

Rebecca Fils-Aime:

Something that I love about hibiscus is that it's very clearing. It encourages movement in the body. It's antimicrobial, it has a lot of vitamin C, so it's really great for the immune system. I think for me that cardiovascular health and the high amounts of vitamin C, for me are really, really the—the two ways that I love using it outside of for respiratory health. It's really something that I just grew up around, and I love so much.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

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.

Most of us meet hibiscus as something pretty. I mean it's pink, right? And it's tart in a glass, and that alone is reason enough to love it, but there's more going on in those ruby calyxes than a refreshing summer drink.

In this episode, Rebecca Fils-Aime shares hibiscus as she grew up with it—the national flower of Haiti, a plant carried across the diaspora and given a different name in nearly every place it landed. She talks about the cooling, moistening qualities that make it so satisfying on a hot day, and then takes it somewhere you might not expect into the lungs and throat where hibiscus and a handful of Caribbean spices become a syrup for the kind of dry, persistent cough that can be so annoying. By the end of this conversation, you'll have a fuller sense of what this familiar flower is capable of, and probably a longing for a tall pink glass of it.

Please remember, if you enjoy this episode, 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. Also, please leave me your comments. I read every single one of them and I love them.

Rebecca, I'm so thrilled to have you here. Thank you so much for being on the show.

Rebecca Fils-Aime:

Thank you so much for having me. I'm really excited to be here with you today.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

Oh, I'm excited. I'm excited to hear your story. We've already been connecting on our hard-to-pronounce French last names.

Rebecca Fils-Aime:

Yes.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

We've got that going for us, and you've chosen a very favorite herb of mine, so I'm really excited to deep dive into hibiscus as well. As always, I want to start with you. What has brought you here today? How have the plants reached out and chosen you?

Rebecca Fils-Aime:

I love this question. Honestly, I have just so many early memories of being in the garden with my grandparents, being in the kitchen with my grandma, my mother. My family is originally from Haiti, and when they emigrated over, they went to New York and then Florida. Luckily, in South Florida, very similar environment as back in Haiti, so they were able to grow a lot of the same herbs and fruits and things in their backyard. So, I'd be in the backyard harvesting with my grandfather, and then we'd bring it inside, and then me and my grandma would sit and process and break things down. I think between that and just—Haitian culture is a culture where it's very commonplace to go into the backyard, grab some leaves, make tea—or ginger or peppermint are go-to herbs if your stomach is feeling a little off or something like that. Even in the food, we have this herb-based, aromatic-based seasoning blend called “epis” that we put in almost all of our food. I feel like between the garden and the food, that just really gave me kind of like a—what I call a “base level knowledge” of different Caribbean herbalism practices and how it overlaps into the kitchen as well.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

I have a question for you, if you don't mind me asking.

Rebecca Fils-Aime:

Yes, please.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

Was that like happy experiences being with your grandparents and preparing stuff? Because sometimes as kids, we're like it's a chore or something. You're nodding your head yeah. It was a happy experience?

Rebecca Fils-Aime:

I loved it. I think—and I credit that's why I still love cooking, even today why kitchen herbalism is really like what I think is the way that I practice herbalism primarily because I grew up in the kitchen and I grew up in their garden. Even in their front yard where there's a lot of grass, me and my older sister would just be taking blades of grass, mashing it up, and making "remedies," things like that, so very, very happy memories. I think I carried that with me throughout my life.

Then in middle school and high school, I started really thinking about my interest in health. I was in middle school and I had to do—I will never forget this—I had to do this summer project. There were a bunch of options I could choose from. I'm 13-years old thinking I want to do something on the digestive system, and that just always stuck with me. I thought I was going to be a gastroenterologist. I was just really into the digestive system when I was younger.

And then fast forward to my junior year in college, I'm a biology major, which is great because it's not just anatomy and physiology, but I'm learning a lot about plants, microbiology, and all these things that my inner nerd just really loved. I realized my senior year, last minute, I had already applied to medical schools and was setting up interviews, and I realized, "I don't

think I actually want to be a doctor. I know I want to help people. I know I want to be in the health world somehow, but I don't think this is what I want to do." I did some research and ended up going into public health instead, and so that's what I do now. I think this could be a whole other episode topic, but I think there are a lot of overlaps between herbalism and the way that I learned to practice public health—community-centered public health, so I really feel like that just continued to stoke the flame of interest in different ways to approach health.

The same thing with cooking. Throughout that time I really grew my cooking skills. My friends would love to come over and just eat some food when we were in college. I still lived at home because the college I went to is ten minutes away. Or we would all get together and cook regularly. I was also getting really deep into taking care of my personal health at the time. I was eating a lot of whole foods and drinking a lot of teas that are well-known in Haitian culture and Caribbean culture in general like moringa tea, eating a lot of leafy greens, a lot of those tropical fruits that have those antioxidants and fiber. Of course, hibiscus, which we'll talk a little bit more about later. So, yeah, I think just that experience of being in that culture of, "Go and get some herbs if things are—aren't feeling that great," and then also having a culture where herbs and food is a big—is a big thing. We put that marinade, epis, in almost everything. I think that's really just how I got here.

I started formalizing my herbalism study I would say probably 2017 when I left Florida to where I am now in Georgia. I had real seasons to start dealing with, and that made me really get into seasonal living and seasonal herbalism, and embracing the cold weather because it was relatively new for me. I was born in New York but I was really, really young when we left and moved to Florida, so that cold was very much a thing that I had to get used to. I think the pandemic happened so we were all in the house, and I just got deeper and deeper into that study and started making medicine for my community, just my co-workers, people who live near me, anyone who just asked me for anything. I would ask them some questions just to get a bit more information about, "What do you need support with?" Get a little bit of their constitution, their likes, their dislikes, and then share things with them. To this day, I still

share herbal teas or—herbal steam blends seem to be really popular amongst people that reach out to me. Every August, I make this huge half gallon jar of this elderberry, mullein, nettle—what I call “elixir,” and I just give it out for free. My co-workers already know. Once it’s end of August, they’re like, “Hey, Rebecca, could you get me some of that—the elixir that you made?”

That was just my long-winded way of saying I think I grew up with a lot of it, and then as I got older being intentional about doing more studying, taking classes, self-study. I do the Plant of the Month thing, studying a different plant in-depth every month.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

Nice.

Rebecca Fils-Aime:

And then I started herbal writing a few years ago, and I think that’s—that’s where I am now. I’ve written a lot for Learning Herbs and Botanical Anthology and a couple of other places, so that’s how I got here.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

Nice.

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.

When I was looking at your Instagram, I was seeing that you had been interviewed for one of my favorite fruits, which I have a deep longing for because I can't ever find it where I live, and that's guanabana or-

Rebecca Fils-Aime:

Oh, yes, yes, yes.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

What is it also called?

Rebecca Fils-Aime:

It's soursop.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

Soursop. I lived in the Dominican Republic for a time, and so that's where I fell in love with guanabana-

Rebecca Fils-Aime:

It's so good.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

And now—I can find it canned, but it's gross. It's so sweet. It's already such a sweet fruit, and then-

Rebecca Fils-Aime:

Right.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

[unclear] ith sweetness. I miss it so much. That piqued my interest, the guanabana.

Rebecca Fils-Aime:

It's so good.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

The question that's lingering in my mind is just about the public health, if we can circle back to that, because you're saying there's a lot of overlap there, and you're in public health now. What does that mean? What does that look like? What do you do in that realm?

Rebecca Fils-Aime:

There's a lot that you can do in public health. What I do is I help community-based organizations whether they need to collect data for their funder or they just want to get information that helps them know: is their program working? Are they reaching community as intended? I'll come in and I'm the one helping them with that data process. Still that nerdy part of me that likes the numbers, and also being able to be in community and talking to people, doing interviews or focus groups, just getting information from people directly in community to see whether these programs are impacting them as intended. And then if they aren't, then I work with that organization to give them recommendations based on what people are saying on how they can maybe improve their program, so it can do the thing that they wanted to do and have the impact in community that they wanted to have.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

Oh, that's cool. I have a friend who does something similar but with non-profits, but I often think of her as kind of like the fix-it person that goes in and sees what can be helped and helps the organization. Often times people have desire to help or they have a vision, but they aren't necessarily—they don't know all the ins and outs of what it's going to take.

Rebecca Fils-Aime:

Yes.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

Especially as organizations grow, things shift so much.

Rebecca Fils-Aime:

Exactly, and another part of my job is training organizations to learn how to do those things. I always say my role is not to be here forever. I want to help you out with the thing you need help with, and then let's find a way to build your capacity so that you can do this on your own whether it's a—on a different scale or we help you figure out a way to hire someone at your organization that can do that work. Definitely, that training piece is important as well.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

Cool, that's kind of like herbalism too.

Rebecca Fils-Aime:

Right, exactly!

Rosalee de la Forêt:

So many herbalists are like, "Here's how you make the tea," that sort of thing.

Rebecca Fils-Aime:

Exactly, exactly.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

Thanks for sharing your story with us. I love that you had it at such a young age, that—the modeling—and that has stuck with you in a good way. Sometimes I feel like—because I see now my friends, as parents, their kids, it's so normal and natural to them to have herbs that it's not special like the way it is to many of us who had to find it and cultivate it and dive into it. It's just normal, which is cool.

Rebecca Fils-Aime:

It is.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

But sometimes it's taken for granted, I guess.

Rebecca Fils-Aime:

For sure, for sure.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

Which is good, which is good.

Rebecca Fils-Aime:

And I think too, even though I was raised around it, there are still people who—it's different by person. Talking to my grandmother, she has a lot of memories and just a lot of information that she can share, and there are a lot of other elders in my family as well who are like that, who can recount, "When we were in Haiti, we had this tree. It was just on the road, the neighbor's tree." What I love is that feeling of nobody owns this. This is the community's tree, the community's medicine. We just knew where it was when we needed it. But there are some people who grew up around it and just didn't really absorb that. They know that my mom goes to the backyard and gets weeds, but that doesn't mean know they know what—what they're drinking. They just know their mom is that person who will say, "Drink this," when you're not feeling well. It definitely ranges by person, I think, but it is—when we think about the culture in itself, I think Haitian culture, and I would say Caribbean culture at large, definitely has that underlying thread of herbs and herbalism in particular for preventative measures.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

That's lovely. Thanks again, and thank you for choosing hibiscus. I'm truly excited for hibiscus – one of my favorite plants, most worked with plants. I'm curious why you chose hibiscus for today.

Rebecca Fils-Aime:

It's also one of my favorite plants. Hibiscus is actually the national flower of Haiti. It is something that I grew up around a lot. There are a lot of other countries in the Caribbean that use that—the calyx of *Hibiscus sabdariffa* to make drinks that they drink during the holiday season. It's a drink called “sorrel,” which is where my cough syrup was inspired from. I just grew up around it. There are so many species of hibiscus. I think there's over 300 at this point. A lot of them are important to Caribbean culture. The *sabdariffa* species, in particular, came to us from Africa. I think it's a plant that black people, in particular, have taken with us throughout the diaspora.

There are—you can go through a lot of different black cultures and black ethnicities. They all have a different name for their hibiscus-based drink, but there are a lot of similarities in how they make it. There are—you definitely have the hibiscus. There's usually some variation of a lot of spices, so sometimes it can be clove, all-spice, nutmeg, cinnamon in the drink. Sometimes they'll put pineapple, citrus, mint. There's a lot of different variations of it, but for the most part, you're going to get the hibiscus in it, and at least some kind of spice. Maybe even a ginger. I know that's also very popular. It's really something that I just grew up around and I love so much. There are also some that are native to different islands in the Caribbean too, so I think between—but the *sabdariffa* definitely comes—comes to us from Africa, but there are other species as well.

All of them, because they are part of the *Malvaceae* family, have that mucilage quality when fresh in the flowers and in the leaves, and that is I think one of the most prized parts of that plant in—in the Caribbean. I've seen people take the flowers and the leaves, and mash it up to get that mucilage and use it to wash their hair. I know some people use the powdered calyx of *Hibiscus sabdariffa* as face- or skincare. I myself have used it in a face mask before because

it's really nourishing and it's brightening, so it's really good topically as well. So, yeah, I just have a love for the flower in itself, a love for the plant.

If you look at Haitian art, you'll probably see the flower on our clothing at some point. Even in the art itself like paintings and literature. It means a lot to Haitian people, in particular, as a sign of beauty, but also resilience.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

And is it called sorrel in Haitian? In Creole or-

Rebecca Fils-Aime:

No. That's in the English-speaking countries, they'll call it sorrel. We call it "choublak."

Rosalee de la Forêt:

Choublak.

Rebecca Fils-Aime:

Yes.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

I haven't heard that before.

Rebecca Fils-Aime:

Yeah, I think we're one of the few that calls it that. It has inspired—my understanding is that there are other countries that have a similar way of saying it, but when they're talking about the drink, they'll say sorrel, but sometimes will just—sometimes people will just say sorrel when they're talking about the plant too. It's one of those things where, just using context clues: are they talking about the drink or they're just talking about hibiscus in itself?

Rosalee de la Forêt:

And then it's—in a lot of the Caribbean it's called “jamaica,” which I don't know if that is directly imported from Jamaica.

Rebecca Fils-Aime:

Jamaica. Mm-hmm, mm-hmm.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

Yeah, it is? Okay.

Rebecca Fils-Aime:

In the Spanish-speaking Caribbean, yeah, for sure. It has a lot of—a lot of name-

Rosalee de la Forêt:

Okay, so it's more Spanish-speaking?

Rebecca Fils-Aime:

Yeah, yeah. I know in Mexico too, they call it “agua de jamaica,” as well.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

I've spent a lot of time in Mexico, and that's my drink of choice when I'm there. I like to ask for jamaica sin azúcar because they love their sugar.

Rebecca Fils-Aime:

They do.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

It's more like a syrup. You're like, “whoa!” So—or I say “poco azucar” because a little bit of sugar is fine with the hibiscus. It could be super tart without that kind of thing.

Rebecca Fils-Aime:

It can.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

So, poco azucar, not a lot. But it is—when it’s hot out, it is—for me, it’s the most refreshing drink that it’s just like on so many levels it just feels right.

Rebecca Fils-Aime:

Absolutely, it’s cooling and refreshing. It’s that sour aspect of it in the taste, but also it acts as a refrigerant in the body. That makes sense when you think about all the places where it’s native to, that subtropical environment—you need something to help you cool down. A lot of plants, definitely hibiscus, have that cooling aspect to them.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

And then it makes everything pink, so it kind of makes everything better.

Rebecca Fils-Aime:

It is so pretty, yeah.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

It’s actual science right there.

Rebecca Fils-Aime:

I love it.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

I actually just made hibiscus tea today. It’s 100° today, and where I live it’s very arid, and so hibiscus—just that mucilaginous quality has a whole other level of “Thank you.”

Rebecca Fils-Aime:

Yes, yes. I love that feeling of it's almost like a different level of refreshing because it's not just cooling you down, but when it has that mucilage in it, it's also like your insides are super happy about it.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

Yeah, exactly, exactly.

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So with hibiscus, one thing I would say about it is I reach for hibiscus all the time in the hot months. It's such a soothing, relieving plant. I will actually reach for it when I want something to be pink. I will admit to that superficiality. I don't work with hibiscus a lot, specifically as medicine. It was great to see your cough syrup recipe come in, working with this plant and spices, specifically a more medicinal type variety. I'd love to hear more about your recipe, and I'll let folks know how they can get it when you're done talking about it too.

Rebecca Fils-Aime:

To your point about—I agree with you. Growing up I knew that people used it medicinally, but I was just used to having it in sorrel or in a drink of some sort. Through my studies and also talking to some of my elders, the words are not always going to be the super scientific like “antimicrobial,” but elders did and still do recognize that there is a health aspect to consuming hibiscus.

It's antimicrobial. It has a lot of vitamin C, so it's really great for that immune system. Something that I love about hibiscus is that it's very clearing. It encourages movement in the body, and so I feel like it does a really good job of moving mucus in the lungs. That soothing aspect that we talked about is also really good if you have a little bit of a sore throat. I think overall, to me, this recipe is really good for if you just have that dry, unproductive cough. It's not spastic per se, but it's definitely persistent to the point where the cough itself is causing some of that irritation. I think it's really, really good for that. Then you have these other herbs and spices that also help with the dry cough. It helps restore the mucosa that is causing that irritation in your throat, or just in general, in the upper respiratory system.

It also works to make sure that you're not necessarily suppressing the cough, but it's getting it to the point where it's not as irritating. It's not causing the irritation in the throat, and that if you are having coughing fits, they're not as painful. They can actually be a little more productive too because a lot of times that cough is—there's mucus stuck that can't get out. There are some expectorant spices in this mix with the cloves and the star anise and the ginger. I think adding a little bit more vitamin C with the orange peel—that's really how this all came together.

A lot of these ingredients like I mentioned earlier are in a sorrel drink or just a different—a variation of whichever drink you're thinking about, whether it's the one from Nigeria, or there's a lot of different variations, but I wanted to make sure that the spices I chose reflected the uniqueness of the Caribbean style of making this hibiscus drink. I think a lot of times when people think of Caribbean food, the spice part of it—not spiciness. I'm sure a lot of people know food can be spicy, but using spices in our food. I feel like sometimes people don't realize how much we do that outside of maybe a jerk seasoning or something, but we use a lot of spices in our food, and also as—as an herbal remedy. This recipe is really a love letter to that. And also, when I had a cough, I had hibiscus on hand. I wanted to try it on myself and it worked really well.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

Love that. You know, how you're describing hibiscus is exactly how I work with linden, which they are very similar-

Rebecca Fils-Aime:

Exactly.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

In that way, so it makes a lot of sense. Then the spices, of course, just add that specialness. I love the allspice, the cloves. It's really a nice invigorating blend. For folks who want to download the sorrel cough syrup, you can go to herbswithrosaleepodcast.com or check out the show notes. We have a beautifully illustrated recipe card with Rebecca's recipe in there. And I love that it's like—I always love the simple recipes. It's such a simple recipe that you have here. It's just like a one-pot wonder, and then you have this amazing, delicious, effective cough syrup. Voila!

Rebecca Fils-Aime:

I love simplicity.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

That's herbalism.

Rebecca Fils-Aime:

Exactly. I think the simple—the more simple you can make it, the more approachable it is. It makes people not feel as intimidated. There's definitely a time and a place. If you have a complex concern or a situation, then we have to bring in a lot of different herbs, but I think in this case, these are things that I typically have on hand so it was just easy for me to put it all in a pot, let the spices boil, take it off the heat, let the hibiscus steep, strain it, and now we're going to add that honey to really thicken it up a little bit and make it more of a syrup.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

Lovely. One thing that I love when I go to Mexico is pretty much if Jamaica—hibiscus—is on the menu, I'm getting it. It could be—there's all these different—it will be like hibiscus jam, hibiscus margarita. Whatever it is, I'm going to get the hibiscus thing. One thing that I fell in love with is you can often eat hibiscus there. I was telling my chosen family down there, Luli, I was like, "It's so—I wish we could get fresh hibiscus where I live." I've tried growing it in the garden, I get this much. It was just not the—the climate for hibiscus. I said I just love actually eating of the hibiscus calyx. It's so delicious. She's like, "This isn't fresh. It's just rehydrated." It's all rehydrated.

Rebecca Fils-Aime:

Oh, yeah.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

This is such an embarrassing thing to admit but ever since that I've been like, "I got to do that," and then I just forget. Is that something—do you ever rehydrate the hibiscus or have hibiscus fresh or eat hibiscus? Is that something that you do?

Rebecca Fils-Aime:

I have, yeah. I like to use whether it's—I think it's better for this purpose when it's fresh, for making a jam. That fresh calyx has a lot of pectin. You can make a jam with hibiscus. You don't have to use a lot of sugar, but I would because it's very tart. Add some citrus, add some sugar, let it cook down, and it turns into a beautiful jam with that natural pectin that it has in it. I have not tried that with rehydrated hibiscus, but I have used rehydrated hibiscus before. I think—I feel like I've heard—you mentioned Mexico. I feel like I've heard of them using it in actual dishes that are—that are savory.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

Yes. The one time I had it—one, in memory, it was hibiscus and mushrooms and onions. It was a salty, delicious thing.

Rebecca Fils-Aime:

Yeah, that's amazing. I think that's amazing. I would love to try that.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

Me too.

Rebecca Fils-Aime:

I have not tried that.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

Why do we keep talking about it without doing it? I don't know. We need to like have this hold me accountable or something. Enough—enough wishing. We got to get [crosstalk]

Rebecca Fils-Aime:

I need to go to Mexico and find that. That sounds delicious. I would love to just experience it and think about the differences between how I've had it before and how I'm having it in that moment.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

I remember I went to this French-Mexican fusion bistro, whatever, and they had goat cheese crepes, then had that what you're describing as the hibiscus jam, was just smothered on top of it.

Rebecca Fils-Aime:

Wow!

Rosalee de la Forêt:

It was so beautiful and so much fun. That must have been fresh. It was like I went there one morning and they said that they were all out of the hibiscus. They've used it up. So, I went

earlier the next morning and got it, but it was—I got that sense that they were making it that day or something. It was like they only had so much for the day, so yeah. So yummy.

Rebecca Fils-Aime:

I love that. Oh, my gosh. Now, I have to plan a trip.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

And it was also so ubiquitous there. Go to the markets and they were just—at the booths at the market, there would just be bags, loads, and heaps of hibiscus everywhere, and that was a fun thing as well. It's just like it's so common, so abundant, so wonderful. So many ways to love hibiscus.

Rebecca Fils-Aime:

I think anywhere that you go where there's a lot of Caribbean people, you'll find something similar because even—it doesn't grow there—but even in New York, I know people who can go to a certain market and just get a bag of hibiscus. It's regular for them. It's part of their regular grocery—grocery list. Same thing, of course, in South Florida, but I think down there it also grows pretty well too because of the environment.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

Oh, my gosh. I would love to be around lots of it because I hear of working with the leaves and fresh calyx. Again—I should try growing it again. I've grown it as an herbal—or a gardener since then, but still not quite the climate for that—for that *sabdariffa*. One day.

Rebecca Fils-Aime:

The leaves are also really good too in terms of—so I know they have a lot of nutrition, and so some Caribbean islands will use it as a green. They'll put it in a stew or a soup or even eat it raw in a salad. I've also seen folks use it as a bath tea or they might use it as a vaginal steam postpartum. The leaves definitely have a lot of medicine as well.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

You know, I'm just thinking about right now, Rebecca, just these plants that become such good friends to humans, like you're saying, the African diaspora has moved this plant all around, and then it still remains so culturally important through the ages. It has this abundance to it that still is not only in the way it grows and the way we can have this abundance of it, but it's abundantly in the culture worked with in so many different ways from food to medicine. It's like it's one of our besties.

Rebecca Fils-Aime:

It is. It is.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

Fantastic plant!

Rebecca Fils-Aime:

It is. It's to the point where—so in African American culture, there's this thing called “red drink.” A lot of historians say that hibiscus doesn't necessarily grow well in a lot of places in the South, but them having that red drink during celebratory events or holidays, is like reminiscent of the hibiscus. Even though African Americans have been here for so long, they're—they're still part of that in that way because they're still honoring that plant even though they couldn't have it. That creativity, that remembrance is amazing to me to be able to say, “We can't have that, but how can we still honor that in our celebratory events?”

Rosalee de la Forêt:

That's beautiful. Hibiscus. Are there other ways that you like to work with hibiscus? Or anything else you'd like to share about this lovely plant? Oh, you know what I'd love to talk actually—sorry to interrupt you.

Rebecca Fils-Aime:

No, no, go ahead.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

As a very young herbalist, I was very confused about—I saw the red hibiscus flowers, and I was like, “Oh, that’s hibiscus,” and I didn’t realize—and still, people talk about hibiscus “flowers”. We use hibiscus “flowers”. Would you talk a little bit about the botany of hibiscus? I’m sure we can put B roll on of just what exactly are we talking about when we say we’re working with hibiscus.

Rebecca Fils-Aime:

We have the flower and then we have the leaves. To my knowledge, I believe the *Hibiscus sabdariffa* that we’re talking about is the only one that has that red calyx. Anytime you see that calyx, it’s that very specific *Hibiscus sabdariffa*. But like I mentioned earlier, all of them being part of that *Malvaceae* family have that mucilage. A lot of them have the same antimicrobial impacts as well, anti-inflammation. I think an underrated way to use hibiscus is for digestive concerns.

We also know—I think this is kind of like a general thing—if it’s red it probably helps with cardiovascular health. That is definitely true for hibiscus, similar to hawthorn in that way where it really helps lower that blood pressure. My mom was just telling me the other day, actually, that she’s been drinking hibiscus every day for a while. She went to the doctor and there were visible differences in her blood pressure. It wasn’t super high but it was a change from what she normally had, so she wanted to try to get it down without having to be on any medication or anything. I think for me that cardiovascular health, and the high amounts of vitamin C, for me, are really, really the—the two ways that I love using it outside of for respiratory health. I feel like the respiratory health thing I discovered in my research and testing on myself, but those other things I kind of grew up thinking about it in that way, like that vitamin C in particular, whether it’s for preventative health and just wanting to get vitamin C to boost your immune system, or if you’re not feeling well, you want to get vitamin C. I, personally, get tired of orange juice and things like that, so having that as another option was always really helpful for me, personally.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

Oh, that's lovely. Speaking of the hawthorn, that's actually a favorite combination for me, is hibiscus and hawthorn.

Rebecca Fils-Aime:

I love it.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

Like a classic one for me is then also rose hips on top of that. It's just like those three red berries, I just feel like—are just wonderful. Even preventive, just nourishment for the heart.

Rebecca Fils-Aime:

Absolutely, absolutely. I would love—you mentioned linden, and that made me think I don't think I've tried them together, so now I have to see. I might have to do some more experimenting to see how I like that.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

Yeah, lovely combination because it's got that kind of floral aromatics of the linden; that double mucilage is very nice.

Rebecca Fils-Aime:

Yeah, for sure, for sure.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

I love that about how it just helped support your mom's blood pressure. I like just the way—it's like we often—we don't have a lot of plants that are going to act like really pharmaceutical blood pressure medication, but we do have plants that are incredibly nourishing and make a difference, like hibiscus.

Rebecca Fils-Aime:

They do. They do. And she's used to hawthorn. She has tried hawthorn before and she—for a different reason, more for its nervine capabilities. She has that, but she was just like, "You know what? I think I just want hibiscus. That's just what's natural to me. I always have it." Like I mentioned, it's always—it's somewhere in the cupboard. When she told me that I was really happy because she did not consult me. That is not part of our agreement. Usually, she consults me first, but I think this one was just so natural to her, and she was so used to it that she was just ready to try it on her own without having to consult me.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

Nice, nice. Yay, hibiscus! I know hibiscus—in Mexico, it's often touted for its ability to address diabetes—Type 2 diabetes, which always kind of makes me wonder a bit because every time I see people drinking jamaica in Mexico, it's with a lot of sugar. I'm always kind of like, how is that working necessarily? I'm not sure but it's very highly regarded, like people will tell you that all the time. I feel like everybody just knows that hibiscus-

Rebecca Fils-Aime:

I have heard that too, but I agree with you. I think with that sorrel drink, a lot of times it has a lot of sugar in it, to the point where I think sometimes some of the elders are like, "You can have some but not too much. We're trying to manage your sugar consumption." I would love to—excuse me. I would love to learn more about the Type 2 diabetes aspect of it because I have heard of that. I just have not personally used it in that way, but I've definitely heard of it being used that way.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

I could see maybe perhaps another preparation would be that mushroom, onion, garlic, kind of a savory thing that you could eat it and not be dealing with all the sugar.

Rebecca Fils-Aime:

I think that would be awesome even if you have it in that jam like you mentioned with the crepe. Even the jam itself might have a lot of sugar, but you're not using the whole pot of jam even—even in that way.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

I mean, you would want to. It's so good. It's hard not to.

Well, thank you for sharing your love of hibiscus with us, and for the cough syrup recipe which looks absolutely delicious, as well as effective. All of it, so lovely. I'm just so excited to have hibiscus on the show finally, so thank you so much for bringing that.

Rebecca Fils-Aime:

You're so welcome.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

If you have anything else to share about hibiscus, feel free, but if not, I'd love to hear what's going on in your herbal world these days, what projects are you working on, what's up for you.

Rebecca Fils-Aime:

I think the only other thing I want to mention about the syrup is you can use it the way it's intended. You can also just use it to make a nice, tasty, and pretty beverage with some sparkling water. I've added it to my hot tea as the sweetener, so instead of using a plain honey or something, I just have it on hand. It also turns the tea a beautiful pink color like you were talking about earlier. It's definitely versatile in how you can use this syrup, but having it on hand, in particular towards the end of the summer when you're preparing for fall and potential sick season and the changing seasons. I think it's a good thing to make and have on hand just in case. If you don't need it for a cough, then drink it with your tea.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

I've—I was planning on making this as a enjoyable beverage. I'm so glad you mentioned that. That's incredible.

Rebecca Fils-Aime:

Yes, absolutely, absolutely.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

I like your idea of adding it as a sweetener too, as a—in teas and stuff because that's lovely.

Rebecca Fils-Aime:

So, what's going on in my herbal world, I have a lot going on in the sense that I recently started volunteering with the local herbalism clinic. That is keeping me busy between actually volunteering with them and participating in all the classes. We have a book club as well, so that is awesome. And then I'm re-launching my blog. Really, really excited about that. I initially had it a few years ago, and then life happened and I got really busy. There was no official big launch of it. I just had it and I shared it with some people, and then I took it offline. I've been really working to get it to a place where I want to share it again. We're almost there. Just need to work out a few things with the logo and it will be ready to share with everyone.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

Oh, nice. What kind of writing do you do on the blog? I'm assuming herbal and food. I want to—tell me about it.

Rebecca Fils-Aime:

Definitely, you're right. Herbalism and food, really all of my what I call "herbal musings." I do a lot of experiments with herbalism. I just like to see different things. I'll take a plant and just say, "I wonder if there's a difference between how it tastes when I use it this way versus that way," and so those kinds of things will also be on the blog, and of course, recipes, and just my experiences going through this life of herbalism and kitchen herbalism, and really wanting to share information in a place where I think people can grow to trust it as a trusted resource.

There's so much misinformation right now. Now, we have all these AI-written herbalism books. I just want to have a place that—another place that people can come to with trusted information.

One thing I'm going to have on there is a Resources page. It's going to have books that I recommend or studies that I've recently read that I think would be cool for people to see, or herbalists that I recommend people follow. I think for someone on the outside looking in, it's hard to know who is somebody to trust. I completely understand that if you're just coming into this and wanting to learn now. We know a lot of common names – Matthew Wood, Rosemary Gladstar, but to someone who is new to this, that might not be their knowledge base for that. I think I just want to do my part in helping to counter—counter that misinformation and also give people resources like, “This is what I do and how I practice, but also, if you're interested in how other people practice or if you're interested in learning about some of these other trusted herbalists, here's where you can go.”

Rosalee de la Forêt:

I love that. It is so important, with the—all the AI books and everything. I look at those books and they look like such crap to me. It's so obvious that they're crap, and so I've kind of like—I don't know. I've just been like, yeah, yeah, they exist but they're such obvious crap. It doesn't matter. But the other day, I was with a friend. He was like, “Hey, look, a friend of mine who is not an herbalist, by any sense of the”—he was just kind of maybe starting to get interest, had sent him a book and said, “Hey, what do you think about this book?” The author was Harvard Stanford. Yeah. It was so obvious that it was just a crap AI book, but wasn't obvious to his friend because his friend is not an herbalist. He's not in the herbal world, and it was just like—and it was like what popped up on his feed or whatever. It was just like the thing that was easiest for him to find. He was like, “Hey, what do you think about this book?” I was like, “Oh, yeah.” For just regular folks out there who aren't doing deep dives into everything, these AI books are going to come up really easily. It's going to be hard to tell them apart. Also, as we know, they're going to get better and better, these first kind of like total slop stuff. It can be pretty bad that you're just like, “Gross!” They obviously just want the sale without follow-

through beyond that. They're going to get better and better, so it's important that we're maintaining the integrity of what is experience and who do we go to for trusted information. That's wonderful that you're going to be adding to that.

Rebecca Fils-Aime:

That's definitely the goal. I saw—I read someone's post the other day where they were sharing ways to determine if this is an AI book or not. One of the things I took away from that that I'm going to share with everyone when I can is: research the author. Do they have other books? Do they have any talks? Can you find a video of them speaking on a topic somewhere? Just really doing a deep dive on the author themselves to see, is this the only thing that comes up with this person? Do they not have a presence online? Those are some of the red flags of maybe this is not an actual herbalist trying to share their knowledge with other people, but maybe something that was written by AI.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

Good tip. Thank you.

Rebecca Fils-Aime:

You're welcome.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

Before you go, Rebecca, I have a last question for you. Oh, actually, before you go, we're going to put your—the link to your blog in the show notes. You also are on Instagram, so people can check you out there as well. We'll be sure to—be sure to hit up all of that in the show notes. We'll put these links there for you. Thank you for that. Looking forward to your herbal musings, your recipes. It would be lovely. I do have one last question for you and that question is, how has working with herbs changed how you see the world?

Rebecca Fils-Aime:

I think it has done two things: one, it has brought me community. Being part of—being an herbalist helped me find a lot of other like-minded plant people, farmers, chefs. I'm in Atlanta where I'm really lucky because there's a really strong connection to buying from your local farmers, knowing who they are, knowing what they grow, visiting the farms. Even through volunteering with the clinic, I've just been able to find community and like-minded people in a way that I didn't expect when I started this journey.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

That's cool.

Rebecca Fils-Aime:

I'm just a nerd who liked plants and wanted to research a bit more about them. I think the other thing is it really helps me appreciate the seasonality of things. One of the main points of my Plant of the Month study is: Where does it grow? Where is it native to? But also, when do you harvest it—all the different parts of the plant? Is it—do you take the root in fall, and then the—the leaves in spring, and then the flowers in the summer? Appreciating the changes in the season, which was very important for me as someone who was getting used to cold weather when I first moved here. I tell people all the time when I first moved here and I was very—not resistant to cold weather but just I wasn't trying to embrace it at all. It felt like miserable cold weather. But then I started living seasonally and doing things like, what can I do in the fall that I can't do in April? What can I do in December that I can't do in June and it has really made me enjoy each season now. I think that's probably been another really big impact. I'm looking forward to fall because I want to go pick some apples, and looking forward to winter because I like that everything slows down. It really gives me a chance to hibernate. Those are the two things that I think have really, really impacted me through my work with herbalism and how they changed the way I see the world.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

Oh, my gosh, I love those! I resonate with them so much too. I think that's such the gifts of herbalism. So often we can start out just wanting to know what herb works for what

condition or whatever. It's like this constant unfolding of gifts beyond that. The community aspect is so big. I feel like that's my main focus in life right now: what does that mean to be in community? How do we support each other? How do we look to the plants? How they are in community and then recognize the greater community? Anyway, that's like my theme right now. So into that.

And then the seasonal stuff, Rebecca. I was—I grew up in the Southwest desert, so I also did not grow up around a lot of coldness and really struggled with that. I just hated it. It was so much pushing away and just really not liking it, and just being like—it's like when someone first tastes bitter for the first time and they're just like, "I hate it." End of story. Period. I hate it. Done. That's how I felt too, but how you described it is so true. You can embrace these changes. The plants just offer us so much. So many real things too because sometimes—this might be throwing shade a little bit—but sometimes around the holidays, it's like the things that people really love are plastic shit. It's like plastic snow or plastic—I don't know. It's just like fake stuff. For me—I'm sorry to throw shade at that—but for me it's actually like to embrace what is outside my door and to look at the living world around me and take inspiration there. It just brought a lot more richness to my life that I truly enjoy.

Rebecca Fils-Aime:

Same, same. And when it does snow, I embrace it because I live in a place where it doesn't snow often, but it is starting to snow a little bit more these last couple of years. I've been here ten, 11 years. Things have definitely changed a little bit. I think there was a time where I would not have embraced snow the way that I do now. I love it now because when else would this happen? Of course, it's snowing in January, right? Because it's January. It's exciting and now, I'm going to make some hot cocoa and just sit and watch the snow fall or something like that. These are little things, but like you said, there was just this pushing away in the beginning that I didn't realize was making me more miserable because I was not—I was just pining away for spring and summer, or wanting to go back home to Florida where I knew it was still relatively warm. But now, I appreciate where I am here and it just really has opened up the way I see the world, for sure.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

Such a wonderful embrace by the plants that is just welcoming. It's how we come home, ultimately.

Rebecca Fils-Aime:

I love that. I love that. It's how we come home.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

It's been so lovely to get to know you. Thank you so much for being on the show. I really appreciate this. I loved hearing your story, these gifts, these sharings. Thank you so much, Rebecca.

Rebecca Fils-Aime:

Thank you for having me. I loved this and I'm so happy to come back and talk about another plant that you might love that you haven't talked about yet.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

Awesome! I would love that.

Rebecca Fils-Aime:

We have so many in the Caribbean. I'm always happy to talk plants.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

Absolutely, I love that. Thank you so much.

Rebecca Fils-Aime:

Thank you.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

Thanks so much for listening. You can download your illustrated recipe card from today's episode. Just head over 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 Kathy Thornton in Maryland. Kathy is a student in the Herbal Energetics Course who brings curiosity, careful observation, and a deep appreciation for the plant she studies. Whether working with blue vervain, licorice or nettle, she takes time to notice each herb through its flavors, aromas and lived experience. She described harvesting nettle as an invitation to practice presence and mindfulness, and found meaningful ways to weave her learning into everyday life from nourishing infusions and meals, to sharing herbal knowledge with others.

To honor her contributions, Mountain Rose Herbs is sending Kathy a \$50 gift certificate to stock up on their incredible selection of organically and sustainably sourced herbal supplies. Thank you so much, Mountain Rose Herbs, for supporting our amazing students. And if you'd like to be an herbalist, you can check out my foundational courses at herbswithrosalee.com.

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

You may have noticed that part way through our conversation, when Rebecca was describing hibiscus as cooling and soothing and moving things along, I said, "Well, that's exactly how I work with linden," and that comparison isn't a coincidence, and I want to give you the botany behind it.

Linden, *Tilia* is the genus, spent a long time in its own family, the *Tiliaceae*. Then there was some genetic work done and it got moved along with most of that old family into the *Malvaceae*, so linden now sits alongside hibiscus and marshmallow, like all the mallows—

globemallow, my favorite—okra, and cacao. They're all delightfully together in that mucilaginous bunch. There's one more thread worth pulling here: linden has also been a heart herb, especially in European practice. It's often used for easing blood pressure, and hibiscus has been studied along the same lines, and now there's a real body of research into this. For example, in 2022, there was a meta analysis in the journal of cardiovascular pharmacology. What they did is they looked at 13 randomized controlled trials. There was 1200 people enrolled in those trials all together. They found that hibiscus lowered both systolic and diastolic blood pressure compared to the placebo on the order of about 7-point systolic and 4 diastolic. The effect was clearest in people with mild to moderate hypertension. We've got two cousins from the opposite ends of the climate range, both of them turning towards the heart, both of them mucilaginous. If this has you curious where else to look in that family, of course, marshmallow root is waiting right there for you.

As always, thank you so much for joining me in this episode. I'll see you in the next one.