



ECHINACEA



FIREFLIES HIDE FROM
THE SUN IN THE IVY, AND
COME OUT AT NIGHT.

YOU DON'T GET THIS
MANY FIREFLIES WITH
GRASS. NOW IF YOUR
LANDLORD WOULD LET
YOU CONVERT YOUR...

So I need to preface this zine by saying that while I am writing this for Native American Heritage Month, I am not Native American. I was offered this project as part of my work as a nature educator, to make a zine about a plant important to Native American culture. That's such a large project. As large as North America is wide. What plant do I choose? How do I do this in a way that's respectful? What can I possibly have to say on this subject that's meaningful? Anyone can write down a bunch of facts about a plant, that's not very special or interesting.

I was offered this project amongst the chaos of an office renovation, with my coworkers standing around piles of boxes and empty shelves. They were all very adamant that the starting point for this project should be Robin Wall Kimmerer's Braiding Sweetgrass; a book I was well aware of but never picked up despite a roommate having a copy of it on our shelves for many years.

So I started there. In Braiding Sweetgrass Kimmerer talks about the power of plants to make us remember, remember that we are part of this world not separate or above it. That nature is not a thing to dominate or control, but something that gives us many gifts that we as a species have failed to reciprocate. I started remembering things. I thought back to the first time I learned what it meant for a plant to be native, of the concept of a native garden.

It would have been on one of my summer trips to St. Louis to stay with my grandparents. The apartment they lived in for most of my life had a yard different from any others I'd seen growing up in Springfield, Illinois. There was no grass. Only ivy tumbling down and creeping over the surrounding brickwork. My most vivid memories of those summer trips were sitting on the stoop with my grandpa while he smoked, took his cat out, and regaled me with half true stories of his childhood growing up in a different apartment just a few blocks away. And the fireflies. As the sun set and we started to get a reprieve from the muggy heat the fireflies would slowly float into the air. No other yard had as many fireflies as my grandparents' yard. He explained to me "They stay under the ivy, protected from the sun and heat. No one with grass in their yard has this many fireflies."



The ivy and fireflies were pretty, but the back yard was magical. All kinds of things growing wild and tall like I'd never seen before. Bursts of bright yellow from black eyed susans (my grandmother's favorite), delicate pink and red columbine flowers, blue sage, Russian sage, coneflowers, lavender, tomatoes, river oats. I spent many days out there weeding and planting. My grandfather would point out the plants that have always grown there and still grow wild in parks and the side of the highway and people's yards. He'd point out the plants that would attract butterflies, bees, and hummingbirds. He'd point out the plants that were brought here from the Old World, the same way his parents were brought here from Warsaw, Poland in 1939.

I don't know the full context of my great-grandparents coming to the United States. I don't know if they left Poland before it was invaded by Germany and the Soviet Union or after. I don't know if their families left willingly or were deported. I do know that they were both children, that both their families would end up in St. Louis, and that in the span of two generations our family went from only speaking Polish to only speaking English. I know that they were poor and struggled. I know that if they did not leave Poland when they did I would not be here. And I know that everything that my family did and everything that was done to them led to me sitting here in a makeshift office, writing about flowers.

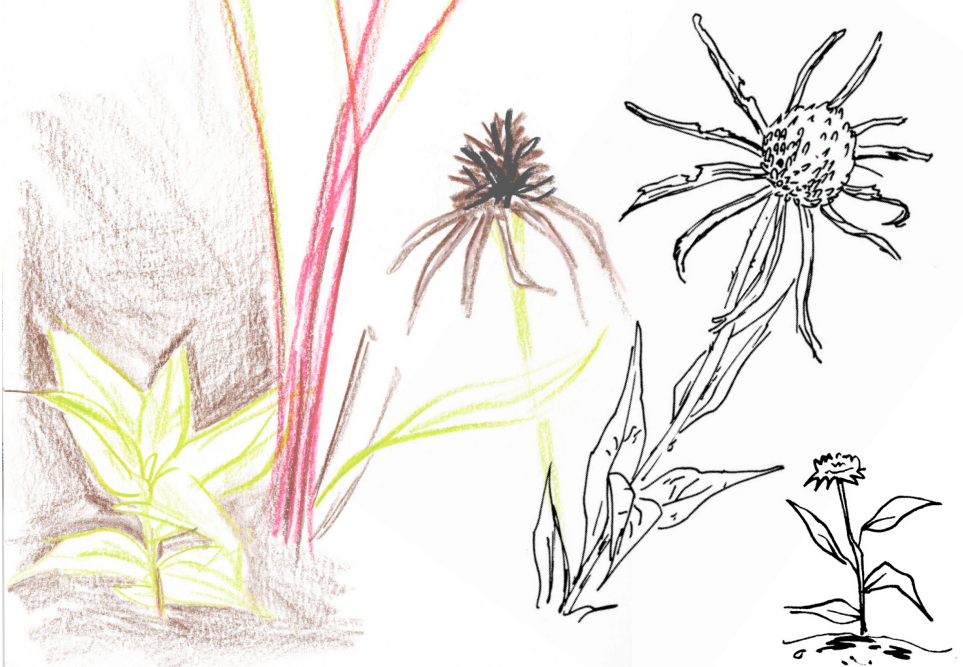


As I read Braiding Sweetgrass it became clear which plant I needed to make this zine about. It's a simple plant, with a recognizable flower, a member of the daisy family, that you've probably seen if you live in the midwest. It's common in gardens, and you may even have a medicinal version of it in your cupboard. Echinacea. From the Greek word for hedgehog. Commonly called coneflowers. With spiky brown centers, and drooping petals that come in an array of colors, bright pink, orange, and most commonly purple. They bloom from mid summer well into fall.



Coneflowers make me think of me, and my family. They're hardy, drought resistant plants. Easy to plant, and hard to kill. I like to observe them throughout their blooming season. I walk past my favorite spots and see how the flowers are doing. Much like me, they get worn down by the hot summer sun. Purple petals fade and wither to brown just as I burn red. As the seasons turn they lose their petals and their seed heads grow even spikier, ready for birds to come eat their seeds and spread them all around. They're perennials so even if they look dead in winter come spring and summer they'll be back bigger and more beautiful than ever.

It is difficult to talk about the history of Echinacea prior to the arrival of European settlers in North America. So much knowledge was lost during colonization as Native Americans were killed, displaced, and stripped of their culture. There is also a lot of knowledge that is rightfully kept away from outsiders like myself. A great deal of traditional medicine was dismissed by settlers and continues to be dismissed by modern scientists and researchers based on Eurocentric ideas of empiricism. Of course a lot of Indigenous wisdom ends up being proven correct, the trees do talk to each other, and a lot of traditional medicines do, in fact do something!





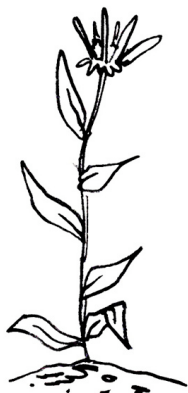
It is important to understand when talking about traditional Native medicines that the physical plant is only one aspect of healing, one's spiritual health is inseparable from their physical health, and physical maladies also have a spiritual component. In her book, *Echinacea: Herbal Medicine with a Wild History*, Kelly Kindscher recounts speaking

with Lakota elder, Alex Little Soldier, about the Lakota's medical applications of certain plants. They became mutually perplexed with each other as Kindscher was showing Little Soldier a book of plants she was referencing, and he kept telling her "well, this is interesting, but, you understand, it's not the plant that

heals, it's the spirit." The plant is a pathway for spiritual forces in healing. And many of these plants, Echinacea included, also contain substances with proven pharmacological effects.

Echinacea has been used across North America for a wide range of ailments, and there is evidence of its use in areas where it does not grow wild, indicating that it was traded widely. The most commonly used species of Echinacea, *E.*

angustifolia, is known by a variety of names to the Plains Tribes. The Potawatomi call it *ashosikwimia'kuk* meaning "smells like muskrat scent" the Omaha call is *mika-hi* or "comb plant" referring to how the seed head was used to comb hair, the Kiowa-Apache call it *ize. iso. he.* or "medicine that makes you numb." It was, and still is on reservations, used for a variety of ailments including snakebites, colds, coughs, inflammation, toothaches, and more.



It took some time for European settlers and their descendants to “discover” the medicinal properties of Echinacea, as they broadly dismissed Native medicine as superstitious and fake. It wasn’t until snake oil salesman and quack, Dr. H.C.F. Meyer started peddling his “Dr. Meyer’s Blood Purifier” that Echinacea entered the public consciousness. Meyer claimed it could cure just about anything, snakebites, wounds, fevers, tumors, and just about any ailment that could be attributed to bad blood. He went so far as to put on a performance where he would let rattlesnakes bite him, then rub his miracle medicine on the wounds. Of course, the rattlesnakes had been defanged. With the advent of antibiotics his Blood Purifier fell out of use, an Echinacea was dismissed as quackery.



Meyer’s misuse of the plant marred its reputation as a medicine with real effects. In the century since Meyer sold his Blood Purifier studies have found that Echinacea contains compounds that decrease inflammation, and stimulate immune response. It has become one of the most popular botanical supplements and today people use it to help recover from colds and boost their immune system. Studies are still ongoing, and there is much to learn about the effects Echinacea has on the human body, but the evidence indicates that settlers were wrong to dismiss the use of Echinacea as total quackery. Sadly, overharvesting of Echinacea to create supplements has caused wild grown populations to decline. Some species were even considered endangered for a time, but conservationists have been working to develop ways of harvesting the plant that are sustainable.



How to turn your lawn into a wildflower meadow

I have to be honest, I hate grass lawns with a passion. Grass lawns are resource intensive and don't give anything back to humans, animals, and definitely not pollinators like bees and butterflies. They take up a lot of water, and energy to maintain. Replacing grass with native wildflowers will bring all sorts of wonderful birds, butterflies, and other helpful insects to your yard. Once established, a wildflower yard requires little maintenance, far far less than the mowing, watering, and fertilizing that grass needs to grow in many parts of the United States. Here are some suggestions on how to convert part, or all of your yard to wildflowers!

Research!

The best flowers to plant, when to sow your seeds, how much to water, etc will depend on where you live. In general, an area that gets a lot of sunlight and already has something growing on it should be suitable for growing wildflowers



Remove grass

Either by tilling the soil with a roto-tiller or hand tools, or by smothering the grass with a tarp or cardboard. You want the topsoil nice and loose

Prepare your seed mix

In a large bucket mix 8 parts sand to 1 part seed mix



Sow those seeds!

Spread your seed mix across the area you want wildflowers to grow. The seeds need a lot of contact with the soil to germinate, so compress the earth by stepping on it, or laying down a cardboard box and stepping on that.

Now water them

Give your seedlings a good soaking, then leave them uncovered to germinate.

Nurture your seedlings

Once your seedlings start sprouting, water them regularly for 4-6 weeks or until they are 6-8 inches tall. After that they will have large enough root systems to be able to absorb groundwater, and should only need watering during very dry times. You will also want to weed your lawn to keep other plants from competing with your seedlings for resources.



I write this in difficult days where it seems like our leaders don't care that our Earth becomes less and less hospitable to humans, to the animals, to flowers. So many kinds of people are under attack. My own family urges me to flee to another country just as we fled over 80 years ago. I've been thinking about Echinacea. I think that I need to be strong, hardy, plant my roots deep and survive even when resources become scarce. Knowing that even when it seems like I'm done for, petals withered away and dry spring will come again. I can spring back to life loud and vibrant, and I will be surrounded by a field of other flowers like me smiling with the sun on our faces.



Sources

Braiding Sweetgrass by Robin Wall Kimmerer

Echinacea: Herbal Medicine with a Wild History
edited by Kelly Kindscher

*Honoring the Medicine: The Essential Guide to Native
American Healing* by Kenneth S. Cohen

Indigenous Native American Healing Traditions by
Mary Koithan and Cynthia Farrell

*Inflammation and Native American medicine: the role
of botanicals* by Andrea T Borchers et al.

peachridgeglass.com

theplantnative.com

stlouisherbssociety.org



Made by Ari S. Mulch

In 2025

For the Garfield Park Conservatory Alliance

Species of Echinacea



E. atrorubens



E. angustifolia



E. tenesseeensis



E. sanguinea



E. simulata



E. pallida



E. purpurea



E. paradoxa



E. laevigata