

The Chinese Medicinal Herb Farm, *A Cultivator's Guide to Small-Scale Organic Herb Production*

By Peg Schafer

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Review by Richard Mandelbaum
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With this practical and informative book Peg Schafer begins to address a real and growing disparity: the rapidly increasing use of Chinese herbs in the United States without a corresponding growth in domestic production. As the subtitle states, this is a book most suited to gardeners and diversified, small-scale organic growers. Although the author makes no mention of permaculture, those gardeners and farmers with a permaculture orientation will find much to their liking in the author's emphasis on creating diverse and functional ecosystems and in utilizing all the potential micro-habitats present on one's land, from wetlands to field to forest - something that medicinal plant cultivation lends itself to well.

The book is laid out generously with color photographs of the herbs under discussion as well as Schafer's farm in Petaluma, California. Although inevitably the book is most useful for California growers, the author has made a strong effort in compensating for this, in particular through the collaboration of Jean Giblette of High Falls Garden in Philmont, New York. The bottom line is that Northeastern growers will find this to be a highly useful and practical guide. Having commercially grown American, European, and Asian medicinal plants on a market garden-scale in Pennsylvania and New York, I would have very much appreciated having on hand the wisdom found in this book as I muddled my own way through trial and error.

Some may wonder: why grow Chinese plants rather than focus on native herbs or the ones already under cultivation? As Schafer points out, these herbs are increasingly being used in the U.S., and are overwhelmingly being imported. While we must be cautious in growing plants outside of their native habitats and can never assume that the medicinal quality will be equivalent (something the author discusses in depth), the climate of eastern Asia is in fact not unlike that of the continental United States, making many of the plants quite compatible with our ecosystem. One fact the author does not mention is that the native flora of eastern Asia is in fact much more closely related to the native flora of eastern North America than European flora is. In other words, it could be argued that many Chinese plants are more appropriate to our landscape than many of the non-natives we currently grow but are simply more used to. In addition, many readers will realize that they are already familiar with many of these plants, and may even be growing some of them as ornamentals (although when grown as medicine ornamental cultivars should be avoided).

The book is divided into two main sections. The first section is a series of chapters discussing various subjects such as selecting which herbs to grow, questions of quality and medicinal activity, production, harvesting, and processing methods, marketing, and conservation. Schafer also gives the sage advice to double and triple check Latin binomials of plants, and to not rely on common or Pinyin names. (One additional resource for this that she does not list is www.tropicos.org.) At times the presentation felt perhaps slightly too autobiographical, but that is probably just a personal preference and other readers may enjoy the anecdotes and stories.

Experienced growers may be tempted to skip over some of the discussions on topics such as cover crops, composting, disease and pest control, nursery propagation, and irrigation. I would recommend not doing so, as Schafer occasionally inserts nuggets of information relevant specifically to herb production. Also included in these earlier chapters are several useful charts that are quick references on regional compatibility, harvesting information, and potential invasiveness. This last point is vital for anyone considering growing medicinals, as some plants can prove to be quite invasive. The author clearly states that the charts are meant as starting points for experimentation and trials, and not as gospel. I did, however, find some errors, such as certain herbs that can in fact be grown in the Northeast not being listed as such. In one case, Asian ginseng or *Panax ginseng*, it appears to be an oversight, since the herb profile later in the book lists it as appropriate to the Northeast; in other cases such as *Albizia julibrissin* and *Lycium chinense*, these are potential crops at the very least for those in the milder parts of the Northeast such as New Jersey or Long Island.

The second section, making up almost two-thirds of the book, are 79 individual herb profiles, out of more than 250 plants that the author has trialed over the years. This is in many ways the “meat” of the book and will in all likelihood be the part that growers return to again and again as a reference. Schafer admittedly and justifiably chose the specific herbs to profile in part at least on her success in California, but there is more than adequate information relevant to the Northeast. Each herb profile also lists other Chinese herbs for companion planting (in the future as our collective experience and wisdom grows it would be interesting to expand this to include non-Chinese plants as well). Lastly, the herb profiles also have summaries of medicinal uses, contributed by Sean Fannin.

Within the profiles Schafer includes all the relevant propagation and cultivation information for each plant. However, the information is embedded within short paragraphs; I would have appreciated a presentation of the key points (soil conditions, sun vs. shade, irrigation and water needs, habitat, etc.) that was a bit more uniform and easy to use “at a glance”. I would also have liked to see all of the good information found in the various charts earlier in the book repeated under each profile. Perhaps the author felt that this would have been redundant, but without this I think the reader will find him/herself regularly cross-checking the herb profiles with the charts. For example, in the case of honeysuckle (*Lonicera japonica*), the potential invasiveness is repeated in both places. But in at least one other case, *Scrophularia buergeriana*, the potential invasiveness of the plant is not mentioned in the herb profile itself and so could be missed. I have not personally grown this plant, but based on my experience with its European relative *S.nodosa* I would be very cautious in planting this.

Schafer also includes a handful of Ayurvedic herbs (traditional herbs of India). I assume she did this because they are popular herbs that represent opportunities for domestic growers, but she includes them without much explanation, which might confuse those less familiar with the topic. For instance, the book’s discussions of working with the Oriental Medicine (OM) community would not for the most part apply to these herbs, as they are not generally used in Chinese medicine. I have successfully grown two of the four Ayurvedic herbs she profiles, tulsi/holy basil (*Ocimum sanctum*) and ashwagandha (*Withania somnifera*), in both northeastern Pennsylvania and the southern Catskills. Unfortunately she implies that ashwagandha is inappropriate for growing in the Northeast. While it is true that it will only grow as an annual in the Northeast it can be successfully cultivated with methods similar to its fellow nightshades, and there is strong consensus in the herbal community and industry that it produces potent, high quality medicine. Ashwagandha would certainly be on my list of most highly recommended medicinal plants to grow in the Northeast.

Overall Schafer makes a strong case for increased production of Chinese medicinals here in the U.S. She rightly identifies the market trends that call for this: increasingly endangered populations of plants in Asia, the growing popularity of Chinese herbs in the U.S., and the growing support for local economies. Added to this is the challenge of finding organic, unadulterated herbs from Asia, although this can sometimes be exaggerated – as the author points out it is in fact difficult to source certified organic herbs from China, but there are reputable companies selling high quality herbs grown without the use of agrochemicals.

Although there is discussion of pricing and marketing it is brief, laying out key considerations, while the focus of the book is on cultivation. Organic certification is mainly presented as a wise marketing decision, since more and more of the industry, including smaller tincture and tea companies, are wanting to label their products as organic and cannot do so without the crop being certified. I particularly appreciated her discussion of fair prices and fair wages for those involved in production, supporting small-scale growers abroad when we do purchase imported herbs, and promoting grower cooperation rather than competition, including innovative projects to form grower groups for herb production.

One of the best pieces of advice that the author repeats and emphasizes throughout the book is to develop a relationship with herbalists and other practitioners. They are not only a potential market but also have the expertise to assess quality and potency. This is even more crucial when the herb in question should undergo traditional processing methods to achieve particular medicinal applications. Growers can begin with small trials, learning both what grows well and what meets the quality demands of the herbal community, and then increase production with a more assured market.

The book closes with some useful resources. As mentioned above, one of our most valuable resources in the Northeast region would be High Falls Garden and the related local herb initiative (www.localherb.org).

None of my critiques, which I consider to be minor, diminishes in any way an enthusiastic recommendation of this book for any gardener or grower interested in growing medicinals or who is already doing so. There are very few books on growing medicinal plants, and this is the only one I am aware of focused on Chinese herbs. Hopefully as time goes on we will be able to produce much more region-specific and detailed information, something which Schafer states herself and is helping to make happen through her ongoing good work.