

PLANT HEALER



Enlivening The Practice, Culture & Art of Folk Herbalism

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PLANT HEALER MAGAZINE

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-Editor & Publisher



Plant Healer Interview:

JOLIE ELAN

In Conversation with Jesse Wolf Hardin

Introduction:

Jolie Egret Elan is a deep ecologist, ethnobotanist and educator, teaching classes on connection to wild nature at the [Good Medicine Confluence](#).

She is and the founder and Director of [Go Wild Institute](#), weaving science, myth and spirit to awaken our nature and find balance within the great web of life.

Jolie has studied herbalism for over two and a half decades. Some of her teachers include Matthew Wood, 7Song, Native Healer Bobby Lake Thom and Jane Bothwell. Jolie's work focuses on reclaiming our wild hearts and psyches, which, when out of balance, results in illness – ecological, societal and personal. Jolie is a field botanist, certified forester, and permaculture designer, with a B.A. in Environmental Studies and her M.S. in Natural Resources/Forestry, studying the sustainable harvest of medicinal plants as well as botanical taxonomy. She has worked on ethnobotanical projects on four continents, including restoring sacred forest groves in India, and developing the herbal medicine sector in war-torn Kosovo.

Jesse Wolf Hardin: Thank you for taking the time for this exchange, Jolie. We appreciate it, and appreciate you.

To begin, you know that plant medicine is an ancient healing art, which through most of its history manifested as accessible, community based care: folk herbalism. Only since the 1700s has there been a movement towards hierarchical organization and regulated practice, focused on credibility and profit over spirit and service, and generally divorced from the ethos of nature and experience of the land. Why and how is it

important now to keep alive an alternative narrative of self empowered folk herbalists, still in touch with and informed by the earth?

Jolie Elan: We live in very interesting times and I am sure your readers will agree that much of our society has lost its way. When we live from within the ethos of nature it can help us find the inspiration and wisdom we need to move through this Great Turning/ Great Unraveling and find our rightful place in within the web of life. Nature knows how to live in balance, when we tune in profoundly, we see viscerally how we



are nature and a gigantic healing takes place, for us individually, societally and also for the Earth. In my worldview Nature does the real healing. Removing folk medicine from the experience of the land could work at counter purposes to deep healing of our society and the Earth.

Wolf: Tell me what you think. I have always said that herbalists and other practitioners of “natural medicine” can serve as a much-needed nexus or bridge, holding the vital connection between natural healers and the natural world from which our finest instincts and the helpful herbs we use arise. And I, in fact, cannot fathom an herbalism apart from the great outside, divorced from the wildcrafting or gardening of plants, certified but sterilized, absent the inspiration and lessons of wild nature, without the magical or spiritual feelings that lie at the core of the materia medica of our practice, and at the heart of the materia of our world.

Jolie: I agree with you. I see my role as a liaison to the natural world, which is the ultimate source of healing. After all, real healing resides in relationship: The relationship of the healer to the patient, the relationship of the healer to the plant, AND the relationship of the plant to every other living being woven within its web. Let’s take Elder (*Sambucus nigra*) for an example, the medicine we make from the Elder is inseparable from the little Ruby-crowned Kinglet and the Red-shafted Flicker, who carries the power of Grandfather Sun in her wings. It is a western delusion that the medicine can be separate, denuded of the songs of the crickets and frogs, amputated from the fungus and foxes.

While I work with many plants, I focus on the plants that have given me permission to work them via dreams or visions. These plants have gifted me with insight into their medicine partly because I treat them with respect, honor their gifts, and spend quality time in nature building

my relationship with them. This medicine feels stronger than learning about plants solely from books and second-hand experience. However, half of our world population lives in urban areas, so I don't want to judge other herbalists in how they make medicine.

Wolf: In what ways can conscious sense of place benefit herbalists and healers in general, wherever they are at? What are some positive ways that place can inform and shape us and the ways we practice?

Jolie: By developing a conscious sense of place we deepen our relationship with ourselves and with the world around us: the leafless winter maples with promising buds; frosty creeks flowing just under an icy veil; the dormant gardens bedded down in blankets of wet golden straw; vibrant winter moss resuscitated by winter rains. It's my first winter in twenty-five years and this experience is reshaping the emotional, imaginal, and mythopoetic dimensions of my life. As I bond with my new home land, my story intertwines with the landscape. Characters in the story become the moss awakened from its long-desiccated sleep; the dormant Angelica roots sleeping beneath the snow awaiting the warm, bright glimmers of the sun; the fluffy black Fisher sauntering down the trail at sunrise. The landscape is seeping into my dreams of learning to ski and getting rescued from mountain lakes. The land and I are co-creating a new story with every muddy stop on the trail.

Developing a conscious sense of place can help us be better healers in many ways. When we come into an authentic, humble relationship with nature we become grounded and rooted. It is from this place that our healing instincts and intuition become honed as we get downloads from the Earth. As plants, animals and elementals become characters in our narratives we come to know them as neighbors and friends – Relations in Nature. We know what they like, who they love and where they live, which is another way of saying we start to understand their ecological relationships. A conscious sense of place also fosters intuitive insights about

ecology and healing. For example, we may notice that members of the rose family, like raspberry and blackberry, are often growing on the borders of wet areas and we make the connection that this astringent plant is good for drying up wet soils as well as damp tissues. We learn to read the land. Instead of gaining knowledge only from second hand sources, we learn how to go directly to the source.

Wolf: Adding ecopsychology classes to our Good Medicine Confluence events feels like an important adjunct, using reconnection to the natural world and our own original natures, in combination with herbal and other therapies, to better serve and affect our clients, associates, and thus our unhealthful and de-natured society. How do you define ecopsychology, how does it impact physical health and repair, and how can it inspire and equip herbalists in their work?

Jolie: Ecopsychology focuses on how to restore our healthy emotional bonds with nature. It's about dispelling the false and destructive belief that we are separate from our sentient and sacred earth. The reality is that we *are* nature: the minerals in our bones originated in rocks, our intestines team with vast complex ecosystems of bacteria, and our breath is given to us by plants. We inspire what plants expire and they inspire what we expire, we are so woven in this conspiracy that somehow don't see it.

Our beings have adapted to be informed by, and immersed, in the more than human world. We evolved to live in community with nature, practicing rituals and ceremonies that show our gratitude. Humanity has a natural empathy with nature. Most Indigenous societies view natural beings as our Relations in Nature: Father Sky, Mother Earth, Brother Bear, Rock People, etc. When we think we are separate from nature, we suffer because we have exiled ourselves from the garden; we are lonely, dis-eased, addicted and mentally ill.

When we live by the delusion that we are separate, we pollute our waters, we foul our air, and fail to see the correlation with growing cancer rates. We are in a collective denial that

our human society is on a suicide mission, thinking that rising stock prices will offset the dangers of a seriously feverish Earth in the throes of climate calamity. Ecopsychology aims to heal our mental health as well as the health of the planet by highlighting that they are intimately connected.

But when we do bust through our denial and bond fully with our nature, our hearts break open at the ecocide of our day: Two hundred species go extinct EVERY Day, sea lion starving due to overfishing, nuclear disasters in Japan, and on and on and on... We want to turn away because our pain feels unbearable, but here is the rub: when we turn towards our pain, we actually reclaim our humanity and our wildness. Only from this humble, heartbroken place can we stop the madness; our broken open hearts activate the Earth's immune system. We are the medicine she needs right now, she is the medicine we need. Ecopsychology helps us honor our pain for the world and become agents for change.

Additionally, understanding nature's processes and cycles helps us understand our own nature. For instance, if we feel impatience with the pace of how our life is unfolding, we might be heartened to compare our situation to a seed silently resting in the ground breathing (yes, seeds breathe). Seeds are little earthships waiting for the right conditions to sprout, blossom, and fruit. In knowing that we cannot force a seed to sprout, we might be able to accept our natural unfolding. Reconnecting with our outer landscapes helps to heal our inner landscapes, which, in turn inspires us to heal our outer landscapes, because in reality there is no inner or outer.

Wolf: Healing through nature, and the healing of the natural world, are twin themes animating not only the ancient cosmologies of land based peoples, but also the thoughts and works of some of the more caring and creative of contemporary teachers. In the sciences, I think of James Lovelock and Lynn Margulis of course, and my old pen pal Paul Shepherd. Sociologists



like Theodore Roszak, musicians including Paul Winter, poets and novelists such as Gary Snyder, Ursula LeGuin, Philip Pullman, and Terry Tempest Williams. The cosmology of radical Episcopalian priest Matthew Fox, NeoDruids and the Wiccan activist Starhawk, the Buddhist thinkers and activists Joanna Macy and Thich Nhat Hahn. What is it that brings each of these folks to similar conceptions and convictions, coming from such widely disparate backgrounds? And is that what is missing from the much larger majority of people who view the composition of Earth as little more than exploitable resources, or as a soulless God-given stage for the play of human activities?

Jolie: In this age of untruths, it is important to remember that reality is not relative. Perhaps the reason that so many of us, throughout time and culture, subscribe a worldview that nature is alive, interconnected and sentient is because this is actually the nature of the world. It's just that we often forget it or can't access this reality because we are distracted. If you have ever spent a good amount of time with people in denial or addiction, it's clear that many people can't acknowledge the pathology at play in the system because that virus has also got a hold of them, and they are playing a role in that pathological system. Being present to what is real and true requires for us to face what is holding us back from being present and this can be excruciatingly painful. I am not saying that everyone who does not share my view that the Earth is alive and sacred is in denial or addicted, some of us just are not taught to see the ensouled world, perhaps the concept is foreign, or their religion or culture runs counter to this world view.

Wolf: The scientifically framed Gaia Hypothesis proposes that the planet and all its elements and life forms form together not just a community of components and relations, but that in its dynamic totality, functions much like a living being. It's self regulatory processes work to maintain a delicate balance of atmospheric gases, PH, and temperatures, without which no human could ever have existed here. What so called "primitive" cultures have for millennia

described as a living planet, Mother Earth, Gaia, looks every bit as miraculous and inspired when viewed through the lens of a wonder-filled scientist.

Jolie: We are at a fabulous crossroads of thought and culture where modern science is backing up Indigenous knowledge that the earth is interconnected and sentient. (It's not that we need modern science to prove the Earth is sentient, but it sure is interesting to watch). The research on plant intelligence is blowing my mind and lines up with Indigenous thinking that plants can sense, make decisions, warn their kin of danger, call for help from the insect world, and contribute to the well-being of their community.

The research on mycorrhizal networks is right out of the movie Avatar. The mushrooms we see and eat are the fruiting body of a huge underground organism. Fungi, it turns out are some of the most gargantuan of organisms. One giant honey mushroom (*Armillaria ostoya*) was found to be over 100 tons, over 1500 years old and over 2000 acres big. Fungi connect to the roots of many trees; the trees provide them with sugar while the fungi extend the root system several hundred to several thousand times. Mycorrhizal (myco – fungus, rhizal- root) fungi act as a web that connect many plants. These network move sugars, nutrients and communication hormones around to support the community. What's more, is that the fungal mats probably have their own intelligence. Researchers have documented that in nutrient poor communities, the fungi will actually lure insects such as springtails, consume them and direct the nutrients to the trees. Dr. Susanne Simard has shown that great big fir trees in the Pacific northwest actually use the extensive fungal networks to nurse their young who can't yet reach the sunlight.

Research on the intelligence of animals is also the stuff of Indigenous legends: squirrels and crows planning for the future; Spiders with problem solving abilities; Sea lions can think logically understanding that if $A=B$ and $B=C$ than $A=C$. Crows mourn their dead, use tools,



recognize human faces and teach their young to avoid onerous humans. The Indigenous perspective that more-than-human life is sentient is actually becoming mainstream. So, the next giant leap is to extend basic rights to our Relations in Nature.

Wolf: If you look back into human history, things have always been difficult, challenging, and in some ways odd and surprising... but we have to admit, the 21st Century and beyond are increasingly some batshit-crazy times. It is getting hard for me to think about herbalism without reference to current trends, values, and politics. It seems both impossible and unwise to ignore the mindsets and actions of the dominant culture, as both marginalized human communities and natural ecosystems are being harmed like never before.

Jolie: It is all connected. Herbalism can't be separated from what is happening in our

imperiled world. Healing does not exist in a vacuum, we live in a sick society on an ailing earth, no wonder we are sick. What we are experiencing on this planet is trauma gone amok, a lethal virus infecting all life in its path. Wars, ecocide, poverty, oppression and violence all produce more trauma fueling the cult of death. Trauma make us more fearful, less trusting and less compassionate, which creates more trauma, and on and on. A vital role traditionally played by shamans is to heal ancestral and personal trauma to bring back balance. Shamans have traditionally used a variety of herbal medicines, like ayahuasca or peyote, to restore harmony and a sense of belonging to the Earth and spirit. I have personally used these medicines, under the care of wise healers, to cure my own debilitating PTSD. I am happy to see the resurgence of ancient healing ceremonies and entheogens, like ayahuasca, but am very wary of untrained, ego-inflated, millennials calling themselves shamans.

It is encouraging to see that the California Institute of Integral Studies is offering a certificate program in psychedelic-assisted therapies for therapists, doctors, and clergy.

Wolf: While pre-civilized tribes precipitated some regrettable ecological problems from extinction of early American megafauna to deforestation in the Southwest, their world view and accompanying ceremonies and taboos often spoke of the sacredness of the living earth, and the importance of our giving back to inspired nature for all it provides us. These efforts at reciprocity are a conscious reflection or emulation of the give and take of the natural world, and are sorely missing from the codes and behaviors of most modern civilized people. Through what means might we hope to raise awareness and stimulate response?

Jolie: I want to be careful to not aggrandize all Indigenous societies because honestly, I have no idea what the reality of life in those cultures is like, especially for an outspoken woman like myself. That said, I would rather live in a society that honors and respects Mama Earth than venerates money.

Sam Oliner, a professor and a holocaust survivor hidden by non-Jews, spent his life researching why some brave people risked their lives to save others while the majority of folks did not. He discovered that most rescuers were taught empathy and responsibility as children; empathy is a learned behavior. I think it's the same for reciprocity and responsibility to life. If we had all be taught in kindergarten that the plants and animals are our relations, we would be living in a different reality. I think we are all born tuned into the cosmic dance, but we are forced into just doing the Box Step. It's a matter of helping folks relearn that they can dance, even if they think they don't know how; our bodies naturally know the moves.

If there is no teacher we can always go to Mother Earth for instruction. I was not taught reciprocity and the sacredness of nature as child, instead I watched a lot of Gilligan's Island and suffered depression and anxiety. Somehow, through my broken heart, Mother Earth

reclaimed and healed me. Along the way, my teachers showed up. Gaia is the greatest teacher but we have to make sure to show up to class with our phones turned off.

As to why we moved from embracing an ensouled world to a mechanistic world, many authors like Carolyn Merchant and Ralph Metzner have addressed this exact topic, so I will spare you my musings on the witch burnings, the scientific method, agriculture, written language and Earth trauma. In the end, I care less about how we lost our way, becoming indoctrinated into the dualist, mechanistic, addicted and traumatic narrative of our day, what's important now is finding a way to move through this bottleneck of human evolution into a consciousness that honors the sacredness of all life. This is what the Great Turning is about. Isn't it an exciting time to be alive?

Wolf: What are some ways that we can substantially, meaningfully, effectively, and continually give back?

Jolie: Some simple ideas: Do what makes you come alive; act on behalf of life; practice gratitude and true humility.

Wolf: Unfortunately, to most people in modern countries, "wild" is a derogatory term, used to describe out of control children, animals that are dangerous, hairs on our face in need of plucking, and weeds in the yard that have proven hard to kill. What exactly is the quality of wildness, the way you see it, and can you think of avenues for bringing people around to seeing the benefit and beauty of things wild?

Jolie: Wildness is an inside job. To know the wild, we must bravely trek into the wilderness of our beings and study the wild from within. That thing you call your intuition – it's your wild nature - you can trust it. What is it you love? What scares the bejezzus out of you. Who are you? Who are you - really? What parts of yourself have you exiled to the borderlands or shadows? Until these exiles are repatriated they will contort our thinking and impulses, domesticating us.



Pay attention to what makes you growl or howl. What gets you chirpy and makes you want to prance? You might have preconceived notions of what wildness “should” be but find yourself moving in a way counter to your notion. The reality is that your inclination, or deep desire, *is* your wildness. Wildness isn’t an intellectual concept, it is your vital energy – your Elan Vital.

And if you are looking for a less heady answer to restoring your wild heart, may I suggest jumping naked into a cold stream and lying on a warm rock in the sun.

Wolf: We could impose almost any script we want on plants since they do not yell if misrepresented, but they are definitely intelligent, including in some not very human like ways, and they definitely communicate with each other, if through electrical and chemical languages often beyond our ken. Talk about the nature of plant intelligence, how we can best understand it, and how it is put to use by the plants in relationship and in their ecosystems?

Jolie: Scientists working in the nascent field of Plant Intelligence have documented that plants have a least twenty different senses including the ability to sense moisture, gravity, hardness of soil and electromagnetic fields. Plants are able to sense and respond to light and can even jetlag if photo rhythms are disturbed. Researchers have determined that plants also respond to sound. Plants make choices; presented with two piles of differing nutrient values, plants will repeatedly grow towards the richer, more nutrient dense soil.

Our photosynthetic friends can detect airborne volatile chemicals, analyze them to sense danger and communications from other plants. Some might call this smelling or tasting. What’s more, is that when plants sense danger they can increase levels of chemicals, like tannins, that protect them from predation, at the same time releasing chemical signals into the air warning others of the impending danger

It’s becoming clear that plants have complex social systems and family lives. Our green beings

recognize and cooperate with their relatives to make room for kin, while fending off unrelated plants. And check this out: Dr Monica Gagliano from the University of Western Australia has shown that plants, like the sensitive plant (*Mimosa pudica*), can learn and remember learned behavior like animals do. Do these capacities collectively constitute awareness and consciousness? In my mind it’s a definite yes!

All this makes me wonder: when we sit with a sentient plant, make an offering and ask for its medicine, could there actually be a scientific reason why the medicine becomes stronger? After all, if the plant can sense us and increase its chemical brew in response to stress, perhaps they can also increase their medicinal qualities in response to a loving relationship based on respect and reciprocity. I believe the plants want to heal humanity and in doing so bring back balance, which actually benefits all our Relations in Nature.

Wolf: An unintended drawback of increasing numbers of people buying over the counter herbal remedies, is the impact on populations. Gathering herbs from mountains and fields help connect us to ourselves, to the plants we use, and even to our purpose and sense of place. But when we fail take into account the rarity of certain species in particular regions, herbalists can actually contribute to the demise of the very plants they love so much. What, in your estimation, are the essential knowings and guidelines for ethical wildcrafting?

Jolie: United Plant Savers has some good guidelines on this. What stands out to me:

- Always ask permission from the plant and WAIT for an answer to come. Sit with it for a while until it the answer is clear.
- Never, ever gather a plant without an offering. Never.
- Positively identify the plant you want to gather; know its identifying characteristics; know if it has any rare relatives nearby.



- Know what plants are rare in your areas and get clear on their identifying characteristics.
- Do not gather more than ten percent of the population - Don't be greedy.
- Try not to compact soil and avoid trampling when the ground is wet.
- If you don't know botany, now is a good time to learn.
- Use what you gather in a spirit of gratitude and healing.
- Look around a take note of all the other creatures that are connected to the plant you are gathering because those creatures are part of its medicine.

Wolf: Accurate plant identification is important, especially when using wildcrafted species. But what else can we derive from observation and intimacy with a plant? What can it tell us about itself... and about us?

Jolie: When we slow down to look at a flower, with the close attention we usually reserve for our most intimates, we can fall ridiculously love with life. We notice the fine line of silky hairs; the bite marks on the calyx; the pool of sticky sweet nectar collecting in the hollows. From this place of engagement, ecological inquiry arises naturally: who pollinates it? why are the hairs sticky? why is the pollen blue? Who eats it? How does the nectar taste?

Some might say that dissecting flowers under a microscope is for eggheads, but I want to dispel the misconception that botanists are geeks - the reality is that is we are in it for the sex! I can't walk down the street in spring without being blown over by the sexual exploits of the plant world. Just like some humans, when plants get ready to reproduce they put on a pretty flower dress, drench themselves in scent and get out there into the orgy of spring. The difference between plants and people is that plants can do it in an unimaginable number of ways and their

sex parts come in the most exquisite, outlandish and fantastical shapes and colors. When you know what you're looking at, you cannot help but be turned on.

As far as what we can be derived from increased intimacy with plant, it's the same as relationships with people – with enough whole-hearted attention and familiarity the potential for understanding endless. Georgia O'Keeffe said it best: Nobody sees a flower really; it is so small. We haven't time, and to see takes time - like to have a friend takes time.

Wolf: Well, thank you again for your insights and time, our readers appreciate the sharing, and this Plant Healer movement benefits from the reminders of nature's lessons, needs, and inspiration.



Jolie: It's an interesting ride from here on out; I am happy to be on the right bus!





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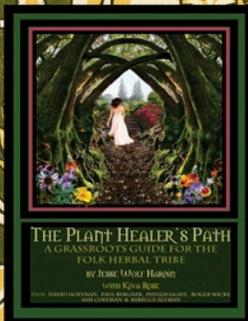
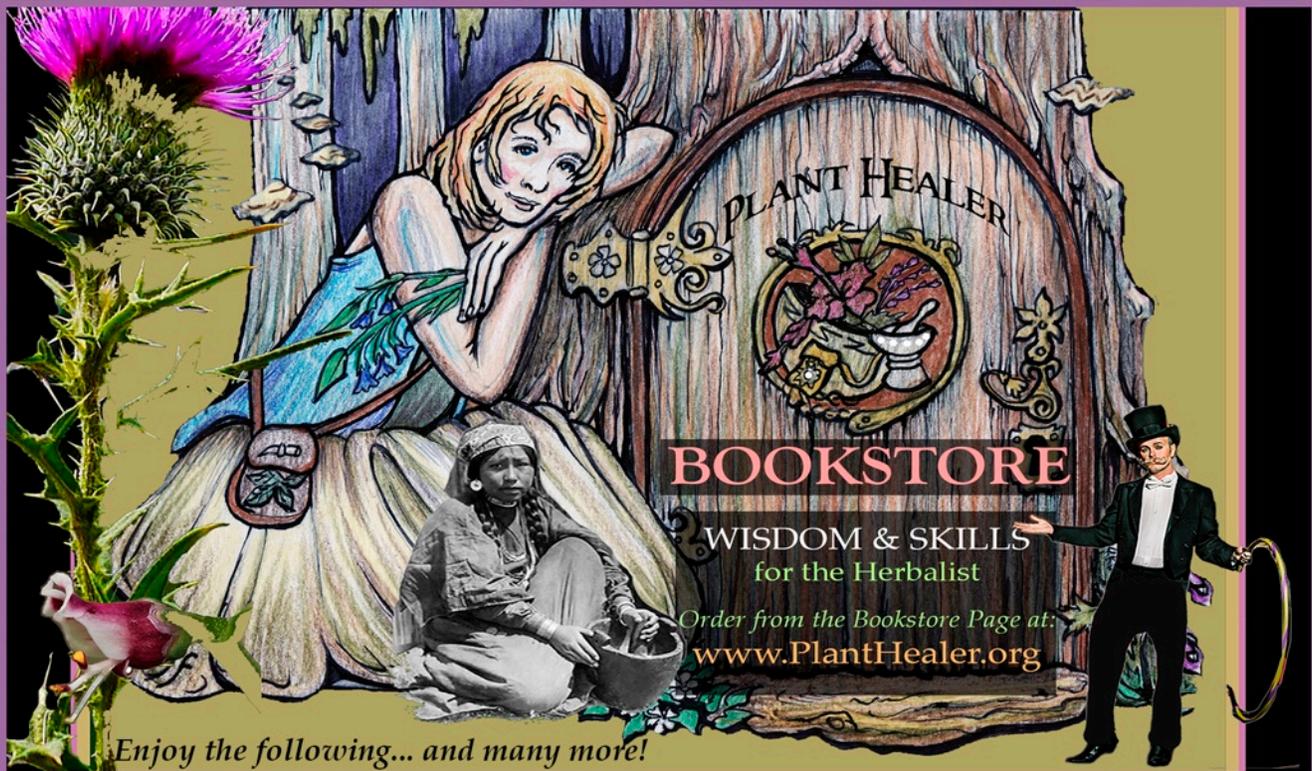
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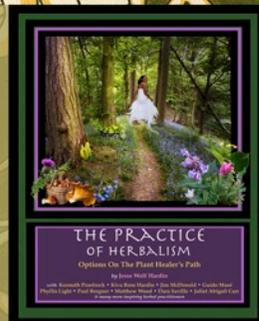


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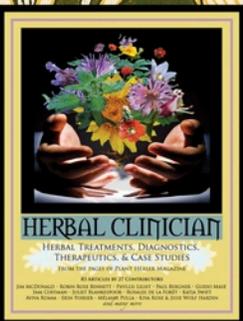
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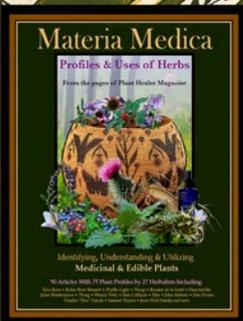
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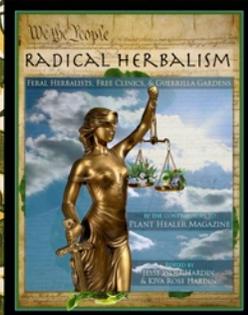
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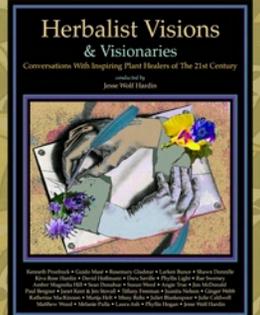
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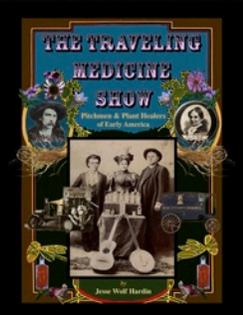
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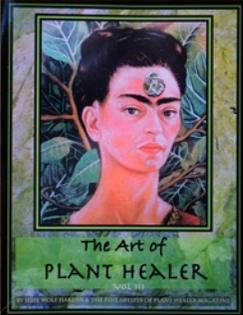
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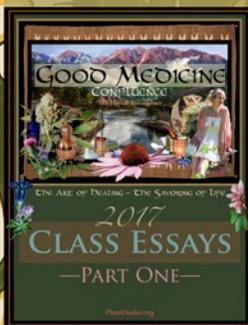
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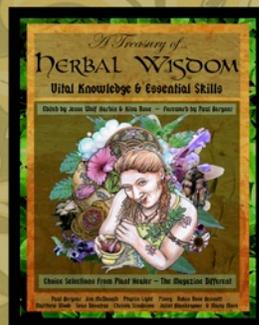
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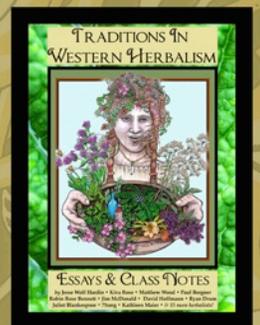
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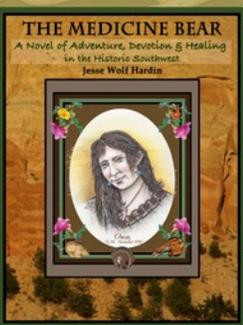
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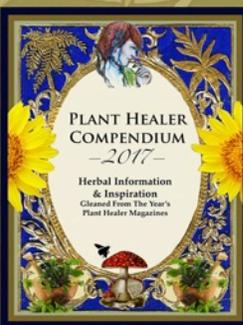
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