.

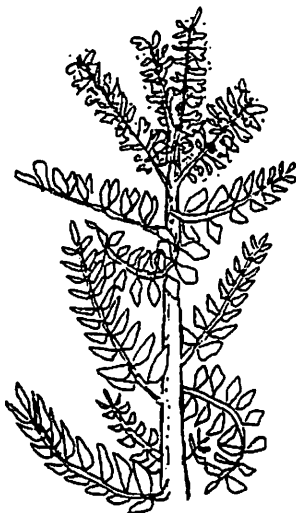
It has an extensive root system, tolerates poor dry soils and is also wind resistant, they are used as a windbreak and also to prevent soil erosion[30].

Resinous pustules on the plant contain 'amorpha', a contact and stomachic insecticide that also acts as an insect repellent[30, 31].

An infusion of the dried leaves makes a pleasant tasting yellow-colored tea[6, 8, 29, 32,].

An infusion of the leaves has been used to kill pinworms or any intestinal worms[8]. The infusion is also used to treat eczema[8]. The dried and powdered leaves are applied as a salve to cuts and open wounds[8].

A decoction of the root is used to treat stomach pains[8].



Helianthus tuberosus, **JERUSALEM ARTICHOKE**
(SUNCHOKE)

Height: 6-9 feet

Flowers: yellow, August to September

Habitat: wet to dry



***A prairie sunflower which was cultivated by Native Americans (original home range unknown), Jerusalem Artichoke has been noted as a very invasive species, and is listed as noxious and invasive by the USDA.**

The plant produces edible tubers which are eaten raw or cooked. The tuber develops a pleasant sweetness after hard frosts in winter, and is then somewhat palatable raw. Otherwise it is generally best cooked until tender, and could be treated as a potato which tastes like Globe Artichoke hearts. The tubers are rich in the carbohydrate inulin (a starch which the body cannot digest) with the fruit sugar levulose, so Jerusalem artichokes provide a bulk of food without many calories, which can be eaten by diabetics. Some people are not very tolerant of inulin, it tends to ferment in their guts and can cause severe gas[17]. The tubers grow to 3 inches long and 2 inches in diameter. The tubers bruise easily and lose moisture rapidly, so they are not good to harvest and store like potatoes; harvest as required for immediate usage.

The inulin from the roots can be converted into fructose, a sweet substance that is safe for diabetics to use[14, 27]. Consuming tubers may aid the treatment of diabetes[2].

Brew the roasted tubers for a caffeine-free "coffee"[6].

The tender seeds could be used as a breadstuff or as a source of sunflower oil.

The plants generate lots of biomass and are used in industry to make alcohol etc.[35].

The fast-growing Jerusalem Artichoke will generate some shade by the end of the summer due to its tall size and dense growth habit. The shade is fleeting however, it thins out when the prairie plants wilt in the winter.

The fast-growing rhizomes make the plant a candidate for bank stabilization.

Natives to North America drank leaf or stalk tea or ate flowers to treat rheumatism.

Glossary

adaptogen - a substance which is considered to help the body adapt to stress and to exert a normalizing effect upon bodily processes

alterative - having the tendency to produce alteration; *esp.* applied to medicines which alter the processes of nutrition, and reduce them to healthy action

amenorrhea - absence or suppression of the menstrual discharge

antisyphilitic - tending to cause syphilis

antiseptic - having the quality of counteracting the decomposition of tissue

carminative - having the quality of expelling flatulence

catarrh - the profuse discharge from nose and eyes which generally accompanies a cold; inflammation of mucus membranes

decoction - a solution made by boiling in water or other liquid so as to extract the soluble parts or principles of a substance

depurative - having the quality of cleansing or purifying

diaphoretic - having the property of inducing or promoting perspiration

diuretic - having the quality of exciting excessive discharge of urine

dysmenorrhea - difficult or painful menstruation

emmenagogue - capable of exciting menstrual discharge

erysipelas - A disease accompanied by diffused inflammation of the skin, producing a deep red color

expectorant - causing the discharge of phlegm from the chest by coughing

galactagogue - capable of inducing the flow of milk

hypotensive - having the quality of lowering the blood pressure (or other bodily fluid pressure)

odontalgic - a medicine for tooth aches

phagocytosis - the process by which a cell engulfs or absorbs bacteria or foreign particles so as to isolate or destroy them

purgative - Causing evacuation of the bowels; aperient

sialagogue - causing an increased flow of saliva

stamen - the pollen bearing organ of a flower

stomachic - related to or altering disorders of the stomach

vasodilator - having the quality of dilating (opening up) the vascular system (veins and arteries)

Footnotes

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DO YOU
KNOW ME?

