



Herbs around us—Another look at herbs which fertilize the earth and nourish life

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New-century farmer and author, Bob Cannard, changed my view about weeds. In the past, like many people, I was taught to get rid of weeds. For many centuries, one of the hard work that farmers did was to weed. They used their bare hands, tools, machines, and now, chemicals and genetic modification techniques. Humans are educated to go against nature, and the extent of the earth's destruction right now proves this point. To reverse this situation and rejuvenate the earth, we need to start by correcting our wrong views. The right view towards plants that grow in the wild is an important starting point.

Twenty years ago, when I first went to Bob's farm and saw tomatoes and potatoes growing amongst weeds, I could not help laughing. He replied, "Don't laugh. I can harvest up to ten thousand pounds of potatoes and tomatoes per acre." After attending his classes as well as seeing and eating the fruits of his labor, I began to understand that weeds are critical

to fertile land and are nature's way of repairing soil damaged by humans. If we learn the language of weeds, we can understand the messages conveyed by them as they reflect the soil's lack and imbalance.

On a farm after weeding, more weeds would grow initially as the land has lots of wild plant seeds that will germinate under different conditions. For every variety of weed that is removed, a stronger variety of weed would grow in its place. This goes on until no more weed would grow, by then the land is barren. In the U.S., there are farms with "dead zone" where nothing will grow. This is the process of desert formation.

But this does not mean we completely ignore the weeds and let the plants be covered by them. The key point is appropriate management. On Bob's farm, there is always a row of crop for human consumption, and another row of weeds meant to fertilize the land. After the spring harvest, he will rake the row meant for human crops with weed seedlings so that they get buried under the soil. On the row meant for land fertilization, he will let the weeds grow. If these weeds are completely removed, more weeds will germinate the next time the land is watered or rained on. However, if some weeds are retained, they will send a message to the seeds below: "Do not germinate now as the conditions are not good".

Recently, I read a book recommended by Bob and had a better understanding of the efficacy of weeds. The book, "Weeds, Guardians of the Soil" by Joseph A. Coannourer, was published in 1950 and is now available as a reprint. The author grew up in the American Indian district, where the local Indians would eat wild

plants but also allowed these to grow with other crops. During springtime, his mother would go to the area by the creek where wild plants grow in abundance, and picked different kinds of wild plants to cook for meals. Some of these wild plants that were commonly eaten included: wild amaranth, Lamb's Quarter, sunflower seedlings, wild vegetables, purslane and milkweed. Dandelion, when found, would be a special dish. Once, he had the opportunity to ask an Indian elder why they did not remove weeds but instead allowed wild plants and crops such as beans, pumpkins and corn to grow together. Was that because they were lazy? The elder replied: "First of all, these wild plants are part of our food, and furthermore, they nourish the land and make the crops grow better." Joseph asked: "These wild plants are everywhere, so why allow them to grow in the garden?" The elder replied: "Because the garden is taken care of, and the wild plants found here also grow better."





When Joseph was young, he had helped a farmer to hoe. One day, when he was busy clearing the land of purslane in the corn field, he suddenly heard the farmer say behind him: "Stop. Do not hoe again." The farmer looked intently at the area where purslane grew, and said: "I've observed for a while, and noticed that in areas where purslane is found, the corn grew healthier. Actually, purslane does not compete with corn but on the contrary, helped it to grow." For many years, the author had travelled all over the world, and came to the same conclusion.

During the Second World War, some farmers could not hire people to do weeding because their workers had been drafted for military service. It turned out that these farms had better harvest. In the case of one farmer, half of his potato field had all the weeds removed while the

other half had weeds because he could not find workers. Unfortunately, the land also experienced a drought that year. He resigned himself to a poor harvest, and continued to rake the land in autumn to prepare the land for the next crop. He had no harvest for the plot of land that had been weeded, but unexpectedly, he had a bountiful harvest of potatoes in the other plot of land that was not weeded.

A very important rule of nature is that plants grow better when the roots of two different species grow together than when they grow singularly. Weeds have very strong survival skills. The weeds that grow on the surface of the land are not selected by humans, and hence, their roots can crack the hard subsoil beneath. In addition, the roots will secrete substances that dissolve the soil, while the roots of crops can only absorb water and nutrients in

the topsoil. However, if the crops and weeds are grown together, the roots of the crops can also penetrate to the subsoil layers, thereby widening the area where they can absorb nutrients.

The author noticed this phenomenon while observing the ground where a well was dug. The roots of the weeds would bring the water up for the use of crops, which is why crops that are grown on land with weeds are more drought resistant. Furthermore, the roots of weeds can loosen soil and increase its fibrous structure. At the same time, because the roots of weeds can penetrate hard soil and reach the subsoil, they help to repair and improve soil quality. There was an orchard that had, for years, reaped good harvests. The farmer had originally used both chemical and organic fertilizers. One year, he became greedy and wanted an even greater harvest, and used lots of chemical fertilizers but no organic fertilizer. Within six months, half his fruit trees fell ill as if they were anaemic, and within a year, all became ill with little harvest. He asked everywhere for a way to salvage the orchard, but the consensus was for him to abandon the orchard and find a new place to start all over again. He was very reluctant to give up his orchard, and thought that if he left it alone for a year, he would be better able to psychologically accept this fact. He did not bear any hope that the fruit trees would survive, and during that year, he irrigated the orchard several times but did nothing else. All kinds of weeds quickly grew, some even taller than a human's height. The next autumn, his neighbour told him to go quickly to see his orchard. From the edge of his orchard, he saw that the fruit trees growing among weeds did not die but thrived even better. He went into

the orchard among the weeds, and found that those fruit trees in the centre grew even healthier. The weeds had saved his land and fruit trees. The deep roots of the weeds had penetrated into the subsoil, such that the chemical fertilizer became diluted during irrigation. When the weeds died, the fertilizer was released to the land, at which time the trees could accept the fertilizer. He had learned a very important lesson, and henceforth, he never used chemical fertilizer on his orchard again but instead, grew legumes and weeds as organic fertilizer. Weeds are the main fertilizer for his fruit trees.

Another farmer's land was very hard, and after many years of hard work farming the land, he abandoned a part of the land and allowed weeds to grow on it. After some time, his neighbour asked him to look at his land. To his surprise, the quality of the soil where





weeds grew had improved. The deep roots of the weeds had loosened the soil, and henceforth, he had a good harvest growing corn.

In the book “Weeds, Guardians of the Soil”, the author summarizes the functions of weeds.

1. They increase more nutrient-rich areas for crops, allowing the roots of crops to reach places that they could not previously do so.
2. These roots bring “lost” nutrients back to the topsoil.
3. The roots of the weeds loosen the soil.
4. They store water in the subsoil, and then the water travel along the roots of the weeds to the topsoil, nourishing the thirsty crops.

Despite their usefulness, we kill these weeds instead! We use poisonous herbicides to kill weeds. These herbicides are absorbed by the weeds’ fibres, sent back to the soil, and absorbed by crops poisoning them before we consume them.

Many people have narrow, selfish and short-term views of nature and plants. They ask whether there are immediate rather than long-term uses. Their attitude towards weeds fully exemplifies this blind spot. A few farmers are enlightened but the mainstream idea is to use cultivation methods that cause land desertification. Weeds are not only useful for land, animals, and people. Many familiar weeds around us are very good nutritional health products and herbs that were traditionally used in the past. During springtime in Shanghai, people would pluck a plant called the shepherd’s purse to eat. I have eaten frozen shepherd’s purse airfreighted from China to the United States. In my old home in Hunan, everyone knew that the cure for dysentery is to eat sun-dried purslane, which was also the feed for the pigs. Purslane has very high Omega-3 oil content, possibly ranking highest among leaves.

In early summer when farmers start supplying vegetables, the quantity of vegetables is small. I would buy purslane from the farmers, and mix it with fruits to make energy

soup using a juice blender. They may find it strange that I am willing to spend money to purchase weeds. In Greece, purslane grows everywhere, and reared chickens will find this grass to eat. Hence, eggs from grass-fed chicken have high Omega-3 content. In Wutaishan shops, I have seen bottled sow thistle, which looks very similar to the commonly-seen wild dandelion. This is a weed that Americans detest the most. Its roots grow deeply and it has a strong life force. In fact, one expert said that dandelion helps the growth of turf, and without dandelion, grass will not grow well. Dandelion grow in calcium-deficient land, and hence, it is common to see them. They have high calcium content, and help supplement the calcium content in the soil.

Plants can absorb lots of nutrients in the air through microorganisms in the soil as long as there is a little mineral in the soil. Eighty percent of the plant's nutrients come from the air. A good example would be legumes, which can increase the nitrogen content of the land. Wild Amaranth is a common weed, and each of its parts is nutritious. Its seeds have high protein content, and are a superfood of the South American Indians. Its roots, stems and leaves are rich in minerals such as iron, calcium, magnesium, potassium, phosphorus, zinc, selenium, Vitamin E, Vitamin B, and so on. Amaranth sold in health food stores is actually its seed. In every locality, there are local herbs that can be recognized by experienced people. In the early years, I went to Taiwan to live in a temple in Kaohsiung, and ate very delicious wild vegetables, one of which is called white mugwort. At that time, vegetables sold in the market were grown from chemical fertilizers and I could not eat them. Even



one bite of a piece of fruit had a taste of pesticide. The wild vegetables saved my life.

Once when I went to Malaysia, an herbalist told me that there were many local herbs that could treat cancer. Some patients were cured after eating some wild plants. In addition to the local herbs, there are 13 weeds that can repair land that has been damaged by mankind. These weeds can be found everywhere in the world, and are saviours of the earth.

The book "The Wisdom of Weeds" describes these 13 kinds of weeds. The author, Katrina Blair, grew up in the wild as her parents were researchers who did their studies in the wilderness. She recognizes wild plants and the way to eat them. When she hiked in the mountains, in addition to some sunflower seeds and buckwheat, the other food sources are picked from the wild and can meet her dietary needs for several weeks. She also brings people to the wilderness to identify herbs.



She mentions three principles in picking wild plants:

1. Ask permission of the plant
2. Only pick what one needs
3. Say thank you

Always leave some behind so that nature can continue to reproduce. Some herbs in the United States can no longer be bought because of high demand and over-harvesting. The North American goldenseal is an example. Each time we harvest wild plants, sprinkle their seeds to the ground to ensure future harvests. When harvesting roots, only pluck a part of the root and leave a portion behind so that it can grow back. Plantain, dandelion, mallow, dock and clover belong to the category. Also look at the size of the area where the wild plants grow. Harvest only a small part, as otherwise, there may be none left to harvest the following year.

These thirteen herbs are described below:

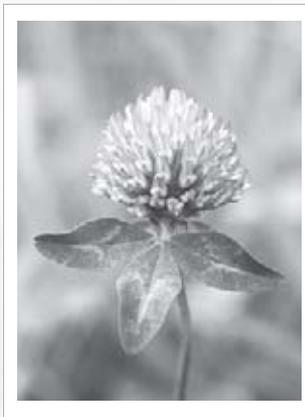
1. Amaranth



2. Chickweed



3. Clover



4. Dandelion



5. Dock



8. Lambsquarter



11. Plantain



6. Grass



9. Mallow



12. Purslane



7. Knotweed



10. Mustard



13. Thistle



Because these plants have soil purification purposes, it is best not to eat them if they grow in land treated with chemical fertilizers or in waste land. First taste a small amount and see the body's reactions before taking more. It is very good to eat one leaf of a wild plant every day.

Green plants can absorb excess carbon dioxide and reverse the climate crisis. Every piece of wasteland and open space should be made green, and herbs are most able to adapt to the current climate changes. Growing crops next to herbs helps create a space for nature and a living space for ourselves. For those of us who do not live in landed properties, as long as there are windows and balconies, pots of herbs can also be grown. Anyone can grow these plants as they have strong life forces. If we do not find self-sprouting seeds of weeds in our land, we can take walks in the wilderness or parks, and bring back some seeds of weeds if we find them. A distinctive feature of these seeds belonging to weeds is that they do not need to be buried in the soil to germinate, and can do so simply by sprinkling them on hard soil. In contrast, if we bury them, they may not germinate; this is how they are different from crops. We can also grow a few pots of grass such as wheatgrass, watermelon seeds sprouts, and buckwheat sprouts to add colour to our salads. We can also let mung bean sprouts grow as they can absorb carbon dioxide. If enough people do this, we will be saved.

Note: ["New Century Farming" Book Recommendation.](#) If you want to know more about natural farming, you can refer to the book "New Century Farming" published by Lapis Lazuli Light.

Knotweed (Chinese medicine)
dandelion (Chinese medicine)
Lambsquarter
Dock
mallow
clover
thistle (Chinese medicine)
Mustard
Amaranth
Plantain (Chinese medicine)
chickweed
Purselane(Chinese medicine)

The original Chinese article was published in the May 2016 issue of Lapis magazine and is accessible online <http://www.lapislazuli.org/tw/index.php?p=20160501.html>

