



Left: Ashley Glenn, program manager for the Sacred Seeds program, which is devoted to conserving medicinal herbs.

Sacred Seed Conservationist

Ashley Glenn is program manager for the Sacred Seeds project [see *Organic Gardening*, April/May 2010, page 24], an international effort to preserve both medicinal plants and traditional knowledge of how they are used to improve health. From her base at the William L. Brown Center at the Missouri Botanical Garden, Glenn travels far and wide to establish a network of gardens—and communities—devoted to this important task. She has set up community gardens in isolated Peruvian mountain hamlets and remote Cambodian villages and has shared planting work on American Indian reservations. Her next trip is to New Zealand, where she is assisting in the development of the New Zealand Herb Gardens, which, when open in a few years, will be the largest public

garden in the world devoted to medicinal herbs. We met recently to talk about the significance of her work.

Michael Balick: Why is the idea of saving medicinal plants and the traditional knowledge about their uses so important to people today, both in the United States and around the world?

Ashley Glenn: When I'm sick, I have the luxury of choosing between a trip to the drugstore, a doctor's visit, yoga class, acupuncture, a health store, and the plants in my back yard to treat myself. When possible, I'll reach for the plants in my garden or spice rack. I prefer them because they're inexpensive and often gentler on my body and the earth, and it makes me feel like a smart, independent do-it-yourselfer. I like the sense of connection plant medicine gives me: to the earth, and to the generations of people that have also used these plants to heal. For me it's a choice, among many. Through my travels and research as a botanist, I've learned that remarkably few people have so many choices. Most of the world relies on gardens and forests to treat themselves and their families. If their garden fails, or if the forest is cut down, they can't just run to the store for some alternative. Seeing this in person has given me a new respect for wild areas and for the amazing innovations of traditional communities in using these lands sustainably.

MB: How does Sacred Seeds address this issue?

AG: Our mission is to help underserved groups develop and support ethnobotanical plant sanctuaries within their communities. These Sacred Seeds sanctuaries are often the best, and only, sources of medicines to address local people's primary health-care needs. Remember that around the world more than 4 billion people depend on plants

PROFILES

as a part of their primary health-care delivery system, based on a great deal of knowledge of how to prepare and administer traditional remedies. Sacred Seeds harnesses the power of that knowledge, much of which has been gained over centuries of trial-and-error experimentation, and helps to save the plant biodiversity upon which it depends. We have developed a network of gardens around the world. By connecting these gardens, we shine a light on the voices and wisdom of these remarkably talented gardeners and traditional healers. We foster local efforts on a global scale.

MB: Could you give some examples of Sacred Seeds sanctuaries in different places and what sorts of plants they contain?

AG: Our sanctuaries are truly as diverse as the people and land that they are born from. In the Dakota Sioux community of Crow Creek, South Dakota, the sanctuary takes the traditional form of a medicine wheel, conducive to storytelling about Dakota history. In Costa Rica, Finca Luna Nueva is growing more than 300 mostly native tropical medicinal plants in a rain-forest habitat, where researchers and traditional healers alike can explore and share their knowledge. In Sri Lanka, we have a forest of native fruit trees, but it's also been designed to give children a place to learn and play.

MB: As program manager, what's been your best moment?

AG: It's the small moments that show that people are finding their own relationships with our sanctuaries. Peter Lengkeek of the Dakota Sioux showed me tobacco offerings in the buffalo skull centerpiece of the Crow Creek garden, and told me that elders leave these as blessings and thanks. And one of the students at Kindle Farm School in Newfane, Vermont, another Sacred Seeds Sanctuary, was so dedicated to their garden that he earned an internship at Finca Luna Nueva in Costa Rica. Hearing the joy in his voice as he explained to the younger students that he now believes you can work hard and achieve your dreams, that moment was precious.



Ashley Glenn's work has taken her from a center of botanical science and excellence to outposts of regional horticulture, bringing together the best both realms have to offer.



MB: How can the readers of *Organic Gardening* become involved in this program?

AG: If you are interested in incorporating a “sacred” or ethnobotanical layer to your garden, I suggest you explore your own sense of place, in the broadest sense. It may be a geographical place, like southern Missouri or the Rocky Mountains. It may have a personal significance, such as the cultural history of your family, or of your region or town. What you hold sacred and what you hope to preserve become the “identity” of your garden. From there, the process of choosing your plants becomes clearer. At Sacred Seeds, we encourage local trade first and foremost, supporting communication and cooperation within communities. Local seed swaps, university extension services, farmers’ markets, and the elders in your neighborhood are all great resources for interesting seeds, cuttings, and plants. If your community doesn’t hold seed swaps, consider starting your own! —*Michael J. Balick, Ph.D.*

For more information, see Find It Here on page 68.

