

Mel Kasting:

It is a plant of connection and restoration, and mood enhancement and a mood-enhancing, sort of social-connecting plant. Aralia berry is really, really good if you are a person that makes a lot of plans with people and then when the plans come, you're like, "Hmm, I don't want to go anymore."

Rosalee de la Forêt:

It's just so clear you love aralia berry so much. It's just that—it's kind of this—again, I don't think there's a lot of people out there working with it to this extent.

Welcome to the Herbs with Rosalee Podcast, a show exploring how herbs heal as medicine, as food, and through connecting with the living world around you.

Well, I'm going to admit it, before this conversation I knew almost nothing about aralia berry. So, when my dear friend and brilliant clinical herbalist, Mel Kasting, chose it for the show, I was like, "Nah, I'm not going to read up on it. I'm just going to let her teach me," and I'm so glad that I did.

Aralia berry comes from spikenard. It's a relative of ginseng. One of Mel's first teachers called it the "dance berry." In this episode, you're going to hear why it got that name, along with the Life of the Party elixir that Mel created to get a roomful of people up and dancing. You don't want to miss that. But there's also a real depth here too with this berry. Mel shares how she works with this plant for people who feel heavy, drained and disconnected after illness, grief or long stretches of stress. By the end, you might have yourself wondering if a little dance deficiency is part of what you're feeling too.

If you enjoy this episode, please give it a thumbs up so more plant lovers can find us and be sure to stay tuned until the very end for your herbal tidbit.

Mel, I'm so excited to chat with you. Thanks for being here.

Mel Kasting:

Oh, you're welcome. I'm happy to be here.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

I almost feel like I should give a disclaimer, let everybody know like, "Hey, this is one of my closest besties who I also deeply respect as an herbal colleague." We'll try to be mostly professional, right?

Mel Kasting:

Yeah, we'll try.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

Okay. Alright, but we're still going to have a lot of fun. Sweet. Well, I am excited to hear your herbal story, hear how you were brought along to this plant path, and I'm also super excited to hear about the herb you chose for us today. So, lots to look forward to. First, how did the plants call you, Mel? How did you get here today?

Mel Kasting:

So, I was always kind of a plant—unofficial plant person. My dad is from rural Illinois, and so I learned a few choice edibles. We did mushrooms. We did some wild greens. There was always a garden, but it wasn't—there were—there was no "plants as medicine." I didn't really have access to that but I always loved plants, and then I always did what I like to call "plant swerve." I might have gotten it from jim. I always wanted to stop and look at plants. I was always super curious.

In college, I got a tea blending book and went to the local witch—witchy shop and bought a bunch of brown herbs and tried to make tea. They were gross and I was like, "Oh, I must be bad at being a witch or being—so I'm not going to do that anymore." And so I graduated from college. I was working as a project manager for a document restoration company in the Christian Science community, which is really big in St. Louis. They got shut down for

insurance fraud, which is hilarious because Christian Scientists generally don't believe in seeking medical care. There was a fraud situation with our insurance. I got a large severance package.

As a 23-year old young woman, I decided just to leave St. Louis and someone was like, "Oregon is a really cool place to be, you should go there." I just bought a—I literally just bought a ticket to Oregon. I bought a backpack and some hiking boots and jumped on a plane, ended up in Eugene, and I met my first herb teacher, Howie Brounstein at an art walk in—at the Eugene Whittaker Hospital—it was a long time ago. I asked him what he did and he said that he was an herbalist and I was like, "What's that?" I didn't know. I'm from the Midwest. I grew up pretty—like I didn't have a clue. Basically, from the time that I met Howie and found out that—that "herbalist" was a job, I was like I want to do that job. I fell absolutely fell in love with the plants in the Pacific Northwest, especially at the Cascade Range between Eugene and then up through—up through the mountains there.

Howie ran an herb school—or still runs an herb school, Columbine School of Botanical Studies. I didn't have any money and so I told him that. I was like, "I want to come to your school." Luckily, I have this—I have the skill set that's like from the brief—my brief time in the business world, and so he hired me to help run the school with him and be his assistant in trade for schooling, and that's kind of a theme throughout my herbal education. I went to—I took all of his courses and worked at the school, sat in with him on the clinic. He really absolutely changed my life in every way. I mean, I did go to the school but all that special time that I spent with Howie, and then also, Steven Yeager was teaching at the school. That program is very unique because in addition to learning herbal actions and getting to know the plants, we learned a lot about ecology and plant counting and botany. My early training was very rooted to plant and to place, specifically to place.

And yeah, and so I just worked with him for a long time and then I went to an herb conference in Cloudcroft, New Mexico, and I met Thomas Easley who is my current colleague. And he—what happened? He gave some ridiculous speech. I think he was doing a soxhlet extraction. I

love working with Howie, but wildcrafting is really personal to me. It's not something that I feel comfortable teaching not because I think it's wrong, there's absolutely ethical ways to do it, but it's a very personal thing for me and so I didn't want to go on and continue to teach work and teach with Howie because I wasn't really comfortable doing that with groups of people. But I loved being around people and Thomas had an herb school on the side of a mountain. I think it had been going for maybe one year. I had been seeing clients at that point and making medicine. I felt some pretty significant gaps in my ability to support the clients that I was seeing. I was feeling, actually, pretty discouraged about it. I was kind of ready for a change of location.

So I met Thomas. He gave this big speech about Wellspring Mountain, which was the place that he hosted the school for many years. At the end, he basically said, "I called the banks and I just said, 'This is what I want. I don't necessarily have the money. How are going to make it happen?'" Again, I was in a situation where I was rich in skills and poor in cash, and so I called Thomas up and I basically—I think I emailed him and said, "I really like what you're doing. I want to work with people. I want to get better as a clinical practitioner. Your speech was inspiring to me. I don't have any money. Is there a way we can make this happen?" And he hired me and the plan was to help him the year I was in school, it was an intensive program, and then to take over running the clinic—the Free Clinic there. I drove to—I drove to North Carolina never having been there, filled with my truck full of stuff, and-

Rosalee de la Forêt:

This is a recurring theme for sure.

Mel Kasting:

Yes, this is a recurring theme, and I loved it. Really, I've been there—I've been there ever since. I think my—my place is connecting people with plants, specifically. I think I got to find that there in that beautiful place. The Wellspring Mountain was a 500-acre botanical sanctuary, so I did get to be around the plants as I was learning to—to people with plants and to be a practitioner.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

I knew the highlights of that but you just filled in some gaps for me, so that's nice to get those filled in. I don't think I had heard the Christian Science aspect before. Now, you used to live at Wellspring, and now you're back in St. Louis.

Mel Kasting:

I am. I lived at Wellspring for five years and then I was in—still I stayed in and around the area for another few years outside of Roanoke and Floyd, Virginia before I moved back to St. Louis, which is my home—my hometown.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

Hey, there. Just a quick note: if you'd like to hear from me in a more personal way, I'd love to have you in my free text community. I send a couple of texts every week, things like behind-the-scenes updates, herbal thoughts that I'm chewing on, and little sparks of joy I don't always share anywhere else. To join, just text the word ROOT to 1-509-383-8398, and if you ever want to break up, no hard feelings. Just text STOP to the same number and you'll be opted-out immediately. My goal is to make it so juicy and so fun that you look forward to getting my texts each week. Okay, now back to the show.

Well, thank you for that, hearing—and I'm looking forward to hearing more too just about your clinical practice now and your teachings now. We'll get to that later. First, I have a confession, Mel. I don't really know anything about aralia berry, spikenard, at all. I was tempted to go look some things up. I remember—I think I read about it in Michael Moore years ago or something. I was like maybe I should research it beforehand so I don't look like an idiot, but then I just decided I basically have a one-on-one class with Mel so I'm just going to let you tell me about spikenard.

Mel Kasting:

Absolutely.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

The question I always like to start with is, you had the ability to choose whatever plant you wanted to choose today and you chose aralia berry. Why? Why did this plant jump out for you?

Mel Kasting:

I think I chose aralia berry for a couple of reasons. One, because it's an herb that can be grown as long as you have moist, semi-shaded places. It's pretty easy to grow as long as you can protect it from the birds because they want to eat the berries. On top of that, it is a plant that has a unique use set. I know as herbalists, we love puzzles. We say, "This one herb does this, but we could combine these other herbs to get this action." There are some herbs that just don't exactly translate even when you put a bunch of herbs together. Solomon's seal is like that as well. It's just—it's magic. It just works and it's really hard to replicate that with a formula. I felt like because it's accessible to grow and because it is really unique that I wanted to talk about it. It's really integral to my work as well—to the type of work and how I connect—it is a plant of connection and restoration and mood-enhancement, and that is central to my work no matter who I'm working with and what their main concerns are. It's like bringing of joy and connection and so I end up using it a lot, at least in small doses for things like that as well.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

Where does it grow naturally? Natively?

Mel Kasting:

So, we—it grows all over the country, the different species. The—the species that I was first turned on to was in Oregon through Howie. Howie was Michael Moore's student and a teacher at his school for a long time. *Aralia californica* grows in middle to Northern California and Oregon, and a little bit up into Washington. It likes—all of the aralias, all of the spikenards, really like mostly shady, moist, acidic soils, but they need a lot of moisture to—a lot of

moisture for the berries to germinate. They like to live in that strip between—not quite coastal. We don't want—that middle strip through California, Oregon and Washington. You'll find it in other places but that's the biggest part of its range.

Aralia racemosa is more like central, southeast. It likes the ravines and the stream banks, so again, wet. There are less—the places where there are less mountains, like parts of the Midwest—we're not necessarily going to see it around rocks but you're definitely going to see it in little ravines and stream sides.

And then *nudicaulis* is not—is another species because in the northern part of the United States and up in through Canada. I've never worked with that particular species, although I talked to Jim about it at the conference. He said that the uses for that berry are pretty—pretty similar.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

That was the Great Lakes Herb Faire that we were just at a couple of weeks ago.

Mel Kasting:

So fun.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

That's one of the fun things about those conferences is gatherings—being able to ask different bioregional folks about their use of the plants.

Hey, it's Rosalee. You know, creating this podcast has been one of the most rewarding parts of my herbal work, and if you found something meaningful here, whether it's a new perspective, a favorite recipe or just a sense of calm, I want to let you know there's a good way to go even deeper. It's called the Podcast Circle. Inside, you'll get access to live classes taught by some of my favorite herbal teachers, behind-the-scenes updates, and a beautiful library of herbal resources that we've gathered over the years. But more than that, it's a space

to connect with fellow plant lovers who care about the same things you do, and truly, your membership helps make this podcast possible. It's how we keep the episodes coming and the herbal goodness flowing. So, if you're ready to be part of something more, something rooted in connection, head over to HerbalPodcastCircle.com. I'd love to see you there.

Well, this is kind of your show now, Mel, because I don't even know what question to ask seeing as I know so very little about *aralia*, so let's dive in wherever you would love to dive into.

Mel Kasting:

Absolutely! So, I think maybe talk a little bit about the history and then we can talk more specifics about dosages. I looked up—I was trying to find the thread. I've used this plant for a long time. I definitely got it from Howie who got it from Michael Moore, but I was trying to figure out where Michael Moore got it. I was doing a deep dive last night, and really, I honestly couldn't figure it out. There isn't—because a lot of times there's either an indigenous use or a colonial settler use of a plant that clearly, there's like a—either an unbroken lineage and unbroken connection or, at least, there's one that isn't—isn't so broken that you can't see it.

I couldn't find—I couldn't find anything in that way, all of the indigenous uses are mostly with the root. They're used as a diaphoretic and an expectorant, and they'll—sometimes the berries would be in it. You don't find a lot of information on the berries themselves. Even the physiomedicalists and the eclectics, they used the root and did not—not really use the berry, or if they did, they made a combo tonic. We're not talking about the root, which has very different uses, but it is important to understand that connection because even the roots, the older uses – the eclectic and physiomedical uses of the spikenards was depletion. That's one of a few words that's a thread with the way that *aralia* berry works in the body.

Aralia is in the Ginseng family. It's in the *Araliaceae* family. The *Aralia*—all the spikenards, especially *racemosa*, which has been studied the most, has true ginsenoside in it, along with a lot of other combo. The berry has never been assessed, and so we can't necessarily

extrapolate that those things are in the berries, but if we look at the history of the herbalists that were using it, we can think that potentially, there would be something similar there.

Michael Moore popularized it. I learned it from Howie. Howie called it the dance berry. For anyone that knows me very well, I love dancing. It's a part of my sanity, and so he piqued my interest at "dance berry." We were eating them along the trail—really interesting flavor. Everyone's eyes perked up and people started talking. There was one—there was one man—I forget his name—that was in my school year. He was an introvert. He didn't talk—very comfortable around people, just had no desire to talk. He starts talking, just "da, da, da, da." His hands were moving around. Everyone was laughing. Everyone's pace was peppier and had stepped up. My first experience of this plant is a mood-enhancing, social-connecting plant. It felt amazing. Maybe it's like we all—it's easier to talk about and spend time with our favorites, and because it's—I think that it works really well as a plant of connection and to bring a little bit of energy and mood.

It's not stimulating in a way that ginseng is or some of the other adaptogen plants. You'll never take—like eleuthero where you can almost get a buzzy feeling if you take too much, because it has this balance of repletion and energy. And so, yeah, Michael Moore used it. Michael Moore thought it was an adaptogen and used it kind of similarly to the way that we use ashwagandha. If we're thinking about the adaptogens in the stimulating to calming, we've got all the—all the classic ones like eleuthero over here. Ginseng is kind of over here, and then we have ashwagandha here. I would say that aralia berry is just slightly more stimulating than ashwagandha. Then we have something like codonopsis which is more complete—about depletion and isn't really adaptogenic in that way. I look at—I look at those types of plants on a spectrum.

Aralia berry is also moistening. It has a little bit of sweetness. Something like ashwagandha is very drying. I haven't seen aralia berry keep folks up, but it's definitely not going to put you to sleep, whereas, ashwagandha is an herb that we all know is very calming and centering. You can actually even help—a lot of people take it in the evening to help with sleep. Thinking

about it as a restorative plant that is—Michael Moore thought of it as ginseng-like and he used it—he said it’s a gentler, less pushy version of ginseng. That’s how he looked at it. When he was choosing and using that plant, it was from that sort of framework. I think he also said that he used it for panic-like stress. I have not found that pull for aralia berry in that way, but it was there and he used it for many, many years. I looked through the transcripts of one of his old lectures on aralia berry which are available online if you want to—it’s probably—because it’s not really written about, the best way to go and dive more deeply is to get on Michael Moore’s site and find the lecture. Find the spikenard—I think it’s listed as Spikenard Lecture and Folio and then you can dive more deeply in that. From Howie, I learned this indication—that view of that dance berry bringing that—bringing connection.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

Like dance deficiency would be the indication? Dancing deficiency?

Mel Kasting:

Absolutely. I think of it as sensory deficiency. We say dance berry—I joke about that a lot because I love to dance. I think it does make people want to dance but are uncomfortable dancing, want to move their bodies. Really, for me, it seems like it helps stuck sensory systems, or people that can’t sit down into their sensory system, or maybe too depleted and stressed out to be conscious of that—of that sensory system. So, yes, dance berry, but it could also be paint berry. It could be go-jogging-with-my-dog berry. It could be have-some-sexy-time berry. It just feels like—it makes you feel good in your body without being euphoric. It’s not like kava where you take a bunch and you’re feeling sedated and buzzy.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

It’s funny—if I can interrupt you—that you bring up kava because when you have been describing it, I keep thinking of kava just kind of that relaxed social aspect, the ability to communicate with more ease that kava can bring. And then I’ve talked to so many people who kava has been a really important ally for not drinking alcohol—getting sober, not drinking. When you said that dance berry maybe helps people who want to dance but they’re

not comfortable, that's what alcohol does for a lot of people, right? It gets them on the dance floor. So, it's an interesting correlation in that way too is that it could be a social lubricant in a similar way. But you're saying—so I've been having kava in my mind that I really wanted to ask you about that similarities. You're saying it's different from kava and maybe not as—will you say that again?

Mel Kasting:

It's not sedating.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

Not sedating.

Mel Kasting:

We know small doses of kava are not specially sedating, but it is a sedating—it's a pretty sedating, kind of euphoric plant. I look at—I don't think aralia berry on its own makes it easier to talk so much. I look at it as for people that need to be in their bodies more. It is a best friend of kava and also damiana. We'll talk about that later. We'll talk about the formula, but I do think that formula, in particular, is a really amazing replacement for—for alcohol, if people don't want to use alcohol as a social lubricant because it pairs well. It's like best friends with kava because kava will bring the words, and aralia berry will make you feel good in your body.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

Let's just talk about that formula since you already brought it up, so we don't have to-

Mel Kasting:

Sure!

Rosalee de la Forêt:

Tease folks with it. You've shared with us the Life of the Party elixir which sounds fun in itself. I love the description where you said, "It also makes dancing while doing the dishes at least

150% more fun.” That's a very good sales point here. Yeah, tell us about the Life of the Party elixir.

Mel Kasting:

The Life of the Party elixir came up when I was—we were having a graduation—no, it was pre-graduation. I was living at Wellspring and I wanted—we were in the middle of nowhere and I didn't really want to drive an hour and a half, two hours to go dancing. Nor did I really have the money to go and do that. My goal was to get this group of people up and on their feet. I had—I had harvested aralia berries so I had probably a half gallon. I had a bunch of aralia berry and I remembered that I had it and I popped into the apothecary, and I was like, “Okay, what's going to make people feel really good in their bodies and want to dance and not feel self-conscious?” because everyone just seems so self-conscious and I want all these folks to dance with me. Actually, the Life of the Party came up as like a very selfish, like how do I lubricate the situation and make people feel good? And so I combined equal parts of aralia berry, damiana and kava-

Rosalee de la Forêt:

That sounds amazing.

Mel Kasting:

And then put just another one part of honey in to soften that taste. It's really simple and it worked. People were dancing! I think some of it—you got to try it yourself. We all have to use herbs and practice them because I did tell everyone as well, this is the magic of formulas like, “Okay, this is the Life of the Party.” I don't remember if I named it at that point, but I did glue a picture of David Bowie dancing onto the bottle. I passed it around. I was trying to-

Rosalee de la Forêt:

Subliminal messaging.

Mel Kasting:

But the cool thing is that I watched people—absolutely people were dancing, but people were talking. They were talking deeply, and not the sort of conversation where you're turning around. It's the sort of conversation where you turn to another person and you're looking at them and you're not—to the point where you're not paying attention to what's going on around you, so that's—I think that—or you think about our sensory systems or you're thinking about our bodies, some of us like to move our bodies. But if we are in—embodied in there, we can enjoy conversations more. We can connect more deeply even if it's not romantic or there's not going to be any touching or really that much physical movement. I think that that—it was pretty inspiring.

Really, since then I just bring it to whenever I have aralia berry enough to make the formula, I bring it to social gatherings, pass it out and watch people, watch the fun and watch [unclear]. You can take pretty—reasonably high doses so that the Life of the Party is one to two teaspoons. You can do that even two or three times in a night. I think the stop is more about—if kava's especially sedating for you, you'd end up by the end of the night getting half of a teaspoon of kava. For some folks, that would be a little bit—a little bit too sedating.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

Well, it sounds like a very lovely formula. I can't wait to try it one day. Cheers to David Bowie, and for Mel, for bringing Life of the Party. And for folks who are interested, you can download your recipe card, check out the show notes, the video description—it's beautifully illustrated. You could also go to herbswithrosaleepodcast.com, check it out there. Thank you, Mel, for sharing the Life of the Party with us. Alright, where would you like to go next?

Mel Kasting:

Yeah, I'd love to share a little bit. So, I think—I have two sets of uses. I think I've talked a little bit about the social use. It can be used recreationally or—I mean it can also be used in intentional conversation and get-togethers or house meetings, staff meetings, things like that, at lower doses. But I look at that as more of a recreational set of uses. We're absolutely using this to feel good together and feel good in our bodies.

Clinically, I have some uses for it that I think are pretty interesting. I've extrapolated those just by trying, understanding that—those are Michael Moore uses which we're thinking about stress modulation, fortifying, and mood elevation, kind of adaptogen-like. I don't think it's just—it's not an herb like ashwagandha or some of our nervine tonics that is going to build resiliency over time to the point where you stop taking it and it—your nervous system is better just from taking that. It's something that I use clinically for shorter periods of time not because I found any evidence of harm, just because usually, by then, folks are through the depleted stage and we're moving on to maybe building more resiliency.

I use it—for sure, after illnesses, especially lung, like long-term pneumonia, bronchitis, folks with COPD that are in more of a recovery stage after a flare. Also, really, any illnesses that cause really serious depletion. When folks—not in the acute stages. It's more for folks that are through the acute illness and they're ready to start getting back to work and getting back to their routine, but they're exhausted and it just feels like drudgery to get back to their routine, so I use some aralia for that.

I use it in long-term grief. After those acute stages of grief, it's kind of—it's really the same indication. It's just an emotional instead of a physical issue where your body can feel leaden or you're—disassociated or whatever is going on after the grief, but it's been a few months or it's been six months or however long it takes to get through that stage, and you are going to go back to work and you want to start socializing again.

Aralia berry is really, really good if you are a person that makes a lot of plans with people and then when the plans come, you're like, "Hmm. I don't want to go anymore." So, we can think about that—those indications socially but also, thinking about that clinically when folks' bodies feel heavy and they don't have the motivation to do things. I hesitate to say that it strongly supports depression. I really look at it as more of a depleted state, though maybe it has some depression because of depletion. Postpartum it could be really nice. The caveat is there is no research on breastfeeding. I feel comfortable using it. I haven't seen any harm. I

usually use it low doses and for short periods of time, but for folks that aren't—just knowing that we have —there are zero studies on aralia berries. Zero, it hasn't been analyzed or assessed at all and so we're just using it—I'm just using it because it works really, really well. It can be good for seasonal depression. I pair it with St. John's wort for the depression that comes from darkness, or also in Florida from sun. I feel like it gets that in places where it's really hot. It's like people get more depressed because they have to stay—whenever people have to stay inside a lot, I think. What else?

After panic attacks, it's really good. It doesn't really—Michael Moore says it's for panic-like stress. I haven't seen it useful—be useful when someone is really, really activated, but that state—that spacey, exhausted state, after panic attacks. I've used it after folks have had psychiatric hospital stays or—or just thinking of people that are depleted after something bad has happened, whether that's an illness, emotional grief, having a child. It doesn't necessarily have to be—after a marathon maybe, if someone is feeling down and heavy.

And then I also—I think that it can be really good for couples that are having issues with one or both libido, and they've been assessed and it's more of like a mental or a stress thing. It can be a really good part of a formula for that.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

Oh, my gosh, Mel. I love all herbalists – every single one. There's something really fun about talking to a clinical herbalist where you just have such this broad range of experience, and it's—it's just so clear you love aralia berry so much. It's kind of this—again, I don't think there's a lot of people out there working with it to this extent, so to have—it's just a special gift when somebody takes a plant that's maybe a bit lesser known and then actually works with it and is able to report back on all of these various ways. That's really cool.

Mel Kasting:

I do love it.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

It's not something you can buy in commerce, right? This is like you have to harvest it, grow it yourself kind of deal?

Mel Kasting:

You do. There are few herbalists on the West Coast that sell it, and that's a really great segue into thinking about if you are going to—especially, the *californica*. I do not know anything about the ecology range of the *nudicaulis*. If you're up in the Northern areas, you have to do your own research there. But just making sure if we're wildcrafting these plants that we're really thinking about—ideally, you're growing *racemosa*. It's the easiest to grow. You can get—you can get *racemosa* and I think *californica* seeds from Richo Cech from his business that I forget the name.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

Strictly Medicinal Seeds.

Mel Kasting:

Yeah. The seeds—I think he sells both. But if you're wildcrafting, just some things to think about are: you don't want to take everything because the birds absolutely love this plant. It is a food plant.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

They want to dance too.

Mel Kasting:

They want to dance too. They want to fly [unclear]. And then make sure there's a good stand because we want the birds to have some and we want the plant to be able to make more plants.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

Good deal. So, for you, I can imagine that—is that something that you’re looking for every year of just like, “Okay, I got to get my aralia berry this year?”

Mel Kasting:

I used to get it from Erica Galentin every year because she has—she had a huge garden but she moved and has gotten a new place, and it hasn’t been established. I have a backyard that is wet and has—it’s full of dappled sun so I’m going to load it up with aralia this year.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

That’s cool! Nice.

Mel Kasting:

I’m pretty excited about it. I have friends—Howie’s students are taught ethical wildcrafting. I have been trying to get Logan to harvest it.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

Logan Keister.

Mel Kasting:

Logan Keister. There are—Bare Medicinals in—I think that they’re in Northern Oregon—sometimes has it, but generally, it is something that you have to grow.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

I’m excited! I’m so curious what it tastes like.

Mel Kasting:

It has a lot of the fruit acids, but it isn’t—it isn’t particularly bright—bright tasting berry. I think—definitely it’s moistening, but it’s still berry-like in the sense that it’s moistening and cooling. It has some sourness. It has some sweetness, but it also has a musk—like a musk

taste. Not musk to the point of cheese or stinky feet or anything. It's just a very, very slight musky taste to it.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

When you are making medicine with aralia berry, is it mostly the tincture that you're doing?

Mel Kasting:

I do. I think Richo talks about using the dried berry. I have never—I've never used it because I always just harvested with Howie and we use the fresh berries. We did—I usually do the fresh berries in 75% alcohol, at a one to two, but there are—there are herbalists that are drying it and using it as well—so feeling free to kind of play with that. I absolutely am going to play with the dried berries as well when I start to grow it.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

It's interesting, when I asked you why you chose this plant and you said because it has such a specific use, and I was not expecting to hear what we heard. It's just fascinating to me, this state of depletion but kind of a very specific state—dance deficiency state or as you said, it could be the painting berry. Whatever that might be—the sense—dropping into our sensory awareness. I don't know. It's just really fascinating to me. It's often talked about how we don't have a lot of strong adaptogens here in North America. We've got American ginseng, but natively, so many of those come from faraway. It's interesting to hear about spikenard and how it fits into that family. Sweet!

Well, is there anything else you'd like to add about aralia berry? You've done so much already.

Mel Kasting:

I think that I got—oh, I did want to say that although we're not talking about the root, that Michael Moore also thought that the root had some of that—it had some of that restorative—I haven't really—I haven't played with it because it's so aromatic and it's diaphoretic and expectorant, it doesn't really—to get enough of that to try it. It's also going to warm the body

up and it's going to—I like the aralia berry specifically because it's cooling. So many of our adaptogen-like plants or even our stimulating plants are drying, and so—but you could play with it and see—see if that—because the root is a lot easier to get.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

I'm trying to think. I'm going through my head right now being like, “When is there both the root and berry used and then the berry is more prized?” I'm not—I can think of berries that are prized like schisandra or hawthorn, but we don't really use schisandra root or we don't use hawthorn root in the same way so I'm just—because I think berries are often—maybe with the exception of schisandra and hawthorn. There are probably others, they're just not in my mind, but I don't often think of them as strong medicinals, berries. So yeah, it's kind of an interesting thing to hear you be like, “Yeah, but I really like the berry and the root is just different medicine.” Obviously, you prefer working with the berry, at least, in this realm.

Mel Kasting:

I do and I don't often go—go to the berry or to the root for its—it's like lung. I have different herbs that I work with that's not really in my materia medica. I have things that I have easier access to as like a warming diaphoretic expectorant. We have a lot of those. Yeah, I just really don't—I don't work with it much.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

Thanks again for bringing aralia to the show for the first time ever, so I appreciate that. Now, I want to switch gears. I feel like there are so many things I could ask you about and probably will. I—would you mind talking about your clinical practice for a little bit and just maybe even—there's probably people watching who don't even know what a clinical herbalist is. What does that entail? What does that look like? What is it to be a clinical herbalist, Mel?

Mel Kasting:

Absolutely! So, for me, what I do is I sit down with people for about an hour; sometimes a little bit longer. I was trained to use SOAP notes, which is a form of medical note-taking, so I

do things pretty—I do things pretty formally. But above all, a clinical herbalist is someone that has not just herbal training. We aren't just trained—we're trained in, of course, what herbs do in the body, but we're also trained about bodies. I think that, really, it's like all of the types of herbalism shine in different ways. I think clinical herbalists are able to because of our training in anatomy and physiology and pathophysiology, and kind of that red flag. We call it “differential assessment.” No matter how—unless we have medical licenses as herbalists, we can't diagnose, but we do—I think, I feel that I have an ethical responsibility to be able to see patterns in order to potentially send someone to the doctor if they have an issue that I'm worried that they need a diagnosis for.

There are clinical herbalists that do lots of different things. There are folks that focus a little more on community care and acute care, and less on long-term chronic illness. In my practice, I work a lot with folks with chronic health issues, and really—especially, I work with folks with mast cell related issues. Most specifically, lately, I've been working with alpha-gal, which is an allergy to mammal products that you catch—not catch, but that happens from a tick bite. I also—I end up seeing a lot of folks with nervous system issues and depletion, burned out activists and folks that are struggling with mental health issues that are really interested in embodiment—because I personally use some somatics in my practice, as well, which to me, really just means reminding people that they have sensory systems and that it's okay to stimulate them as a part of their healing process.

Most clinical herbalists, depending—no matter what our focuses are, are going to sit down with folks for a decent amount of time anywhere from one to three hours sometimes, and we're going to take a full health history. We're going to look at what folks' main concerns are, but we're also going to ask about stress, sleep, diet, digestion, movement. Those things we kind of—I look at as building health thing. Everyone—I'm interested in how everyone deals with stress and how everyone's digestion is even if they're coming for menstrual cramps, or even if they're coming for seasonal allergies or anxiety. I think that the cool thing about clinical herbalists is we aren't told by insurance companies that we only have 20 minutes with

our clients. We can sit for as long as we need apart from people getting tired, of course, to get the information that we need.

So, then we generally make comprehensive health plans. I work with diet and lifestyle and a little bit with supplements in addition to my herbal practice, although herbs are, of course, center. Not all clinical herbalists need to or want to work with those other things. There are some folks that just focus on giving folks plants. Let's see, what else. I will write up a full health plan; I use an EMR system. It—my brain needs to be organized and have everything in one place, it's HIPAA-compliant note-taking and a place to store all of that information. A lot of folks do still do paper notes and they just have a box that's really safe that they keep away from others. Herbalists don't have to technically be HIPAA-compliant because we're not licensed practitioners.

Generally, clinical herbalists are going to be working with folks on a little bit longer term – sometimes three months, sometimes six months. I have clients I've been seeing for five years. They'll just pop in every once in a while. We're thinking of it as adjacent to primary care. While we can't obviously provide primary care, but we can work alongside primary care practitioners through the long haul to help folks feel better.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

That was a lovely explanation, thank you. One thing I was struck by when you're talking, it's just like you've naturally found this niche for yourself with the nervous system and alpha-gal and mast cell. Just knowing how brilliant you are in that work is just like what a gift that you—I know you didn't force those things. They're life circumstances, own interests, and probably who showed up helped you find those paths, but then you just bloomed into them and you had helped so many people. I know just had the alpha-gal class online which was super successful. You just taught it at the conference, Great Lakes Herb Faire, and people were really grateful for that. It's another gift of herbalists is when there's a—there's "great to be a generalist" and then when people niche down, you really get this experience and care for people that can just really profoundly help. Thanks for sharing your gifts in that.

What I definitely want folks to know—and I did not ask you this permission ahead of time, so we can delete this if you want, Mel, but I want folks to know that you’re a mentor because that’s also a really powerful part of the whole herbal clinical experience is having a mentor along the way, especially when you’re just getting started. You offer those services, so I want to hear about that too. Why would someone choose a mentor? What do you look for in a mentee? What is that relationship like?, etc. If you’re open to it.

Mel Kasting:

Absolutely. Yeah, I like—I’ll talk about anything. I think mentorship is really important because it’s one thing to theoretically understand – understand how to work with plants and how to work with people, but there’s this period of time in early practice where you have to apply your knowledge. If you don’t have someone supporting you, you are: a) it’s going to feel really stressful and uncomfortable. You’re going to feel bad at it in a way that doesn’t feel nice when you don’t have to feel that way. Having a mentor means having a guide; having someone to say, “Hey, does this formula look okay?” or “Am I—I feel like I’m missing something. Is there a red flag that I’m missing?” or “Is there a”—whatever because we all miss things, but we especially will miss things when we’re early on. It’s a natural part of the process.

All other types of practitioners, licensed and unlicensed, there is—medical doctors are watched for many, many years. Obviously we’re not diagnosing, we don’t need to be watched for that many years, but so many other—all the other professions have practicums. They have people—they have formal mentors in their programs. Herbalism isn’t like that and so there are—and because we’re not standardized, we—it’s a choose-your-own-adventure, which is amazing. But if we’re going to dive into a choose-your-own-adventure, we need people along the way. We think of any fantasy book and they’re collecting people along the way to help them, it’s kind of how I look at herbalism is—we need all the people that we can get. I think that mentorship is a way—it’s also a way to help be assessed. Where are my educational gaps if there are any? and have someone that can help to fill in those gaps or give resources.

A lot of mentors won't just look at cases—folks' cases. They look at their education and they'll watch their skills. My mentee is—I don't have a formalized program right now, but a lot of it is kind of—it's about meeting with a person. I have an assessment form. A lot of—a lot of folks that do a lot of mentoring have some sort of form or interviewing process, and that process is to see where people are at – what do you have, what do you need. I call it an “audit.” I'm big on the word, audit. A resource audit, educational audit, like “What do we have?” and “What do we need?” My goal as a mentor, and I think any good mentor, is to take—challenge does not have to be struggle. We can be challenged and we can be a little stressed out. We can be nervous but we don't—we shouldn't feel like we're completely struggling. That's not how it's supposed to feel. There's this old mentality like you're a healer or you're not and you're just—and that came from the '70s and the '80s and I just don't buy it. I don't think that the process has to be painful to get—for you to be good—good at it.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

[unclear]

Mel Kasting:

Yeah. Mentorship is just a way to have—to phone a friend in a formal—in a formal way and to get help. All of us should be—if you're—if we're clinical herbalists, we should be sitting in with each other because that's where you learn the good stuff. If you don't know how to—you can talk about that stuff. I believe really strongly that anyone that is planning on seeing clients needs to get comfortable with people sitting in with them. When I work with mentees, that's the way that I was taught. With Howie, he was not mean about it. He didn't make it intense, but he sat with me, and he listened and watched everything that I did. It was a little bit terrible in the beginning—a little bit, and then it got really good. Then it got really good and you have someone in real time to assess that process.

I think if you're—if you're someone that is looking for a mentor, I think that really the most important thing is to make sure the person that you're getting as a mentor is doing actively

what you want to be doing. That's true of school too. It doesn't matter if you're a clinical herbalist and you're looking for clinical mentorship or you want to make medicine and you're looking for a mentor—a medicine making mentor because it's not always—we have to assess our own education. We have to think of those questions. I think that's the most important question when you're looking for it is—well, I guess, first, you have to know what you want to do, which is really hard because herbalists—we have so many beautiful things that we can do with plants and interacting with plants, but-

Rosalee de la Forêt:

So true.

Mel Kasting:

If you want to be a clinical herbalist, ask them about their practice: How are you practicing? What do you do? It's a red flag if a mentor won't let people sit in with them. It's my opinion. I know it's a strong opinion, but it—I mean if you're a teacher, you're teaching in front of people, and mentorship is individualized teaching and support.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

Thanks for sharing about that. So, you're a clinical herbalist. You're a mentor to other clinical herbalists and you also teach. I mentioned that you did the alpha-gal class recently, but you also have the Live Foundational Herbalism Certificate program. Will you tell us about that?

Mel Kasting:

Absolutely! So, we—excuse me—through the Eclectic School of Herbal Medicine—that's one of my—I see clients in private practice, but my day job is the Clinical Director for that school. We have just completed this past year, an updated Foundational Program which I'm really proud of. I think that it has—some of these philosophies that you're hearing. We talk about the idea about building health and being conscious of people's experiences within—within the herbs. It's not just—you're going to give someone an herb and they're going to feel better, you're going to change their experience in the world. That idea that the way that we have

been in the world is going to affect our medicine; going to affect what we need. It's going to affect our health, the way we grew up, who we've interacted with in our lives, how stressful our lives are.

The Foundational Program is—has been self-paced, and I really love teaching in person because I—whether it's online or physically in person because it is simulating and we grow as teachers and we get to see people's faces and hear those moments where people—those aha moments where someone gets it and they get really excited. That's missed in self-paced. That's missed in self-paced learning. We always have Q&As and office hours but it's really not the same thing as a live class, so we decided to do—to do a live program. It's going to be fully live, meaning you just show up and we teach, and the assignments are afterwards. It's about—it's going to be about eight months, although there are a couple of breaks. It's going to be just a two-hour evening class once a week. I'll be the primary. Thomas will pop in. Thomas Easley, my colleague, but I'll be mostly teaching that program, which I'm pretty excited about.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

Cool! And who is that for? Who is the person that is going to be like, “Yes, this is the class for me!”?

Mel Kasting:

It's a—It's a beginner program with the caveat that our programs, because it's the first step towards a clinical practitioner training program, that I would say that it's a robust foundational program. You will be—you will also be learning about the body and a little bit about assessment. It focuses on building health and acute care herbalism along with medicine making, but it's absolutely—we have absolute herbal beginners. And this is—it's the first—although it's the first step to the clinical program, all of the assignments are geared at folks learning how to connect with plants and to support themselves and their families and maybe their friends, with the common acute things that come up. I think that the old—oh, go ahead, sorry.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

I was just saying lovely. It's a good first step.

Mel Kasting:

I kind of look at herbal education as kind of what we think of an older European model where we have the home herbalism or the female-based herbalism. The midwives were doing herbalism in this very informal way and it was a part of our lives—it was a part of our lives, and that has been something that has—for some people, it's a broken lineage for a lot of people. Everyone doesn't have that innate knowledge anymore to just pull something out if you have a cough or use some peppermint and yarrow when they have a fever and need some diaphoresis. And so, I think that we think about foundational herbal learning as learning to support yourself and your family and a little bit of your community, then we have that middle tier which were the apothecaries—the pharmacists—not medical pharmacists, they were using herbs. We think about modern day, we can't use the word “apothecary” in most states legally—herb shops. So then that middle level is you can come and talk about things that you can't figure out yourself, and so you can go do that step. And then the clinical herbalists are the folks that work—we already talked about that, the long-term chronic care. The Foundational Program is for that. It's to be able to confidently use herbs for yourself and your family.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

Nice. If people are wondering how they get in touch with you personally or if they're interested in this program, what are the best ways to get in touch with you?

Mel Kasting:

Yeah, absolutely! So, you can—email is probably—probably the best. If you're interested in the program, you can—it's mel@eclecticschoolofherbalmedicine.com. You can email me there for everything. I do have, for my own business, the mentorship, I have a different email

but I can funnel. I can just pipe over to make it easier, so folks don't have to have to sift through two separate emails.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

Cool, and you have Forest Edge Herbals website and as your social handle. We'll put links to those in the show notes as well so people can check you out there.

Mel Kasting:

Thank you.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

Mel, I have one last—this has gone by so quickly. Thanks for sharing all this additional information that I put you on the spot for, by the way. I appreciate that. And the last question I have for you, if you're ready for it.

Mel Kasting:

Ready.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

Alright. What's a mistake that you've made with herbs that has ultimately made you a better herbalist?

Mel Kasting:

Oh, yeah. This is a pretty good one. I was a baby clinical herbalist and I had just started working with—I had finished working with Howie and had just started the program with Thomas—the clinical intensive program. I was only two weeks in and I had to go back to St. Louis because—I don't remember, there was a reason I had to go back. One, I had a friend that was detoxing off of a drug and I had been learning—I have learned a lot about the liver with Howie, but it was kind of an older—Michael Moore who was amazing with herbs, but sometimes the physiology didn't exactly follow. He had a physiological model that doesn't

clearly follow modern physiology in some ways, so I don't think I had a full grasp. We were having—we had a unit on supporting the liver and I was so excited. I went back and I—this person who was pretty darn miserable because they were already in this detoxification process. I was like, “What you need are liver herbs!” and so I filled—yellow dock and burdock decocted very strong and had them drink. I was like, “This is going to make you feel so better so much faster.” They drank it and they puked for like four hours and I don't think that he talked to me for at least a week after that. He thought that I was trying to purge him, which I absolutely wasn't. I genuinely thought—I just did—all I thought was help. I think it's so common when we're all early on to not think about the person, the fact that they were depleted because clinical herbalism is not just about choosing the herb. It's also about looking at people's state. I was absolutely not looking at the fact that he couldn't handle that in that moment.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

Yeah, you were just like—like you said, baby clinical herbalist. You're like “liver problem, liver herbs,” bam. And you feel like that informed you later on, that was a learning. You realized at the moment of just like—or later of, “Oh, that's what happened.”

Mel Kasting:

I realized in the moment, I don't think I was conscious in the moment that I had learned a big key in relational health. I think now, especially because I work with relational health so much, when I started working with it, I thought about that as relational in the moment.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

It's been something you've reflected back and stayed with you and you're like, “Oh, okay.”

Mel Kasting:

I think at the time, it was more about not understanding assessment—the differential assessment, more than it was about, “Is this person mentally and physically ready to be doing

this thing?” You don’t need to give people those herbs when they’re still not eating or sleeping because they’re—because of their state of mind.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

Right. Well, thank you for being brave in sharing an herbal mistake with us. I think that has a larger implication. Like you said, sometimes in the beginning we can just—we just want to help so much. We’re excited and we love the plants; depending on the situation, it could just be a little bit more serious than that. It needs more care, more caution. Yeah.

Mel, thanks for hanging out with me.

Mel Kasting:

Yeah, I loved it!

Rosalee de la Forêt:

Yeah, thanks so much for being on the show. Thanks for aralia berry. I’m very curious now about this plant in ways I was not before so—and I’m just going to put it out there that if you and me are ever together and there’s a Life of the Party bottle, I will dance for you.

Mel Kasting:

Bother Logan to send me—it’s going to get close to harvest time.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

Okay, I will do that.

Mel Kasting:

It’s getting close.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

I will even ask other people to reach out to Logan and make sure to get Mel her berries.
Thanks again for hanging out. I really appreciate it and I'm sure I'll be talking to you soon!

Mel Kasting:

Have a great day!

Rosalee de la Forêt:

You too, Mel.

Thanks so much for listening. You can download your illustrated recipe card from today's episode. Just head to herbswithrosaleepodcast.com or check out the show notes for a link. If you're not already subscribed, I'd love to have you as part of this herbal community so I can deliver even more herbal goodies your way.

This podcast is made possible in part by our awesome students. This week's Student Spotlight is on Francesca Bunch in Sydney, Australia.

Francesca has been part of our community through the Herbal Energetics Course and The Healing Power of Teas, bringing curiosity and a wonderful willingness to learn through direct experience. She made some especially lovely connections with ginger and kava, including during a camping and hiking trip, where she explored the herbs in relationship with her surroundings. Her observations of fresh and powdered ginger and her developing relationship with kava beautifully demonstrate the value of embodied, experiential learning.

Francesca also dove deep into researching the native Australian salt bush during the Salty module, even though it was not her assigned plant ally! I loved seeing her connect course concepts with personal experience and ecology, and her work is a beautiful reminder that herbalism can lead us into deeper relationships with the plants and the places where they grow. Thank you, Francesca.

Okay, you did it! You made it to the end of the show, which means you get a gold star and this herbal tidbit.

Mel mentioned that birds love aralia berries and so I thought I'd look into it more being the ecology nerd that I am and I found that spikenard feeds a whole community long before the berries even ripen. American spikenard, it grows in these rich, moist forests along the edges, clearings, stream banks, etc. It blooms in the summer when there's not a lot else flowering, especially in the shade which makes it a really valuable food source in a part of the forest where nectar can be hard to find. Its tiny white flowers are arranged in these big airy sprays, and then they draw this impressive crowd of short and long-tongued bees, wasps, ants, flies, butterflies, skippers, moths, beetles. You name it—they are showing up at the aralia. Many of these are smaller. They're lesser known pollinators. They are solitary bees, moths, beneficial wasps. If you're growing this in your garden, these are all beneficial pollinators that help keep garden pests in check, so that's cool. Then after the flowers come those berries, and the clusters ripen unevenly so you'll often see several colors on the same stalk at once like little strings of jewels. Songbirds, especially thrushes, are eager to eat them along with chipmunks and other small mammals. Meanwhile, the plant's got these big, lush leaves that are offering cover for wild life all-season long, so it's got a lot going on. If you're thinking about growing spikenard, you're not just planting medicine for yourself, you're going to be planting a summer feast for your area. Be sure you grow enough to share.

As always, thanks for joining me. I'll see you next time.