

California School of Herbal Studies: hub for herbalism renaissance

- by Samantha Campos Special to Sonoma West
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Herbalist/CSHS co-director Rebecca Maxfield is pictured at the California School of Herbal Studies in Forestville.

Photo by Sarah Bradbury

CSHS has a collaborative relationship with the West County Health Centers.

The transformation begins on the verdant, tree-canopied dirt road to the California School of Herbal Studies (CSHS), just off Highway 116, two miles west of Forestville. A sign alerts drivers to the 5 mph speed limit, and goats graze quietly on the left, before the land dips into a woodland ravine. I roll the window down to take in the fresh air and my usual mind chatter ceases. I'm here for a weekend class, but I already feel like I've entered a kind of magical sanctuary.

As we file into the redwood barn, we're greeted with the warm scent of cinnamon simmering in the kitchen. A dozen or so of us gather on overstuffed couches and floor seats, the sun filtering

through vibrant stained glass windows, with that earthy aroma wafting into the classroom, tempting our palate. Many of us remark on how inexplicably “cozy” we feel. Trinity Ava Wool, today’s instructor for “Essential Oils and Aromatherapy,” smiles.

An ebullient woman of 45, Wool has worked with feel-good aromatics since she was a 20-year-old ballet dancer living in Amsterdam and tending to the routine injuries of her craft. She’s now been teaching at CSHS for the past 16 years, mainly leading core curriculum like Fall and Spring Herbal Essentials, various skincare coursework and classes on Eastern herbs.

The root of all medicine, Wool tells us, is plants. Every plant contains some antimicrobial, antioxidant and adaptogenic properties. As she talks of essential oils, the most volatile compounds extracted from a plant, Wool strikes a balance between science and the sacred. She explains that there’s a strong relationship between immune system function and our emotional well-being. Stress is known to weaken the immune system, but we can use a synergy of essential oils to enhance our physical and emotional health. Essential oils affect the mind, body and spirit tangibly. They can protect us from “civilization diseases”—like depression, anxiety, heart disease and cancer—and can alter our physiology just by breathing the air near them.

“Changing your microbes and changing your mind, your human-ness,” she said, “is a lot of what we do here.”

The California School for Herbal Studies was founded in 1978 by Rosemary Gladstar, and was the first school of its kind in the country. It’s since become a hub for herbalism renaissance. These days there are roughly 85 schools in the U.S. devoted to botanical studies.

“A lot of people don’t feel good, and want to know more,” said Wool. “There’s a collective desire to get back to the land, back to the simplicity of common sense.”

Every year, there are over one billion colds in the U.S. According to the Journal of American Medical Association, western medicine is the third leading cause of death in the nation. But recent studies give hope: essential oils may be the “new” antibiotic. A review published in the “Journal of Ancient Diseases & Preventive Remedies” in 2013 titled “Essential Oils and Future Antibiotics: New Weapons Against ‘Emerging Superbugs’” offers a comprehensive look into the potential application of essential oils as an alternative or supplement to antibiotics.

“Perhaps what is needed is a paradigm shift, a fundamental alteration of the way we use antibiotics to treat infectious diseases,” the review article states. “In this regard, there are lessons to be learned from plants.”

Wool agrees, encouraging us to return to our inherent plant wisdom, or “kitchen witchery,” as she calls it. “The magic’s in the garden—your own backyard. Nothing’s better than knowing how to do it yourself. I don’t know if there’s a more important revolution than that.”

Collaborative Effort

In the early 1990s, before Gladstar moved to Vermont to co-found Sage Mountain Herbs and later, United Plant Savers, she handed the school over to a group of people led by James Green. In 2000 he transferred it to herbalist Rebecca Maxfield and her husband, Jason Miller, an environmental educator. Both are currently co-directors of the school.

“The beauty of this place is that it’s very much a collaborative effort,” said Maxfield. “None of us could do what we do without the others.”

Most of the faculty has been at CSHS for close to 20 years. Botanist Autumn Summers, a 30-year veteran of the school, is their program coordinator. Between core staff and guest instructors, there are a couple dozen teachers offering a vast array of plant-based knowledge.

Prior to CSHS, the 80-acre Emerald Valley property on which it’s located once housed a family ranch whose main farmhouse was situated across the highway. It then became a dry-farmed vineyard owned by an Italian family in the 1950s. Today’s classroom was originally a barn full of hay, with no electricity or plumbing or colorful stained-glass windows.

Maxfield is originally from California but was living in Portland when she took her first herbalism class. At the end of it, she wanted to delve deeper so her teacher recommended CSHS. Maxfield came to the school and basically never left, getting a job working in the office—a position that grew as she took on more responsibilities—with Maxfield and Miller living on the property for 17 years, along with their parents for 10 of those years, while raising their two kids.

“When James [Green] retired, he offered me and my husband the chance to take it on... I was scared to death. I like to do things well!” said Maxfield, laughing. “I saw prospects but I knew it would take work. My husband talked me into it. It’s been the most fulfilling thing I could imagine—to love what you do, feel like you’re contributing to the world, and be sustained by it.”

Naturally, Maxfield has learned much along the way. “Plants are really good at living in community, they can teach us,” she said. “Personally, it’s been humbling and has taught me to slow down a little. I tend to want to get everything done right away. But that’s not how nature works, or how a good business works.”

Progressing with one foot in the garden

CSHS offers long and short-term classes for beginning and intermediate levels of interest. Eight-month intensives start in early spring, like Roots of Herbalism and Foundations of Health, which immerses students in herbal plant identification, wild-crafting and cultivation, drying and medicine-making, while providing an academic foundation of human physiology and materia medica, incorporating complementary therapies and crafts, as well as camping trips and guided meditations.

A couple dozen one-day and weekend classes are also offered every day but Friday, March through November (no classes are offered in the winter), and vary from year to year. This fall

features Medicinal Mushrooms, Herbal Skin Care, and Herbal Holiday Gift Making, among many others.

Over recent years, Maxfield has noticed a greater sense of urgency from students. A new generation has cropped up who are serious about their education, see the applications of healthcare, and really want to bring herbal medicine to people in an accessible, egalitarian way. In turn, the school “moved into the 21st century” with homework, tests, a greater online presence and other resources. “But we very much keep one foot in the garden,” she said. “It’s the crown jewel of what we do.”

In addition to the classroom barn with adjacent kitchen, a medicine-making building and self-guided medicine trail, CSHS boasts a half-acre garden with more than 400 herb species. Tim Blakley was the first head gardener until the early 1990s.

Under Tim’s guidance, students hauled in thousands of rocks, defined the garden beds, created terraces, and slowly put in the plants. After Tim left to work for Frontier Natural Products Coop, where he’s responsible for sourcing ethical herbs, Leslie Gardner took over the CSHS garden until she passed away in 2014. “We owe her a great debt,” said Maxfield.

Bryan Bowen, a clinical herbalist who came to the school 15 years ago, currently tends the garden, along with a handful of student-gardeners. Because all cultivation is for educational purposes, plots are small, and a lot of plantings are experimental. But you wouldn’t know it, walking through the lush landscape, stopping to smell the passionflower and lavender, and admiring the abundant rows of medicinal North American herbs.

CSHS also has a collaborative relationship with the West County Health Centers. Select staff and students see patients in the Forestville clinic on Thursdays. Most people come to the school with an awareness or openness to herbalism. That’s not necessarily the case at the clinics, where CSHS herbalists are able to help people they might not have otherwise reached.

Additionally, the school works with and contributes herbal remedies to the Ceres Community Project’s Sebastopol kitchen, which makes meals for people (and their families) undergoing debilitating medical treatments.

“Our goal is for people to feel comfortable using herbs and eating herbs in their everyday life,” she said. “And for people to treat the two to three things they most commonly encounter. We’re not trying to upend the medical industry. But a lot can be done with plants.”