

Herbalist Exam Set For October '95

A certification examination in Chinese herbalism will be given in New York City on October 20, 1995, sponsored by the National Commission for the Certification of Acupuncturists (NCCA) located in Washington DC.

About 214 candidates are expected to present themselves, according to NCCA director Colleen Prasil. The same examination was given this past spring in San Francisco to about 300 candidates and, to her knowledge, this pair of exams represents the first attempt in North America to certify competency in Chinese herbalism by means of an examination.

Such certification is but one step in the process of developing a new category of practitioners trained in traditional Chinese medicine. Licensing of herbalists will be the responsibility of the States, some but not all of which now license acupuncturists.

Acupuncture was adopted so quickly in the West, back in the early 1970s, that many who acquired training -- and certainly the public -- had only a dim understanding that acupuncture as a technique is only one aspect of the vast body of empirical knowledge that constitutes traditional Chinese medicine. The crux of this approach to understanding the human mind and body lies in the prevention of illness or imbalance and thus focuses mainly on behavioral issues -- including spiritual practices, diet and exercise. As herbalist and teacher Jeffrey C. Yuen is fond of saying, "In ancient China, physicians received money only as long as the patient stayed well. When sickness occurred, all payments stopped."

Now, in certifying herbalists, the NCCA is helping to compensate for this lack of awareness about the Chinese approach. Herbalists will be required to demonstrate competency in two areas: herbal knowledge and Chinese medical theory. Likewise, acupuncturists are expected to know Chinese medical theory. Competency in all three areas (herbalism, acupuncture and theory) will be required for the doctorate or OMD. At present, North America has very few colleges that prepare candidates for the doctorate, among them the American College of Traditional Chinese Medicine in San Francisco.

Some herbalists view the advent of certification and licensing with trepidation, knowing the long history in the West of harassment of practitioners of the old medicine (including torture and execution during the Inquisition).

HFG SURVIVES DROUGHT

Most of the High Falls Gardens plants have thus far survived the Northeast Drought of '95, thanks to regular hand-watering performed by diligent volunteers. The field crops are located at the Thompson-Finch Farm in Ancram, New York.

A few Columbia County farmers installed irrigation piping in May when accumulated water deficits as of last winter began to threaten this summer's crops. Of course, for piping, a water source is required such as a nearby creek or year-round pond. At the HFG plots in Ancram a new well will have to be dug near the field to support piping. Meanwhile, one of the farmers, either Marnie or Don MacLean, fills a large tank from the main well, pulls the tank into the field with a tractor, we attach hoses and water each plant individually. Such dedication!

In this, the first year of HFG's field crops, we're counting about 700 surviving plants in thirty varieties. Some of these are familiar plants that the Chinese use as medicinals, such as *Isatis tinctoria* (Woad root and leaf) and *Polygonatum odoratum* (Solomon's Seal rhizome). Some have been grown in the West as ornamentals, such as *Houttuynia cordata* (Chameleon Plant) and *Platycodon grandiflorum* (Balloon Flower root). Others, less familiar, are now being propagated by certain North American nurseries that deal in herbs or exotic plants; these include *Anemarrhena asphodeloides* ("Know Mother") and *Schisandra chinensis* (Magnolia fruit).

Most of these plants are perennials that will take from two to five years to mature. All the ones in the Ancram field are first-year plants, so we expect to continue our prayers for rain, mulch well after the ground freezes, and then hope for the best.

However, in this case the NCCA, while giving preference to acupuncturists, clearly recognizes actual practical experience, in lieu of formal training in herbalism, as qualification for this examination.

Over three hundred practitioners had been certified prior to the development of this examination, through credits for academic training and experience. Anyone may obtain a list of NCCA-certified herbalists by sending a written request and \$3 to: NCCA, P.O. Box 97075, Washington, DC 20090-7075. ■

WHOLE FOODS, WHOLE HERBS

With a plethora of herbal products on the market, why should we bother to grow our own herbs? These products may be extracted, concentrated, granulated or otherwise refined and are, above all, convenient. ("Contains the active principle in ginkgo leaf, brain stimulant since ancient times, in gelatin capsules!") A few manufacturers of herbal products are hip enough to use only organic herbs. So what's the problem?

Those who have followed the progress of the whole foods movement of the past thirty years can recognize the irony inherent in this situation. Think of organic pop-tarts. The alternative food market has inevitably demanded convenience foods, complete with an organic label to propitiate the gods of the New Age. Perhaps the time pressures of post-industrial civilization in decline, which make proper food preparation so difficult, are to blame. Yet the same forces are at work on herbs used as medicine. Easier to pop a pill as insurance or magic bullet, rather than to worry about what plants are in it, where they came from, how they were grown and, to the point, how they were processed.

Whole Foods in the Macrocosm

The whole foods movement has taught us sound dietary principles: to respect the integrity of food, to reduce or eliminate dependence on animal protein, and to combine foods for protein complementation and a balanced variety of nutrients. Annemarie Colbin is one of the gurus of the movement and her cookbook, *The Book of Whole Meals* (Ballantine Books, New York NY, 1983), is prefaced with an elegant summary of the whole foods rationale.

Colbin's points have an analog in an understanding of herbs used as medicine. The key issue is plant integrity. When part of the food plant is taken away, the components that make the rest of it digestible, or provide for maximum assimilation by the human body, may be reduced. A well-known example is the B vitamins in wheat bran and germ, discarded when making white flour. As unrefined carbohydrates, fruit and vegetable sugars may be Nature's way of enticing us to eat these foods. But when we extract the sugars -- cane sugar, fructose, corn syrup, etc. -- and add them to other foods, we are circumventing Nature and destroying the balance that's been created just for us.

We have evolved along with our food plants over millions of years, yet food additives and processing, along with elaborate techniques for the manufacture of drugs from plants, have been prevalent for less than fifty years. A five-decade-old, colossal experiment in circumventing Nature, using ourselves as the guinea pigs -- terrific idea! Under such circumstances, the emergence in our society of a high incidence of obesity, chronic degenerative disease and strange new immune system disorders seems much less mysterious. (And this is without even considering the

effects of the manufactured chemicals put into the soil, water and air.)

Many people would interpret whole foods concepts as dictating the consumption of raw foods -- going into the garden and eating straight off the vine. Banished from Eden as we are, however, our digestive systems sometimes need the help that a little cooking provides. Stated another way, it's best to minimize the energy put into digestion. The Earth School of classical Chinese medicine holds that digestive overload is the trigger of chronic degenerative disease, including the cancers, Crohn's, Chronic Fatigue and others that plague us.

Whether cooked or not, macrobiotic, vegetarian -- whatever the system -- whole foods are the foundation of our health.

Plants and the Microcosm

Our awareness of food integrity is now expanding. The organic farming movement and related scientific discoveries are beginning to reveal a more detailed picture of the chemistry of soil and of plants themselves. In fact, this chemistry is far more elaborate and sophisticated than anyone in our modern age of materialistic science has ever dreamed.

A good description of this new awareness is Jim Duke's article in the July/August '95 issue of *Organic Gardening* magazine. He explores the concept of synergy in plant food -- that the value of the whole food is greater than the sum of its parts, beyond obvious material characteristics such as fiber, because the plant compounds complement and enhance each other's nutritional potency.

He cites the case of the "weed" *Artemisia annua*, or Sweet Annie, known in China as *Qing Hao*. Popular here in the U.S. for its use in dried floral wreaths, *Qing Hao* has been used in the East for centuries to treat fever and is now being studied for its potency against malaria. Duke says that recent research along these lines shows that mixes of several compounds found naturally in the plant have been demonstrated to be at least three times as potent as using the best-known active ingredient, artemisinin, alone. The AIDS underground is far ahead of scientific research in advocating the use of whole Sweet Annie to treat opportunistic infections.

Duke points out that bugs (either insects or viruses) can much more easily develop resistance to a single or simple compound than to the full array found in the whole plant. Evolution has favored plants that have developed sophisticated defenses against pests. He believes that many of the same phytochemicals that protect plants against insect predators are the same ones that enable human bodies to fight disease. In a fascinating example, he cites cineola, a compound found in the mints that is