

# Rosemary Gladstar

## ROOTED IN THE HEART OF HERBALISM



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Called “the grandmother of American herbalism,” Rosemary Gladstar began her career developing herbal formulas 35 years ago in her shop in Sonoma County, California. She went on to start the California School of Herbal Studies (the oldest-running herb school in the United States) and create the original formulas for the Traditional Medicinals Tea Company, which she co-founded.

Author of numerous herb books, including *Herbal Healing for Women*, *The Storey Book Herbal Healing Series*, *Herbal Remedies for Vibrant Health*, and the *Science and Art of Herbalism* Rosemary has taught extensively throughout the United States and worldwide and has won numerous awards and certificates for her work with medicinal plants. Rosemary lives and works from her home, Sage Mountain Herbal Retreat Center, a 500-acre botanical preserve in central Vermont.

One of Rosemary’s greatest passions in recent years has been the work of United Plant Savers, a nonprofit organization dedicated to the conservation and cultivation of at-risk North American medicinal plants she founded in 1994. She is also dedicated to preserving botanical sanctuaries across the U.S. where these precious native species can thrive.

I met Rosemary fifteen years ago at the New England Women’s Herbal Conference, which she founded and celebrates its 25th anniversary this summer. New to the herbal community at the time, I was struck by how down-home, warm, and welcoming Rosemary was despite being an herbal “celebrity.” As part of a team of women who started the Southeast Women’s Herbal Conference seven years ago, I have had the privilege of working closely with Rosemary on many occasions, including as the keynote speaker at our conference twice during the last seven years.

An model of cooperation among women, values-based work, and dignified elderhood, Rosemary continues to be an unflagging proponent of the herbal community and deeply supportive of the herbal renaissance that she, in large part, helped create. I spoke to Rosemary for this interview during the

**LWW: You're considered the grandmother of modern herbalism in North America. How is that for you?**

The phrase "Grandmother of modern herbalism" got tacked on the end of some article long ago and then picked up and repeated. It's very sweet, but when I think of "grandmothers of herbalism" I think of my elders, like Norma Meyers, Adele Dawson and Juliette de Bairacli Levy.

**Yet you are an elder to so many! While we don't often think of ourselves as "the elder," in many ways you are. What is it like to carry that elder status for so many women?**

I don't think I do carry it; I think I'm wise enough to know that it's just mirroring. People are mirroring to me and I get to mirror back. I learned this lesson early on when I first starting hosting gatherings in my early twenties. I began to notice that after a really incredible event it was so gratifying to see a spark actually lighting people up. You could see how it was making a difference. But I also noticed that if I took it personally I would feel yucky and stuck instead of feeling good about it.

So I quickly learned that both the positive and negative energy aren't mine to carry; it isn't personal. In this kind of work, you're just a vehicle, so I learned to just let the energy flow through me and then offer it back to the Mother. There's an old saying, "God/dess, make me a hollow reed from which thy voice may sing," and that is really still my mantra. I first heard that saying when I was about twenty-two years old and I still think about that often.



**I've heard you say many times that herbalism is one of the few professions in which women become more revered as they age. Can you speak to this?**

To begin with, we're in such a youth-oriented culture. There is this fear, even among very conscious and wise women, that as you get older you become less sought after and valued. But something one of my daughters-of-the-heart (stepdaughters) Melanie said has stuck with me. I was always exposing the group to amazing older women like Juliette de Bairacli Levy and Tasha Tudor and others. Melanie commented wisely, "herbalism is the one field you get into where you're like fine wine. The older you get the more valuable you are."

And it's true! We have brilliant younger herbalists and they hold a very important place in the circle; but nobody holds the same place as those elders. People seek them and want to be near them.

It's not really about what they teach, but something deeper. For example when you used to listen to Juliet talking. It would be a very simple and beautiful truth that she would bring forth but it wasn't like the students were scribbling down notes as they would if they were listening to someone else. They were listening more deeply than that — listening with their hearts.

**Why do you think that herbalism has a greater respect for its elders?**

1. It's respectful. Herbalism teaches respect and humility. You're always kneeling and bowing to the earth. Like old plants in your garden, like old trees in the woods, we realize that in nature elders are given a very special place in the community. A very different place than the young.

2. Another reason is that it's traditional. In traditional tribes and indigenous cultures all around the world, the elder women and the elder men were given a very special place in council and above all they were listened to. It is a trans-cultural thing, it's not just Native American, it's not just European or Chinese. It's all cultures of the world. In herbalism, we believe in the traditions and we support traditional ways.

3. And it's also practical. There is a special value placed on the teaching of the elders because they've had a lifetime of experience. We know that herbalism is a lifetime study. It doesn't matter how good the school you go to is, unless it's the school of life you don't really learn about herbs. So you know that these people hold that wisdom.

When we're young, we start out with passion and inspiration; in the middle years we acquire lots of information. That's why everyone goes to conferences and schools, because they want to learn a lot. But then, after acquiring information, you have to unlearn it again and go back to what you "know." As we pass from middle age and get older we let go of the information, and go right back to inspiration and passion again. As an older person you go to a place where the plants just speak to you and you come to trust that process.

You're one of the few European-American teachers I know that brings the concept of ancestors alive in a real way. With you, it's not some detached intellectual concept; it's women we've known and studied with, and in some cases are still among us. That's a radical, life-changing notion. How do people respond to it.

It is a bit of a tap on the head, as if to say "remember." I'm pleased to say, people do respond to it.

I have made ancestor work part of my mission because when I first starting working with herbalists, it was just elders in the community, there was no one else at all. Some of them were very well-known and some of them weren't known at all. These were the people who held this knowledge for us, who were bridges between traditional knowledge and the world we live in now. They were doing this work when it was absolutely unpopular, you couldn't earn a livelihood from it, and if you worked with this deep-rooted knowledge you were thought to be really strange.

For example, back when I was homesteading in the Pacific Northwest, there was an old woman who lived next door to me and knew her plants really well. She was a librarian in town. She didn't write books, but she was really knowledgeable and I knew instantly that this was a person to learn from.

I began connecting with Juliette when I was in my twenties, and when I started teaching in the mid-to-late 1980's, I started noticing that younger people who came to my classes didn't even know who these older people were. I thought, "Come again?" That's when I started working on my slide show to capture the images, names, and stories of the elders. It's the best slide show I have made, and people absolutely love it.

It's easy to sit at the feet of someone who is well-known and popular, but what about all those elders in nursing homes with nobody hearing their stories? If an elder is eighty or ninety, she was probably raised on plant medicine and probably remembers the old traditions.

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To me it's part of the break we've had with our traditions. Somehow people think this is "our stuff" that it's new knowledge, that's just been discovered or invented. People are starting to patent herbs, for goodness' sake! It's become embarrassing to me in some ways. Truly, there's nothing we do with herbalism that's just "ours" — it's all a gift from the ancestors.

One thing that strikes many people when they go to herbal conferences is that herbalists know each other so well that it feels like a family gathering. In your conference work you are well-known for bringing in less-known herbalists, difficult personalities, and teachers from

other countries; the word "inclusive" comes to mind. This runs in the face of the competitive energy which pervades so much of our culture. Can you speak to this?

I'm conscious of that competitive edge you are speaking of, and, truthfully, I've had to work on it in myself, too. It's not like I'm just naturally cooperative, although part of that tendency comes from my upbringing growing up in a large Seventh-Day Adventist family with a strong community orientation.

For example, years ago I had a little herb store on the main street in Sebastopol, and a young friend of mine wanted to open up her own store down the street from mine. I watched myself get territorial, and I didn't like how that made me feel. So I talked to her about how she could make the store different enough from mine so we wouldn't be competitive but could be supportive of one another, so that if one of us did well, the other could too.

I work to cultivate the attitude that “the better your event does the better mine does, and vice-versa.” I look to see “does it work better for the whole?” Then we can make a beautiful network and not hold onto our fear. It’s just fertilizing and watering the best that we have and recognizing that we want all of our gardens to grow beautifully.

Back in California, I ran the herb school for a long time and it was fairly well-established and I was well-known in my work. I had a brilliant student who came to the school and worked with me for years as an assistant and she grew to be a better teacher than I was in many, many ways.

Over time, I started noticing crankiness in myself even though she was one of my best friends. As I noticed what was going on, I talked to her about it, and the process of identifying and resolving it helped me realize that I wanted her to be the absolute best teacher even though that meant that she would surpass me.

That’s happened over and over again; I’m older now that’s how it’s supposed to be; you want it to be that way, or what would happen to the next generation? It doesn’t mean that I don’t feel competitive, it’s about recognizing that feeling and then deciding to feed what we want to grow, and for me that means feeding the desire for community, not the competitive urge.

A few years ago a teacher said she was contemplating not coming [to one of the conferences] because I had invited teachers that she disagreed with. I told her, “that’s the whole point of these events — is for the exchange of dialogue. We’re exchanging ideas, listening, and supporting.” If we wanted to listen to ourselves all saying the same thing all the time, we wouldn’t have to go anywhere!



*Ever since she opened her herb store in 1972, Rosemary wanted to go to the Valley of the Roses in Morocco. She finally made it in 2008.*

**I have to ask: you travel, run conferences, and manage the Sage Mountain Herbal Retreat Center, and don’t have a large staff, or spend most of your time at your computer! How do you manage to keep it all together?**

[Laughs heartily.] That’s the illusion — I *don’t* manage to “keep it all together.” I’ll tell you a secret: I didn’t give my family enough energy when I was younger; I’ve made sacrifices that if I could go back, I’d redo, to be quite honest. I tell young people “your work will always be there, but your children will grow up, and partnerships will not last unless they are given priority.”

Today, I have piles in my office of things that “should have been attended to” but haven’t been yet. Some of them I will get to and others, well — things like reviews and projects with deadlines — I just can’t. I have a little more ease about that now; the most important thing is to wake up and greet the day and have a sense of joy about that. Tend to the people that need attending to, try to get a little work done each day.

I also must note: though I don’t have a large staff, the people who I work with are unbelievably helpful. I could never do what I do without the help of my family, the woman in my office, and the amazingly competent conference staff.

Furthermore, I love what I do and it seldom feels like a burden. If I need to stay up late or get up early to work I don’t usually resent it. I feel so thankful to be able to do this work and I try to do it joyfully and readily. I try to have that relationship with Great Spirit/God/Goddess and to be living with gratitude. I’m thankful to be in service at this point in my life; I’m a worker, not a queen bee — and thankful for that.

**What are you most focused on these days?**

I’ve tried to pull back from doing so much teaching. It’s not that I don’t love it; you can’t teach herbalism and not have a good time because the people you teach are so grateful. But to be a good teacher you have to draw on that ancestral knowledge and blend it with what’s

*Rosemary signing books at the Southeast Women's Herbal Conference.*

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**What is the essence of your vision?**

It's not very grand. All my life, I've been driven by something bigger than me; there was always something from inside telling me what was next. I'll march and change the world when necessary; I'm a Sagittarian and I'll never be fully content to just stay home.

But now my vision is to get to spend more time with my partner and with my grandkids. I really lament that I don't have time to spend with my family. My mother is 87, I have an eighteen-year-old grandson that I've talked about taking on a trip for the last few years, and a five-year-old granddaughter who lives in Vermont that I see about once a month. She'll never be five years old again.

**Would it be fair to say you are "passing the baton" and moving towards a simpler life?**

Yes, absolutely, it feels so good to me. Whenever someone steps out of a role in an event or group I've involved with, I'm looking for a young person as a replacement.

For example for the last four years I've partnered with my son-in-law — who is in his early forties — on the International Herb Symposium, and now he's officially a part-owner. Likewise, with the Women's Conference, half of my staff is young people I've brought in. With United Plant Savers, our new executive director is Susan Leopold, who's in her thirties. On every level, it's a good thing to be doing. I'm a young elder, I'm in my early sixties; but I'm a wise elder because I see it happening, I'm welcoming it, and I'm excited about it. Thank goodness, I'm finally here. YES! I've worked hard to get here.

**As you travel around the country, you meet many women. What do they care about? What are they hungry for?**

The generations have changed and its clear we're in edgier times. Yet people are still attracted to the same things I've always seen: Sacred and simple things that we all want: a peaceful place to raise their families, good health, good food and water, and good livelihoods. I see that everywhere I go.



current and I've gotten a little too relaxed and don't do that any more. Standing out in front of people and teaching is not as easy as it used to be; these days I like being more in the background. I like cooking for people; I love my role as coordinator; I love seeing it all happen and making the great choices of which teachers to bring in. I like those background roles better than getting up front.

**What about being older is better?**

I don't feel old yet — my body has not started to wear down (which happens if you live long enough) — and still functions for me really well. So, I'm loving the aging process; there's nothing about it I don't love. Even having less energy feels really great, because I like the feeling of being able to get tired in the evening where I just can't keep going. When I was younger, I was blessed with tremendous amounts of energy; evening would come and I would just keep going and going. Now I have to stop and say, "I'm tired." I read and put my feet up; I love it.

You're out there promoting a do-it-yourself, kitchen-medicine, plant-based approach to health and herbalism in spite of an increasing trend towards scientific reductionism, cheap supplements, and specialization. How do you keep at it?

The paradigm of people's herbalism — directly connected to the plants themselves and to the land — is the heart of herbalism, now more than ever. We have to advocate for it because it's under more threat than it's ever been before; fortunately we have a strong grass-roots movement that supports it so I'm not overly worried. Yet due to many pressures — including the ones you just mentioned — maintaining this tradition require continuous vigilance and advocacy.

I'm happy to see herbalism include sophisticated and clinical methods; there's a place for all kinds of approaches in the big quilt that makes up the green herbal medicine community. I was asked to teach on holistic herbalism for nurses and doctors at Dartmouth Hitchcock Medical Center in New Hampshire. I said, "I'm happy to teach here but I'm going to teach it as a family practice — the way herbalist do herbs." So we made salves and tinctures together and they loved it.

But the most deeply-rooted, strongest part of the herbalist community and tradition is grass-roots home health. That's how it is everywhere in the world; how it's been passed down through the bones of the ancestors. I tell students in my Foundations of Herbalism class is that there are many ways to be an herbalist: you can go to school and get a degree, you can be clinical, but kitchen medicine is at the root of everything.

The word "herbalism" has not been usurped by medicine. You can look up the definition in any dictionary, and there's nothing about being a clinical, medical person to be an herbalist. A herbalist is a person who works with plants. If you work with plants, and they are a passion in your life, and you use them, then you are an herbalist. You're a home herbalist, a family herbalist, and that's at the heart of it all.

*Rosemary with Corinna Wood, director of Red Moon Herbs at the Southeast Women's Herbal Conference.*

Photo 2012 © Emily Ankeney.

Herbalism is the one strong people's medicine that we still have that's alive and viable. It's incredibly important that we continue to speak out on its behalf. For me, that's not difficult, since it's been my passion for decades and I expect it always will be!

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*Sage Mountain Herbal Retreat Center & Botanical Sanctuary.* Founded over twenty years ago by Rosemary Gladstar and her family. One of New England's foremost learning centers for herbs and earth awareness. [www.sagemountain.com](http://www.sagemountain.com), PO Box 420, East Barre, VT, 05649. (802) 479-9825

*United Plant Savers.* Rosemary is one of the founders of this organization, with a mission to protect native medicinal plants of the United States and Canada and their native habitat. [www.unitedplantsavers.org](http://www.unitedplantsavers.org). P.O. Box 400, East Barre, Vermont 05649, (802) 476-6467. @



*LEE WALKER WARREN lives in a Cohousing Neighborhood at Earthaven Ecovillage in the Appalachian Mountains of Western NC (near the artsy, hip city of Asheville.) She is an herbalist, food and social activist, writer, and manager of a cooperative farm focused on a pasture-based system of animal and crop rotation. She is also*

*Program and Promotions Coordinator for the Southeast Women's Herbal Conference, and annual event held near Asheville, NC and dedicated to the Wise Woman Tradition. Details can be found at [sewisewomen.com](http://sewisewomen.com).*

