



**a brief history of [Western] herbalism** – Herbalism, as a distinct practice and area of study, is a relatively recent phenomenon. For the majority of history, herbs were the medicinal agents of all healers, from shaman and witches, to priests and bonesetters, to elite physicians of the upper castes.

**ancient roots** – In the Egyptian, Mesopotamian, Greek, Roman, and Persian societies of antiquity, from which our tradition descends, healing was often considered a vocation or trade rather than a domain of the elites.

**a brief comparison with Traditional Chinese Medicine, Ayurveda, and Unani-Tibb** – In places where the use of herbal medicines remained central to healing practices even after the introduction of chemical and pharmaceutical agents, more acceptance of these practices led to greater standardization of them – and arguably, to stagnation, rarification, or co-opting of them, as well.

**Samuel Thomson** – A practitioner in the early 1800s, his patented system was a blend of folk tradition, empirical observation, and multi-level marketing. Anti-elitist and egalitarian, he conceived and promoted it as the medicine of the people. For a time, it was the primary form of health care for a majority of the population in the US.

**Eclectics & Physiomedicalists** – These two offshoots of Thomsonian medicine expanded on its botanical basis, adding in university-level training in diagnosis and physiology. They practiced on equal footing with allopathic MDs (“regular” physicians) during their heyday.

**the Flexner Report** – Published by the Carnegie Foundation in 1910, recommended the closing of many medical schools (including Eclectic and Physiomedicalist institutions) and stronger state regulations of licensure. Represented the insertion of allopaths' influence in government, and led to outlawry of other modalities – herbalism went underground, and much of the knowledge developed by those schools was archived and inaccessible.

**flower power** – The 60s and 70s began a resurgence of folk tradition and the development of a new American herbalism. This included individual experimentation, the integration of methods from other forms of traditional medicine, and ultimately, the rediscovery and revitalization of the Western herbal tradition.

**the Traditional Medicines Congress** – As herbalism came into its own, certain factions within the community began to make efforts at establishing licensure for herbalists – causing much controversy and heated debate. This activity is presented today as being oriented towards the loosening of restrictions on the language in use by the herbal *industry*, but it included establishing restrictions on the availability of particular medicinal plants, which would necessarily entail the enactment of regulations determining who could utilize those plants. The TMC was the closest herbalism in America came to government regulation of the practice . . . so far.

**herbalism in the US today** – Call it a mongrel, or call it a polyculture; herbalism in the US today is endlessly diverse, and continually evolving.



**what is an herbalist?** – Anyone who is involved in the cultivation, distribution, or application of plants for healing.

**varieties of practice** – A sampling of possibilities: farmer, medicine-maker, apothecary, medic, clinician, teacher, curator of botanical gardens/libraries/collections, designer of herbal equipment/software/adverts, conservationist, forester, chemist, promoter, proprietor, writer, legal advisor/advocate, activist, . . .

**the street fair** – It is the blending and interaction of various traditions, philosophies, practices and plants that makes modern American herbalism resolutely resilient and vibrantly vital. Other herbalists in your area are not your “competition”, they are your peers, your support, and your community!

**how can i learn to be an herbalist?** – However you do it, getting an education is a necessity.

**herb schools** – Finding the right school is very important, as there is great variation between programs and teachers.

**personality** – Herbalists are personalities, each and every one; each school has its own composite personality, as well. Much depends on a good match between the personalities of school, teacher, and student. Use drop-in classes, open house nights, or public engagements to get to know the school[s] you’re considering: meet the teachers, see the space, talk to current students if possible, and get a feel for the personalities at play. Ask for testimonials. Trust your gut.

**programming** – A school may primarily focus on home herbalism, clinical practice, shamanic herbalism, wildcrafting, cultivation . . . all are valid, but different. No one school can adequately cover *all* the subfields of herbalism in sufficient depth, so the teachers should be up front about which areas they focus on and which are covered superficially.

**schedule & commitments** – You should be clearly informed about what kinds of commitments you’re entering into when you enroll in a program. Questions of time include the course schedule, as well as any homework & assignments you’ll be expected to complete. Questions of money include the total course fee, any materials expenses you’ll incur, whether there is an advance deposit or a payment plan, and how money is handled in the case of early withdrawal from the program. If you have any questions about these topics that aren’t answered by the school’s website or course materials, ask!

**accreditation & degrees** – Very few herbalism schools in America are in a position to be accredited or to grant degrees. It may be *useful* to have a university degree in a related subject – botany, agriculture, nursing & other medical disciplines, etc – but it is not *necessary*.

**standards of curriculum** – Every program needs to include direct experience of the skills it intends to teach. A clinical herbalist’s training



program should include all the basic foundational instruction, discussion and demonstration of clinical skills (as distinct from materia medica and pathophysiology), observation of client sessions, roundtable discussion of your own client sessions, and guidance for building your practice. Similarly, a program focused on cultivation or wildcrafting must include substantial time in the garden and the field, a medicine-maker's training should involve lots of kitchen/lab time, etc.

**mentors** – When it comes to finding a personal mentor, you'll face all the same issues as with a school, but more pronounced – especially when it comes to questions of personality and time commitment. Beware of gurudom: herbalists are better pictured kneeling in the dirt than standing on a pedestal. If you find a good match, this kind of relationship can convey great benefits on both parties.

**orienting self-study** – The goal in self-study is to make sure you're drawing from all points of the compass: the books and records left us by past generations of herbalists; the new information coming in to our field from scientific research, ethnography, and other forms of modern discovery; direct personal experience and experimentation, and that of our peers in this generation; and the realms of critical intuition and personal lore. Even if you're enrolled in an herb school program, self-study is a fundamental part of your education.

**learn from everyone** – If you put three herbalists together and ask a question, you're liable to get five different answers; it's important to have many teachers. Read widely, attend conferences, listen to audio recordings, watch videos – seek new information everywhere. Recognize that those you serve – students, clients, customers – are your best teachers.

**teaching** – If you can teach it, you understand it. This is the best way to solidify your own knowledge, and to build on it. Teach anyone who knows less than you – start right away! Teach what you know. Find opportunities to teach by reaching out to groups already in place (gardeners' associations, WAPF chapters, mushroom hunters, etc). Lead herb walks on local farms or in public parks and sanctuaries. Just go ahead and teach your friends! Teach in your home if you can't afford to rent a space. Hold "office hours" at a local café. Try lots of different things and see what sticks.

**cultivating skills & aptitudes** – Or, how to become a master herbalist in 30 years or more. You need both enthusiasm and rigor.

**materia medica study** – There's something to be said for knowing 9 herbs intimately rather than 90 herbs superficially; but there's also benefit in coming to appreciate the variety and diversity of the world's herbs, their actions and preparations. Read an herb a day. Maintain an "herb of the month" practice. Start with what's local and common. Follow your interests.

**sensory integration** – Herbalism is an irreducibly sensual art; you must cultivate your senses to become skillful, no matter which variety of practice you pursue. Taste an herb a day. Wind herbs into the fabric of your day: your food, your self-care, your rituals, your environment, your dreams. Find and frequent a sit spot. Seek encounters with non-human intelligence; learn to speak plant language.



## how can i make it official?

**certification** – Any certificate is worth three things: the paper it's printed on, the reputation of the school or teacher who signs it, and the representation it embodies of the work put in by the student – no more or less. Receiving a certificate documenting one's hours of experience is appropriate and useful, and to be expected upon completion of a course of study. A certificate proclaiming one a "Master Herbalist", granted after completing a 9-month mail-order program, on the other hand, is not promoting reasonable expectations of competency.

**licensure** – There is no governmental oversight or licensure of herbalists in the US today. We like it that way, not just because we prefer to avoid bureaucracy whenever possible, but because we believe herbalism is a right and not a privilege, and that restricting access to herbs is a violation of a fundamental human right to explore and cooperate with nature. Herbs are demonstrably safe, as evidenced by the rarity of occurrences where herbs cause serious illness or injury in anyone, so there is no call for further regulation in the name of public safety.

**herbs in commerce: DSHEA** – Herbs and herbal products sold in open commerce are currently regulated under the Dietary Supplement Health and Education Act of 1994. The "structure and function" labeling rules it enacts establish limits on the language herbal product makers can use. One effect is that customers receive no information about traditional use cases or scientific research conducted outside the United States. Herbs can not be regarded as both "dangerous supplements" and "ineffective snake oil" at the same time, and in fact they are neither.

**scope of practice** – First do no harm. Informed disclosure isn't just due diligence; it initiates a conversation and sets expectations about where the agency in healing resides. Transparency is fundamental. Be comfortable with saying "I don't know, but I'll find out for you."

**insurance** – It can be difficult to find insurance that specifically covers the work you'll do as an herbalist. Your options include general liability – basic insurance against accidental injury to people on your property (e.g. someone slips on your stairs) – and there are places where you can purchase professional liability insurance. Because herbalists are tolerated rather than encouraged under the current legal structures, though, your best protection against any charges of practicing medicine without a license, "malpractice" (liability for injury to the client), etc, is to maintain good practices around informed disclosure, and to be as honest and transparent with your client as possible.

**Health Freedom acts** – A Health Freedom act is designed to clarify the legal space in which unlicensed health care practitioners, including herbalists, operate. Such acts usually include requirements for such practitioners to have clients read & sign a document stating they are not doctors, are not dispensing drugs, are not licensed, etc, and describing their training, experience, and scope of practice in plain language. Massachusetts has a health freedom bill in the legislative process now! See [hfama.org](http://hfama.org) and [nationalhealthfreedom.org](http://nationalhealthfreedom.org) for more information and to lend your support.

**the AHG** – Becoming a Registered Herbalist with the American Herbalists Guild is not, in and of itself, a guarantee of competency – lots of good herbalists don't join up.



There are certain requirements you must complete to purchase this membership; in the past there was a pronounced slant towards a certain style of practice and approach to herbalism, but there have been substantial changes in the past several years.

**how can i make a living?** – It may not seem like it at first, but there are plenty of job prospects for herbalists today. It will take some creativity to access them, though. also, it's worth recognizing that herbalism is a vocation; it has not historically been a career.

**don't quit your day job** – You're still a "real" herbalist, even if you work a 9-5 job that has nothing to do with herbalism. "All in" means different things for different people. But first and foremost, you need to avoid going into debt.

**don't take out a loan** – That way lies debt.

**how to make transition** – Yes, you'll work real hard. Make sure you don't neglect self-care, or you'll burn yourself out. Talk to your employer about transitioning to a four-day workweek, or other kinds of flexible scheduling, to accommodate your time with clients, plants, products, etc. Make a plan for what your tipping points will be, and stay flexible.

**how to advertise** – Be sure you're reaching the people you want to reach. Start where you are: look for local outlets rather than big advertising companies (e.g. Google). Look for events calendars where you can submit free listings. Get a website. Subtle is usually better.

**how to get compensated** – It doesn't have to be money, but you need compensation for your work. Break the habit of giving away your work for free, and the self-doubt hiding at its root, as early as you can. Look at the fees charged by similar practitioners in your area to assess what you should be charging. Find ways to work with underserved populations and still remain solvent; sliding scales can work.

**how to grow** – No one has a secret that will boom your business. Word of mouth is always your best advertising – real words from real mouths, more than social media platforms or advertising-in-disguise outfits. Slow, organic growth is better; it's more sustainable. There's no rush. Remember that you don't need to earn a living as an herbalist to be a real herbalist!

**be true to your nature** – Don't try to be an herbalist like someone else, even someone you admire: you have to do the work that is in your heart, the work that is your own calling. If you're true to that, you won't trip over your ego.

**keep learning** – Get used to it – and learn to love it, because you'll never stop.