

The Industry of Wildcrafting, Gathering, and Harvesting of NTFPs: An Insider's Perspective¹

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THE INDUSTRY

The natural products industry has been undergoing a tremendous amount of change in the past few years. Large corporations including pharmaceutical companies, food and drug store chains, and even department stores have been adding medicinal herbs to their offerings. We can find anything from naturally raw bulk herbs, to standardized extracts, to time-released formulations. Everyone has seen some variation of the commercial that depicts a man standing in the middle of a parking lot looking very confused because he cannot remember where the car is parked. A package of ginkgo capsules is shown, and the man happily finds his car. This level of advertising has obviously helped the industry by encouraging potential consumers to try herbs as a possible long-term solution to health concerns. However, as demand has generally maintained an upward trend, it has ultimately been a roller-coaster ride. Supply and demand generally do not go hand in hand. Growers and wildcrafters can seldom react as quickly as the consumer, and may take a year or two to catch up. By this time, the consumer may have already gone on to something else. This can make it especially difficult for anyone in the initial stages of working with herbs and getting into the herb industry.

Because of the increased interest on the part of the consumer, and because of the perceived

potential for profit in growing or harvesting herbs, new wildcrafters and growers are constantly trying their hand at harvesting, only to find that it is not as easy as it seems. Clearly, if it were that easy, many more growers and harvesters would already be involved with herbs. This leaves an opportunity for those who are truly interested in being successful in the herb industry—those creative people who can “invent” equipment and maintain a sensitivity to ethics and quality issues, and who have a drive to give customers what they require.

One issue that has continually frustrated anyone entering the NTFP market has been the absence of well-established general information sources similar to those available for true commodities, such as corn or soy beans. There is no single reliable report for price information, and most buyers who follow market trends closely do not publish price lists because price information is confidential, volatile, and quality-sensitive. The NTFP industry has yet to reach a level of sophistication necessary to develop a common base of information. As a result, growers and gatherers are left attempting to find more creative ways to learn about the market. Networking is one of the best ways to learn and begin to understand the variety of price and quality structures. Books and the Internet are helpful, but are only a first step. Prices vary significantly and most listings rarely clarify whether prices are for raw material or packaged products, or what level of quality is required for specific price points. This can potentially lead growers to undervalue an herb that is for sale.

For example, one grower was asked to quote the price for several different crops he was about to plant. He had quoted \$3.00 per pound for each herb. As we started to discuss individual items, he began to see that for some herbs the price was too low for him to even break even, yet for other herbs the price was so high that he could not be competitive.

¹ *Wildcrafting is the harvesting of wild plants in ways that will help increase a specific plant population and its health. The terms wildcrafters, gatherers, and harvesters are used interchangeably. For more information on ethical wildcrafting, contact the author.*

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The domestic market is, on its own, difficult to monitor, and factoring in overseas markets and competition complicates it further. Growers from other areas of the world are becoming increasingly competitive, and more countries are making certified organics more available. Part of the challenge has been to find ways of competing with countries where the cost of living is lower and where lifestyles are more spartan. Alternately, part of the opportunity is in finding ways of being better than the competition and adding value without adding significant cost of equipment and buildings. One major area of opportunity is still in providing herbs that are certified organic. Buyers are increasingly searching for herbs that are harvested in both ethical and sustainable manners. Organic certification is a very good way to address this important consumer concern. I will explain this more fully later when I address future niche opportunities.

The experience that my company, The Frontier Natural Products Cooperative, has developed in working with growers and gatherers has come from years of listening to our customers, growers, gatherers, herbalists, environmentalists, and scientists, in addition to those within the herb and world communities. To meet consumer concerns, we require ethical wildcrafting forms to be completed by gatherers, although we also rely on conversations and visits with growers and gatherers to determine authenticity. Our visits allow us to assess whether or not harvesters are truly concerned and understand ethical issues around harvesting, or whether the forms have simply become a process for marketing organic and ethically harvested products. Several forms and sets of guidelines exist and are available for gatherers. Some are more useful than others in helping train wildcrafters. The guidelines and questionnaires offered by United Plant Savers and by Rocky Mountain Herbalist Coalition are useful and have been utilized by many companies that purchase herbs from gatherers. Learning these guidelines and following them will help newcomers to the field in selling herbs.

Within the industry, another major key element is understanding that not all customers desire the same thing. Expectations for quality and supply vary among buyers. Recognizing that not all customers want the same level of quality, or be willing to pay for it, is very important.

If a potential customer has written specifications for a product, growers or gatherers can use them as a guide for harvesting. Any information that can be passed from the customer to the gatherer can be useful; the more you know about their needs, the easier it will be to supply them. For example, some companies are concerned about color variation within a specific lot or shipment. Obviously, there will be some color variation because each herb is an item from nature. But if a company requires that a root color range from light brown to beige, but part of the harvest is very dark brown, it could be subject to rejection. The grower or harvester may need to sort through and select color ranges to meet a customer's specific requirements.

Some companies test for constituent levels, oil content, color, flavor, aroma, dirt, wrong plant parts, salmonella, *E. coli*, and they may require botanical names (genus and species verification). Depending on the end use of herbs, some companies may not place importance on specific characteristics, while others may test for everything. This can be risky, and successful growers and gatherers maintain more than one customer so that if they cannot satisfy the requirements of one customer, they can sell the materials to another. If customers ask for lemon balm, or any other herb, it is important to know whether they require leaf only, leaf and flower only, flower only, or the entire herb. The amount of selection, cleaning, or selective harvesting that will need to be done must all be calculated into the cost of production and ultimately into the grower's selling price.

Other requirements can include representative preshipment samples for testing, different levels of cleanliness, i.e., dirt and debris. Some customers will want fresh herbs, others will need them dried to very specific levels of moisture content. Knowing as much as possible about what a customer requires will make a grower or gatherer more successful in making an initial sale and will further the relationship in becoming a trusted long-term supplier. There is, clearly, some responsibility on the part of the buyer to ensure that growers and gatherers obtain as much information as possible. If a buyer cannot provide specific information, serious problems may arise from misunderstandings of what is required. If there are no specifications, it would be wise to, at the very least, obtain this fact in writing.

GAINING THE EDGE

The importance of finding a niche cannot be underestimated. Working closely with a buyer might help a gatherer focus in a specific direction, yet does not provide flexibility within an area of potential opportunity.

With herbs that are wildcrafted, there is increasing concern voiced by consumers and native peoples that areas are being overharvested. One area of potential, then, is to respond to this concern through certified organic ethically wildcrafted herbs. There are several advantages of organic certification of wildcrafted herbs. Buyers are assured of ethical wildcrafting practices as outlined by the certifying organization. In this vein, wildcrafters are registered and required to know and follow guidelines provided. As well, gatherers are eligible for the premiums that exist for certified organic herbs. This provides for a good and sustainable option in that many wildcrafters hold a vested interest in future harvests. Many harvesters have a natural understanding of our environmental situation including deforestation, urban sprawl, mining, and uneducated overharvesting. Without some measures that control harvesting, it will become more difficult to maintain biodiversity and sustainability within harvesting practices, with the possible outcome of forcing more cultivation into monoculture production, as opposed to harvesting within an ecosystem.

Several organic certification agencies are very concerned about these issues and have programs in place for working with wildcrafters. They will require that there is someone they can contact who is in control of the land, whether it is crown land, government land, or even timber mill land. Additionally, there must be maps of the area available for verification. The group, agency, or company in control of the land then needs to provide written confirmation that there has been no industrial contamination in the area of harvest and needs to submit a list of harvesters and information about their harvesting practices.

Seemingly, organic certifying agencies require a good deal of information and demand a substantial amount of control over harvesting. Yet, if we look at a harvesting situation from another point of view, the land has already been under some level of control with maps, owners, or land managers. Organic certification is not

an attempt to specifically add more controls. Rather, it is a method of ensuring future harvests while gaining the opportunity for gatherers to take advantage of the premium for organic certification. There are also broader benefits built into the certification process, as gatherers can assist with plant population counts, observe reactions of populations to harvesting practices, and contribute to the definition of optimal sustainable population levels. Making connections with groups who are already studying plant populations and practices can also be beneficial on a much larger scale. It can assist continental and global efforts already under way with groups such as United Plant Savers. Even though there is considerable domestication and cultivation of traditional plants, more and more information is being distributed about the benefits of the natural environment. The benefits of the permaculture³ environment and companion planting have brought new awareness to how planting, population maintenance, and harvesting should be handled.

Ethical wildcrafting is another possible way of gaining an edge in the marketplace. Various groups in the States have been working on setting up ethical wildcrafting programs, and some have had good results. As the program develops, it will begin to offer classes in wildcrafting, ethics, and marketing. A registry of gatherers who have completed the program can be easily developed and provided to buyers. Ethical wildcrafting would be a much less structured option than organic certification and could provide a whole new way of protecting specific areas of the environment. Clearly, the ideas presented here could be perceived as a form of encroachment on freedom of gatherers and a move towards increased controls over harvesters. And, yes, it can be viewed in this way. Yet, we need to consider the destruction experienced within some areas that have not

³ *Permaculture is a system of growing crops in balance with the environment. Unlike monoculture and companion planting, permaculture is the ultimate method of sustainability in which the cultivated environment most closely resembles the natural environment. Several species are planted in the same environment to complement, nourish, and protect one another as seen in nature.*



been protected in any way. The processes suggested here are, in fact, milder and may ultimately impact the harvesting process less than an extreme situation that could either shut harvesting down altogether, or through not sharing Mother Earth's gifts, lose them to those who would take without respect.

MARKETING IDEAS FOR SUCCESS

The marketing of wildcrafted herbs is ultimately not very different from the marketing of cultivated herbs, and it is still extremely important to understand as much as possible about the herb industry. If gatherers or growers are considering becoming involved in wildcrafting, they should plan on a great deal of hard work to succeed. This applies regardless of whether work is in the field, the forest, or the marketplace. As a result, anything that can be done to make the work easier and faster should be experimented with. If a tool, building, or vehicle can be converted, or a piece of equipment adapted, it may make a difficult job both easier and faster. The opportunities are as endless as the imagination itself.

It is also wise to focus on quality. As a rule, the better the quality, the higher the price. Building a reputation for providing high quality herbs will make the selling part of the work much easier, although understanding the customers' quality requirements is paramount. It is helpful to build contacts with government departments of agriculture and university extension services that may offer ideas and ways to improve your focus. Establishing contacts on the Internet, visiting web sites, and making connections via e-mail can also help build relationships with specific buyers.

In terms of understanding market trends, local health food stores can be a way of finding out which products are popular, which have been steady sellers, and which products are marginal in sales. This will help in the selection process of what to grow or wildcraft. It is important to remember, however, that very rarely does the shelf price reflect in any way the price that the grower or wildcrafter can expect. Shelf costs reflect quality, processing, testing, advertisement, and other variables that make up the cost of an item on the shelf. It is also useful to check current herbal magazines and periodicals for discovering market information: who is advertising, and which herbs are

the current focus within the industry. Attending regional, national, and international trade shows will also help in establishing more connections. Many companies have representatives at such shows, and it gives the grower or wildcrafter the opportunity to learn about the various companies interested in buying raw materials. It is also a very useful arena in which to gain valuable information about the future directions of the industry as a whole. While seminars and conferences are not always exciting, a wealth of information can be gained from the speakers and from other attendees at such events. Most speakers are interested in sharing more information than simply was presented, and it is good to plan to meet either during the conference or afterward via phone, fax, or e-mail.

It is also important to learn some of the more technical aspects of herbs through tests such as high pressure liquid chromatography (HPLC). The technical intricacies are not as important as simply knowing how such a test can affect your sale. Other things to be aware of include tests such as the steamed volatile oil test (SVO), thin line chromatography (TLC), and quality control (QC), certified organics, ethical harvesting techniques, permaculture, and companion planting. Visibility is also important, and you can have your name or company's name listed in catalogs, organic directories, with university extension agents, with forestry service departments, in wildcrafting registries, or any other listing that will help get your name in front of buyers. Many of these publications are free or have a minimal charge, and buyers consider them to be very precious publications and find many suppliers in this way. As a general rule, working directly with end-using companies, and staying away from "middlemen" as much as possible will more likely lead to a higher price for your products. However, this is not to say that all middle connections are bad. In fact, in some cases, they are very useful, especially if you have very small quantities. Middle people can group several small quantities of like quality into a larger lot for sale, and they may have already developed the necessary connections, allowing a grower to make a sale more quickly. Given that each situation differs, it is necessary to weigh the pros and cons of working with or without such a middle connection. It is also wise to develop more than one outlet for your herbs. If nothing else, it is good to have a backup in case you cannot meet the

quality requirements dictated by the primary customers, or alternately, if your customer cannot purchase all you harvested.

Learning how other countries are growing and wild harvesting herbs is also a useful activity. Additionally, keeping in touch with the weather channels to know drought areas in other regions of competition and staying abreast with world political situations all help you understand your market better. Knowing the impact of weather, or politics, or earthquakes, or other conditions can give you a bit of an edge when it comes to selling a product. Customers themselves can also be a good source of market information. The closer the growers' relationship is with their customers, the better source of information both can be.

Another useful activity is to find out what herbs are "at risk" and whether there are areas where such herbs can be cultivated. It is also possible to work with companies that will be logging, mining, or developing an area with the result of destroying plant populations. You may be able to work out an arrangement entitling you to harvest the plants before they are destroyed. These can then be transplanted, sold as seedlings or rootlets for others to cultivate, or planted elsewhere. But finally, and perhaps most importantly, learn as much as you can about your customer. The more trust you can develop with each other, the easier it will be to work through hurdles that will most certainly arise. Trust and loyalty go hand in hand when developing a long-term relationship between supplier and buyer.