

# Charleston Daily Mail

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## Ethnobotany catches on with students

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FROSTBURG, Md. -- Frostburg State University instructor Sunshine Brosi leads a half-dozen earnest undergraduates 20 yards through the underbrush of a shady forest. Stooping near some black cherry trees, she plucks a pear-shaped yellow berry as long as her thumb from a shin-high plant with large, graceful leaves.

It's mayapple, a plant with a sweet-tart fruit that can be made into jelly, and poisonous roots containing chemical compounds that are used to treat genital warts and some skin cancers.

The scribbling students are getting an introduction to ethnobotany, the study of how people of a particular culture use native plants. Frostburg State is among the first schools in the nation to offer a bachelor's degree in the discipline.

The program, launched in August, is part of a new effort to understand and capitalize on the centuries-old herbal traditions of the central Appalachian Mountains. Created by Frostburg State, West Virginia University and the University of Maryland Biotechnology Institute, the Appalachian Center for Ethnobotanical Studies aims to foster economic growth in the region through managed development of medicinal plants.

"Part of the whole economic development is determining what non-timber forest products are viable and would have the best opportunities for farmers," Brosi said.

Of immediate interest are ginseng, goldenseal and black cohosh -- plants familiar to anyone who has followed the nearly \$4 billion-a-year marketing of herbal supplements. Beside teaching the traditional uses of these plants, the center is seeking research funds to test the efficacy of not just the specific compounds scientists have already identified -- and often dismissed as ineffective -- but the interaction of an herb's many ingredients or of different herbs taken together.

"We're trying to validate the biology, the mechanisms -- what do these multiple molecules really do?" said Jennie Hunter-Cevera, a microbiologist who heads the University of Maryland Biotechnology Institute. She and the center's associated chemists, biologists, geographers and anthropologists hope to parlay their academic credentials into grants and widespread recognition.

"Our dream is to someday have an international facility that would attract people from all over the world to study and learn about herbal medicine as used in Appalachia," Hunter-Cevera said.

James A. Duke, a retired U.S. Agriculture Department botanist from Fulton who has preached the curative powers of plants for 40 years, sits on the group's advisory board. He hopes to persuade the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation to spend some medical research dollars on Sweet Annie, a weed rich in artemisinin, which has shown promise against malaria.

Duke blames giant pharmaceutical companies for quashing serious investigations of herbal medicines.

"Never ignore Mother Nature," he said. "Mother Nature has made thousands of times more chemicals than all the synthetic chemists in the world could if they set out to do it."

Much of today's ethnobotanical research is done by scientists working in the Amazon. Duke said ethnobotanical studies in the United States last blossomed in the ecology-minded 1970s and early 1980s, but the discipline is making a comeback. The University of Hawaii launched the nation's first bachelor's degree program in 2006, and ethnobotany projects have popped up at Fort Lewis College in Durango, Colo., and the University of Alaska's Kuskokwim Campus in Bethel.

The Frostburg State program sounds good to Larry Harding, owner of Harding's Ginseng Farm in nearby Friendsville. The farm grows ginseng and goldenseal, a reputed antiseptic, on 70 wooded acres that simulate the wild environment. Cultivating a bigger market for farmed medicinal herbs could help save wild herbs from extinction, he said.

"We're taking away a lot of the habitat with development," Harding said. "There's only certain places that ginseng and goldenseal are really accustomed to, and just because it's a wood lot doesn't mean it's going to grow in there."

Ginseng hunter Roger Welch of Kitzmiller, who has earned up to \$3,300 a year picking and selling the root for its supposed health benefits, said he appreciates any effort to enhance demand while sustaining the crop.

"It's like money laying in the woods," he said.

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