

# Allies in the Wild

Island author dedicated to educating people about the benefits of medicinal plants...

By Laura Busheikin

You wouldn't necessarily think that writing botanical reference books is an adventurous vocation—until you talk to Kahlee Keane.

Keane, who moved to Vancouver Island in January, has just published *Wild Medicine of Coastal British Columbia*, a practical guide to BC's medicinal plants. She estimates that it is her 25th book—or thereabouts. In fact, she's lost count.

Keane has spent more than three decades researching and writing these books, as well as teaching workshops, leading educational walks, and writing newspaper and magazine articles.

Along the way she has been renamed, honored, and royally told-off. She's made great friends and stood up to worthy enemies. And she has consistently been awed at the healing powers of the plants that grow in the Earth's wild places.

Keane's work has taken her into communities all over North America, where she has played a number of pivotal roles: anthropologist, historian, biologist, educator and activist. Wherever she goes, she galvanizes people to understand and appreciate the healing properties of native plants, to treasure them, and, if necessary, to campaign for their protection.

Each of Keane's books is dedicated to the plants of a certain geographical area, as broad as the province of Ontario or a specific as Grand Manan Island, a 135-square-kilometre fishing community of 2,500 people off the coast of New Brunswick. And each book has a different tone and structure, reflecting not just the local uniqueness of the botany but also the needs and inclinations of the locals. Although her books are all about plants, her research very much includes people.

"Wherever I go, the first thing I do is look at the lay of the land and talk to the people who live on it. In Newfoundland, people had lots of information and what they needed was for me to collect and publish it. They were happy when I published their recipes. In Ontario, there was a real lack of information, so

my job was to offer what I knew," she explains.

Her new book, she says, reflects her observation that BC is a relatively sophisticated audience for this material. "The knowledge is already very alive here; there are lots of people teaching, learning about, and using wild medicinal plants. So I included more detail, such as the chemical constituency of the plants."

One thing Keane loves about her work is the connection it gives her to other cultures.

"Because this is North America, I get the chance to learn about different approaches. For instance the Ayurvedic tradition [from India] has a huge body of knowledge. All our different immigrant groups bring their experience and information with them."

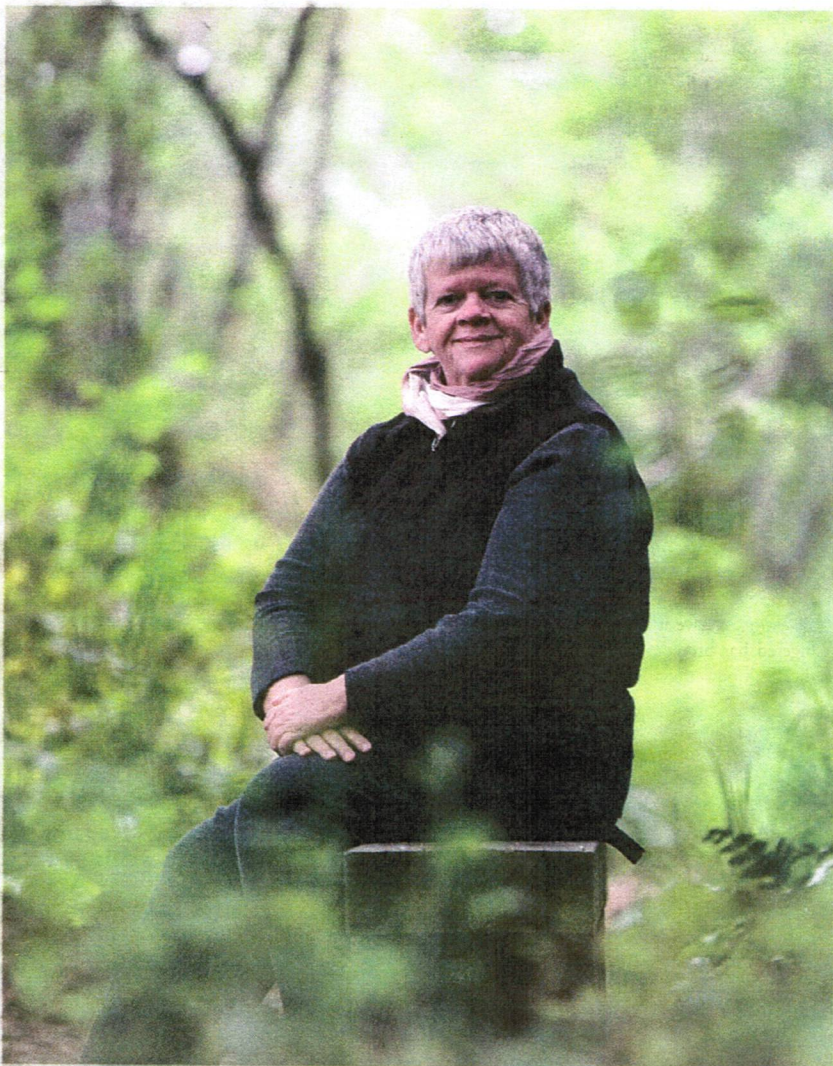
Keane says she is happy to trade information with different cultural groups, but she also needs to respect their autonomy. "For instance, in some areas the First Nations people have suffered a great injury in the loss of their medicine. But it's not for me to replicate their traditions. All I can do is offer what I have."

It was a multi-cultural encounter that gave Keane her nickname, Root Woman, under which she wrote several books. "I was researching down in Mississippi. The people of color there have a rich folk healing tradition. They were quite wonderful, and we all got to know each other pretty well. One day we were out working in the soil together and they said to me, 'We name you Root Woman.' That's what they call their healers. I was so moved, I sat down and cried."

Keane's mission is to restore balance in the relationship between people and medicinal plants, both for the sake of the plants and for the sake of the humans.

"I'm putting the folk back in folk medicine," she explains. "I want people to understand that this knowledge is their birthright. It behoves them to learn about their allies."

It also behoves them to make sure these plants continue to grow and thrive in their natural habitat. This is the other compo-



"I'm putting the folk back in folk medicine," says Kahlee Keane of her research and books, such as the recently published *Wild Medicine of Coastal British Columbia*. "My goal is to protect bio-diversity." Photo by Boomer Jerritt.

ment of Keane's mission. "As an eco-herbalist, activist and conservationist, my goal is to protect bio-diversity. My craft insists on a heightened ecological awareness and a deep respect for the living Earth," she says.

Not everyone understands that Keane's work aligns with environmentalist aims, she adds. In fact, some people think she puts the plants at risk by encouraging humans to harvest them.

"Oh, I've been confronted pretty aggressively," she says with a wry chuckle. "I remember hearing a loud knock on my door one day, and I opened it to this big tall environmentalist who started in on me—'How dare you publish this?

You have to stop immediately!' That kind of thing.

"I was actually scared of him. But when he stopped talking long enough for me to answer, I told him: 'I teach people to use the plants so that they respect and protect them.' And it has always worked that way."

The angry environmentalist did have a valid point, says Keane—medicinal wild plants are being lost due to over-picking. But Keane says this is a result of commercial harvesting, where big companies harvest in bulk to make products they sell all around the world. This is a far cry from what she teaches. In her books and workshops Keane

encourages small-scale wildcrafting, where individuals go into the wild to harvest plants for the use of themselves, their friends, and their families.

Wildcrafters respect the plant, and are often willing to work hard to protect it, she says.

"I've seen this just about everywhere I've worked, but it really came forward for me in Saskatchewan," she says. "I stayed there for 15 years, trying to save one plant—Seneca Root—which is a powerful remedy for the respiratory system. It is also an old snake-bite remedy. The problem is, you need 250 roots to harvest a pound of it, and it takes seven years to grow one plant."

Seneca Root was being threatened both by over-picking and loss of habitat due to development. Keane worried it might be headed toward extinction. She'd seen this before—for instance, with Wild Ginseng in Ontario, which, she says, is now completely gone.

"But the way to save it is to get it listed as endangered or threatened, and it is very, very hard to do that. You need to count it and monitor it, which is a huge undertaking. Thankfully, the little farming communities of Saskatchewan have a great understanding of their medicinal plants, and they grasped the particular situation of this plant. They came forward and volunteered to help, counting, recording, monitoring, so I could make an evidence-based case for the plant."

Keane and her allies formed a non-profit group, Save our Species, which took as its first task the preservation of Seneca Root. They are still working on it; Keane remains hopeful, although cautiously so.

While the fate of Seneca Root in the Canadian Prairies still hangs in the balance, the ongoing campaign to have it listed as endangered has brought people together in a powerful way, says Keane.

"My years in Saskatchewan were very exciting; there was so much camaraderie, so much willingness to cooperate and pitch in to do the work to save this plant," she says, sitting back in her chair with a smile of satisfaction.

Another source of satisfaction, for Keane, is seeing people wake up to the realization that they can use plants to heal themselves.

"I'm giving people control over their own health," she says. "These days, we are steeped in pharmaceuticals, and people are looking for alternatives."

Humans have used plants for healing for millennia, all over the world, she points out. Our modern pharmaceutical system is, in a way, an outgrowth of this. Nearly 50 per cent of the thousands of medications prescribed today are either derived from plant sources or contain a chemical, synthetic imitation of a plant compound.

"Since we did not evolve with these synthetics, our bodies do not always have pathways for their distribution and elimination," she explains. Although synthetic drugs have certainly performed miracles and saved lives, virtually all of these drugs have side effects ranging from the unpleasant to the lethal.

Using wild medicinal plants

not only offers an alternative to the use of pharmaceuticals, it also provides a very different experience of healing. Instead of visiting a doctor's office or a hospital, people go out into the forests and mountains; they can make the medicine themselves and they know exactly where it comes from.

"When people see that this works, they are thrilled!" Keane says.

Keane doesn't consider herself a healer; she would rather see people learn to heal themselves. This is why she became a writer.

Originally, Keane was an accountant, a profession she found "terribly dry," she says with a merry laugh. Thirty-five years ago she left accounting to study herbal medicine.

"I was drawn to the plants. But I didn't want to work in a clinical setting. I figured the best thing was to write. I can educate people this way; a book gives them time to absorb the information by slow osmosis."

When Keane feels her research is complete and she is ready to write a book, she throws herself into an intensive period of writing, writing, writing till it's done.

"I chain myself to the computer. Something happens—an upheaval in my brain, and I start to see the whole book form. I work 8-12 hours a day. I just keep going and going."

The new book has been particularly gratifying because it represents her return to BC, where she lived decades ago. "I love it here; it's like heaven to be back."

Keane says BC has a plethora of wonderful healing plants. However, she is able to choose a favorite.

"I'm very fond of Devil's Club. It only grows here in BC, a little bit in Northern Alberta, and in one very small enclave in Ontario near Lake Superior," she says. "It's strong, it's a warrior, it's substantial and resilient."

Recent research has confirmed the use of Devil's Club, a member of the famous ginseng family, for respiratory problems, including Tuberculosis. This is of particular interest to the medical world, since some strains of Tuberculosis have been developing a resistance to commonly used pharmaceutical drugs.

There is more information about Devil's Club, and 42 other medicinal plants, in *Wild Medicine of Coastal British Columbia*. ☪

.....  
For more information and to order books visit [www.gaian.ca](http://www.gaian.ca).