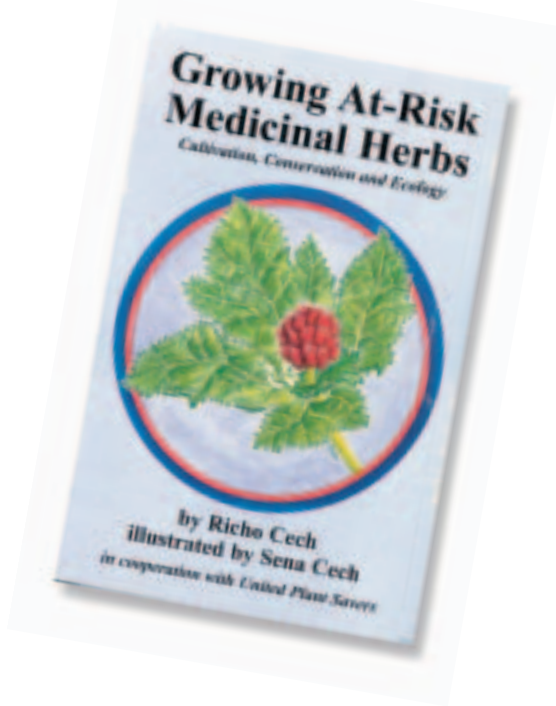


Growing At-Risk Medicinal Herbs: Cultivation, Conservation, and Ecology

Richo Cech, illustrated by Sena Cech

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With the ever-burgeoning global demand for plant-based medicinal products, *Growing At-Risk Medicinal Herbs: Cultivation, Conservation, and Ecology* makes an important contribution to the conservation of medicinal plants. This book thoroughly details 20 native North American medicinal plants considered “at-risk” by the United Plant Savers, a nonprofit organization dedicated to the preservation of medicinal plants (URL: <http://www.unitedplantsavers.org>). Besides their cultural significance, the plants detailed in this book are all perennial, slow-growing, long-lived, and tend to have low fecundity rates, making them particularly sensitive to anthropogenic activities. These species have been considered tricky to propagate as well, and technical information compiled and summarized by an expert is long overdue. Half of the species covered in this book are medicinal woodland herbs native to eastern hardwood forests, the most notable of these are the lady’s slipper orchid (*Cypripedium* spp.), black cohosh (*Cimicifuga racemosa*), bloodroot (*Sanguinaria canadensis*), goldenseal (*Hydrastis canadensis*), and the keystone North American medicinal plant, American ginseng (*Panax quinquefolius*). The remaining species covered in this book are an eclectic mix from a variety of habitats, for example, a temperate deciduous forest tree (slippery elm, *Ulmus rubra*), two insectivorous plants (sundew, *Drosera rotundifolia*; and Venus flytrap, *Dionaea muscipula*), a genus of mostly prairie habitats (*Echinacea*), an herb of dry and rocky soils (lomatium, *Lomatium dissectum*), a subalpine herb (osha, *Ligusticum porteri*), a tropical rainforest shrub (kava kava, *Piper methysticum*), a sun-loving desert herb (stillingia, *Stillingia sylvatica*), and a succulent cactus (peyote, *Lophophora williamsii*).

The book begins with a foreword and short introduction that provides an interesting perspective on how cultivating native medicinal plants facilitates conservation of wild populations. The book then proceeds through species accounts arranged in alphabetical order by common name. Every account begins with a brief taxonomic background and description of gross morphology, followed by clearly labeled sections on geographic range, hardiness and adaptability, ecology, community, and life cycle. Accompanying the text is a geographic map that portrays the species natural range in the US. Notably absent from each map is southern Canada, in which sizable populations of many of the eastern woodland herbs highlighted in the text occur. Complementing the life cycle sections are hand-drawn illustrations that depict important developmental life stages. Although professional botanists may be frustrated that the illustrations are not drawn to scale, I found the illustrations of various life stages informative nonetheless. From my own experience with woodland herbs, first-year seedlings are often cryptic and difficult to detect on the forest floor, mainly because their morphologies show little resemblance to the reproductively mature plants most of us are familiar with. Undoubtedly, readers will benefit from the thorough descriptions and illustrations of each plant’s life cycle.

Following the general biological and ecological descriptions of each species are sections devoted entirely to propagation and husbandry. These sections are noticeably more detailed than some of the biological and ecological sections, perhaps reflecting the author’s primary area of expertise. The propagation material includes cultivation from seeds, cultivation from root cuttings, and general care, which includes gems of information that only a person with 20 y of trial-and-error

experience could offer. In some cases, the order of sections is somewhat confusing. For instance, the logical placement for seed collecting, harvest, and storage would be to precede the section on cultivation from seeds; instead it's placed 4 subsections later and follows sections on crop yield and medicine. Nevertheless, the sections focusing on seed collection and propagation are unprecedented in their scope and detail. The sections on medicine, yield, harvest, processing, and storage contain a wealth of information for those primarily interested in growing these plants for medicinal use or commercial sale. The remaining portion of each species account varies from species to species, but most end with conservation status, offering information on federal and state listings and insight into their commercial exploitation.

This glue-bound paperback with thick pages is durable, and my copy has already tolerated countless trips to the field. The physical appearance of this book, however, may lead one to erroneously view it as a low-quality production and overlook its significance. Those looking for glossy colored photographs of these plants growing in their native habitat or in cultivation systems will have to rely on other sources. Moreover, close examination of the reference section reveals a disproportionate bias to cultivation and propagation literature, and regard-

less of topic, disappointingly few citations are from peer-reviewed journals. The text is mainly derived from the author's authoritative knowledge acquired from years of commercially growing these plants. Richo's depth of knowledge garnered through on-farm trials and countless hours observing the natural history of wild medicinal plant populations are conveyed in this book, making it a unique contribution to the field of economic botany. Regardless of whether you are an herbalist, commercial grower, restorationist, conservationist, or native plant enthusiast for your backyard garden, this book is an indispensable resource for everyone working with "at-risk" medicinal herbs.

—Matthew A Albrecht

Matthew Albrecht is a PhD candidate in the Department of Environmental and Plant Biology at Ohio University. He is interested in a broad range of topics relating to forest ecology, including the population biology of economically important woodland herbs.

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