

Rosalee de la Forêt:

In this episode, you'll hear all about Rhodiola benefits, and get a recipe for Rhodiola Energy Balls. Here's a clip from the interview.

Ben LeVine:

Rhodiola is probably the most stimulating of the Adaptogens, besides Asian ginseng, and it's an herb that you feel a lot acutely right away. I often give it to friends that are skeptical of herbs like, "I've never felt an herb in my life. Herbs don't do anything for me." "Here, try this strong amount of Rhodiola and report back."

Rosalee de la Forêt:

Hello and welcome to the Herbs with Rosalee Podcast, a show exploring how herbs heal as medicine, as food, and through nature connection. I'm your host Rosalee de la Forêt.

I created this YouTube channel to share trusted herbal wisdom, so that you can get the best results when relying on herbs for your health. I love offering up practical knowledge to help you dive deeper into the world of medicinal plants and seasonal living.

Each episode of the Herbs with Rosalee Podcast is shared on YouTube as well as your favorite podcast app. Transcripts and recipes for each episode can be found at HerbsWithRosaleePodcast.com, or through the link in the video description. Also in the video description, you'll find other helpful resources. For example, to get my best herbal tips, as well as fun bonuses, be sure to sign up for my weekly herbal newsletter.

Okay. Grab your cup of tea and let's dive in. It was a pleasure to interview Ben and hear not only about Rhodiola benefits, but also some of the deeper questions that go into sourcing these precious plants.

Sitting quietly atop a Colorado mountain peak, Ben LeVine felt a voice from his favorite herb that would define his future, "You were meant to become a herbalist." That path has led him to the farthest corners of the earth and back, driven to unravel the mysteries of the world's most powerful plants. Now as co-founder and chief herbalist of Rasa, he's using these potent herbal secrets to revolutionize your morning energy ritual with the power of Adaptogens.

Welcome to the show, Ben.

Ben LeVine:

Thanks. Thanks for having me, Rosalee.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

I'm really looking forward to our conversation and talking about Rhodiola. But before we go there, I'd love to hear about how the plant world called you in.

Ben LeVine:

Yeah. I wish I had known from a super early age that I was meant to be an herbalist, it would have saved me a lot of existential despair. It took me a while. I spent a lot of time in nature as a kid, grew up in rural Arizona, we had an orchard, a big veggie garden. We'd go hiking in the Chiricahua mountains in southeast Arizona a lot.

I didn't really discover herbs themselves until I was in my early twenties, out of college. I was really into food justice, food systems, farming. I was working on a farm in Alaska and discovered, "Oh, wow. There's nettles you can harvest. There's fiddlehead ferns. There's chicken of the woods" and got really enthralled by the abundance in nature. Abundance really is not as noticeable in Arizona, so this was a really different change of landscape for me.

I think that was my first wildcrafting book was in Alaska and then I spent some time in India on farms and got exposed to more herbs in a more traditional setting, like here's amla, let's harvest it, this is what we use it for, these are the cultural recipes around amla and hibiscus and a whole bunch of herbs.

Then I landed in Colorado and really, really lucked into a job at Social Seasonings, the tea giant, as an herb buyer. I kind of came into herbalism from the industry. A lot of people try to get into the industry once they're an herbalist and I somehow managed to start in the industry in a way. I convinced them to pay for herb school at night at the Colorado School of Clinical Herbalism.

That school is where I really came home I think to my people and what I want to do in life and really thankful for that place. That started a journey that went to ... I got a masters of science in clinical herbalism at the Maryland University of Integrative Health. Then I ended up at Rasa about four years ago.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

Yeah. We had a similar story in that I grew up in the southwest desert myself, in southwest Utah, and then when I came to the pacific northwest I had the experience of just picking the humble blackberry and it blew my mind, though. I was like, "Wow. This is all just here." It was that kind of opening point of just seeing the world in a different way.

Ben LeVine:

Yeah. Desert kids have a particular ... I get so excited about water in Colorado. I'm like, "There's water here. That's incredible" and all my friends who are from the east coast or the Pacific northwest are like, "It's so dry here." I'm like, "Colorado is magical. What are you talking about?"

Rosalee de la Forêt:

Yeah. Yeah. Well, I'm excited to talk about Rhodiola. This is a plant that I personally adore and does not grow really in the southwest deserts. The one time I've met Rhodiola in person was actually in Iceland, so a very different landscape there. But one that I also like to grow in my garden in a pretty arid location, so I coax it along little by little.

I'm curious why you were inspired to talk about Rhodiola today.

Ben LeVine:

Yeah. Rhodiola has been one of my favorite herbs for years now. I think I probably got into Rhodiola five or six years ago. I got into Adaptogens in general, adaptogenic plants help you adapt to stress. In our culture and in my own personal story of my tumultuous relationship with caffeine, I think I was in a real burnout place, which is super common in the US, and discovered Adaptogens and was learning more about how they might help achieve more balance and found Rhodiola.

Rhodiola is probably the most stimulating of the Adaptogens besides Asian ginseng. It's an herb that you feel a lot, acutely, right away. I often give it to friends who are skeptical of herbs like, "I've never felt an herb in my life. Herbs don't do anything for me." I'm like, "Here, try this strong amount of Rhodiola and report back."

I've used it a lot. I rarely use it by itself because the energetics are pretty challenging. It's very astringent and very drying and very cold. But another reason I wanted to talk about Rhodiola on this show is that it's in danger in its natural habitat. I know we'll get to sustainability but that's a pretty pressing matter that I don't hear enough people talking about, and there's a lot of people that are doing beautiful work with Rhodiola.

Joseph Brinkman from Traditional Medicinals just wrote a paper, co-authored a paper, on Rhodiola and the pretty drastic problems with sustainability. I just wanted to help get that out to a broader audience.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

I love that you're diving headfirst into that, because sometimes I think there's this thing that happens in herbal world where if there's a plant that's endangered or having problems and sometimes there's this desire to kind of just not talk about it, like, "Oh, the solution will be not to talk about it." Instead of, like you're suggesting, you're choosing Rhodiola so we can talk about this issue and not just shut it in a drawer and close it.

Ben LeVine:

Yeah. I've thought about should we not use Rhodiola? And the fact is, so many people use Rhodiola and they don't know of the sustainability issues, even some of the suppliers I've talked to, and that's not going to go away, whether you and I use Rhodiola or not. We might as well try and be part of the solution.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

Yeah. Let's put a pin in that just to talk a little bit more about Rhodiola benefits and we are definitely going to circle around to that as well. Yeah. You've mentioned some things of it's stimulating in nature, Adaptogen. What's kind of the, I don't know, a person that you think Rhodiola might be well suited for? Even, as you mentioned, in a formula, if not as simple.

Ben LeVine:

Yeah. I use Rhodiola where there is fatigue and sluggishness and stagnancy. More of the picture of needing a little bit of a boost, needing a kick in the pants, something to cut through the fog. It's awesome for athletes that are having trouble recovering. It's been used in a lot of performance athletics and also for focus.

It's one of the best herbs I've found for cutting through the friction of resistance, fatigue, that kind of scattered... And Rhodiola really puts me more into a flow, which is great. It's got a wide range of benefits, awesome for immunity. That's one of its traditional uses, taking swigs out of a Rhodiola-infused vodka in the Siberian taiga throughout cold winters. It can be helpful for mood issues. In the winter, I think Rhodiola is awesome, because it has such a big effect on some of our neurotransmitters like serotonin and dopamine.

Yeah. So many things. There's some areas we can use Rhodiola that are still being tried out, like ADHD, and I won't get too much into them, because I don't have a lot of personal experience with ADHD clients but there's some cool research coming out about all the ways Rhodiola interacts with our nervous system and our neurotransmitters and our focus.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

Well, speaking of that, you mentioned that Rhodiola helps you focus and is kind of a stimulant and so somebody listening might be like, "Oh, well, that's why I drink my coffee in the morning." What would you say are the differences between Rhodiola and coffee or other caffeine substances?

Ben LeVine:

Yeah. Several big differences. Well, a similarity first, they're both central nervous system stimulants. You get that immediate stimulation. Rhodiola, a lot less than coffee, of course, but still there.

Some of the main differences, coffee can put you into a stress place, where your stress hormones start getting released, especially if you're naïve to coffee. If you don't drink coffee every day ... I don't drink coffee ... If I drink a cup of coffee right now, my stress hormones would go crazy. I'd have spikes in cortisol, which has a lot of ill effects over time.

Then the next day, I would be kind of depressed. I really experience that with caffeine. If I have a bunch day one, day two I have very decreased performance. My mood, my attention, everything. Rhodiola is kind of the opposite. You can take it multiple days in a row, you can stop it. You won't crash.

Rhodiola has the benefit of balancing cortisol instead of purely stimulating it like coffee does, so it effectively puts a floor and a ceiling on the amount of cortisol you have, which gives you steadier energy throughout the day and less of the negative side effects that chronically high cortisol in our culture gives us, a lot of our chronic diseases, libido, mood, digestion, get dampened when we're dealing with chronic stress and chronically elevated cortisol. Coffee doesn't help that. Rhodiola can.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

Let's go ahead and dive into the sustainability of Rhodiola. I'm really curious to hear your thoughts on this, both as somebody who is sourcing Rhodiola and someone who deeply cares about this plant and the future harvests and the habitats that Rhodiola lives in.

Ben LeVine:

Yeah. Any time an herb starts to get super popular, it's something to look for. I appreciated you mentioning with your ... I think it was with Ann, your podcast with Ann about Chaga and how you ask suppliers, "Tell me about the sustainability of your Chaga" because there are so many herbalists and anecdotal evidence and, hopefully, some hard evidence soon, that Chaga is becoming potentially a sustainability issue.

That's partly because over the last 20 years, it's gotten insanely popular. The same thing for many of the Adaptogens. Rhodiola and Eleuthero are two of the main ones that I've looked at. I was in China three years ago and Adaptogen central, we got ginseng grows there, Schisandra, Eleuthero, Rhodiola, Reishi. I found an Eleuthero stand, which was really magical for me. But I never saw Rhodiola, never found it.

I started digging into it a little more and realizing that there's starting to be a real issue. Many other people in the industry are seeing this as well, including Joseph, who I mentioned earlier, and one of the ways you can start to tell is adulteration increases. There's I think 90 plus Rhodiola species around the world. We have one in Colorado called King's Crown. It's red flowers but it doesn't have the same medicinal effect. You start to see a lot of these other Rhodiola species show up in the raw material getting sourced from China and Russia.

Another thing you notice is the price starts going up and there starts to be a lot of smuggling, so I think 75% of extracts, Rhodiola extracts come out of China. They're running out of raw material. There's a lot of smuggling from Russia now. It's been documented and there's probably way more that's been undocumented. Russia as well has, I mean, vast areas of Siberia have Rhodiola, but the reserves that are documented are dwindling quickly. You look at the numbers from the '70s and then the '80s and then the '90s, and what we have now is a fraction of what was in the ground then.

Part of the problem is it's a root, so any time you're harvesting roots, there's potential issues. It's not a big root. I actually have one here for the folks on video. It's not a huge root. Maybe a plant might have several of these, but it takes 150 of these to make a pound of dried material.

In the wild, mature roots take 20 to 30 years and you generally don't want to harvest them before 15 years. It takes a lot of time to regenerate what's being harvested. Climate change is another aspect. As everything is moving up, things are heating up, there's less water and land use changes for agriculture and livestock also a problem.

You're seeing this primarily in China and Russia where most of the Rhodiola is from, and almost all of the world's supply of Rhodiola is wildcrafted. It grows in boreal regions around the world, so it's in Scandinavia, the far east, maybe even in Alaska and Canada, but the main stands are all in China and Russia. Scandinavia had some of the first harvesting laws hundreds of years ago, because they recognized that this is a problem, this is an herb we value, this is an herb we use, and there were laws in place to protect it. Now really none of those laws exist in places where it's coming from.

When we see an herb with sustainability issues, there are several different approaches. Eleuthero has a lot of similar issues but it's not as far along. We're working with a couple companies to try and get it Fair Wild Certified, which brings accountability to how much can you harvest per acre and still be sustainable?

Rhodiola may be too late for that. There is also cultivation efforts underway that we'd rather support. There's a beautiful organization up in Canada, the Alberta Rhodiola Rosea Growers Association. They're probably the biggest cultivation effort in the world and we've started buying from them at Rasa. A lot of the bigger companies can't switch to them yet, because they just don't have enough volume. Cultivated, it takes at least five years before you want to harvest, so the scale up is really difficult.

It also is not something people have been growing for very long, so there's a lot of little things to figure out, a lot of big risks that these farmers take. We're happy to support them and try to grow awareness and grow their cultivation efforts to the point where some of these bigger companies can start using them as well.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

If someone is interested in working with Rhodiola, what suggestions do you have in terms of what to look for to ensure that they're getting Rhodiola from a good source and it's not being stripped from the wild?

Ben LeVine:

Yup. That's a good question. If you're going to buy the raw root, which I think is great, you can make a tea with it, you can toss in some vodka, which is super traditional, you can buy it from Mountain Rose, which offers Canadian now, instead of the wild, which is great. They've been doing that for a couple of years.

You can also go directly to ... There's some cultivation efforts in Alaska and you can buy the tincture from them as well as the raw root. These places are great for growing Rhodiola, because they're really high in altitude, they're really cold. They match the environment that

Rhodiola naturally grows in. Kudos to you for growing it, Rosalee. I've tried and it gets a couple of inches and then I have a hard time.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

I should mention, because I think it's worth saying that ... I went and visited Rhodiola in Iceland. I was visiting Anna Rosa there. Rhodiola there is so lush and big and beautiful and it really just blew my mind. I was like, "Wow. This is so beautiful and it's so big." Now I realize I'm probably looking at plants that are 30 years old there. We were in protected areas.

Then I got home and I wanted to grow Rhodiola myself, so I got a sprout and planted it and I have probably been growing that same plant for 10 years.

Ben LeVine:

Wow.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

I think last year it might have reached like seven inches.

Ben LeVine:

Wow.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

It's not lush. It's kind of this little width of my finger. You know? It doesn't look anything like the plants that I saw in Iceland, and I'm not ideal growing conditions for it. There could be more that I'm doing. I just coax it along and I'm not harvesting it. I just like to spend time ... I grow it next to Lady's Mantle, which I often saw it growing next to in Iceland.

Ben LeVine:

Wow.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

It has given me deep respect for the plant and seeing ... I've been growing this plant, tending it for 10 years, and it's still a little spindly thing for me.

Ben LeVine:

Yeah. I mean, that's one of the reasons Rhodiola is so healthy for humans is it has this really intense environment. It's got a high altitude, low oxygen, super cold, a lot of radiation from the sun for being so close to the sun. It's building all of these protective compounds for itself and then we can come along and co-opt them.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

Yeah. Yeah. It's certainly a gift to us. Thanks for those tips on looking for cultivation. That's what I'm hearing is you want to see really that at this stage, it's cultivated and maybe Fair Wild Certification is coming for Rhodiola but for now, really, it's the cultivation that we're looking for.

Ben LeVine:

Yup. Ask questions. A lot of extracts out on the market are still from China. They might be adulterated or they might not be sustainable. There are no ... That's one of my projects is trying to figure out a cultivated extract, so working with the folks in Canada and with the extraction company and getting that powdered extract that you commonly see on the market.

Right now there isn't that, so asking questions, if you're going to buy an extract emailing them and saying, "Hey, what's the sustainability? Where is it coming from? What region of China or Russia?" Just bringing awareness to them too. I was blown away ... I was at a trade conference last fall. There were probably two dozen companies offering Rhodiola extract.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

Wow.

Ben LeVine:

No one I talked to was aware that there were sustainability issues. As a collective, if all the herbalists are emailing and saying, "Hey, what's up with this?" It might raise awareness more generally.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

Yeah. Yeah. I can't remember exactly what I shared with Ann but I was actually thinking about that story in preparation of talking with you, because a similar thing happened where I was seeing this one very popular company sourcing a lot of Chaga and I wrote them one year and I said, "I'm concerned about the sustainability of this harvest." The response I got back was, "There are no sustainability issues associated with Chaga." This is a ways ago, right? This is not like last year. It was quite a while ago.

I was so miffed. I was totally just like, "What are you talking about?" I had sent them an article, I think by Robert Dale Rogers, outlining the problem.

Ben LeVine:

I know that one. Yup.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

Yeah. I sent them that, never heard back. It was like every time I saw that company, I'd just get a little bit angry. It was like a year or two later, I emailed them again and I said, "I'm emailing again because I'm still concerned about this issue." I think I said something like, "Is your Chaga ethically wildcrafted?" Their response was, "Yes." I was like, "Oh, cool. Things have changed."

I wrote back, replied, and I said, "Oh, that's excellent. I would like to see that on your website and I would like to hear more about the steps you're taking to ensure that it's ethically wildcrafted" and then I never heard from them again. So it was like an easy yes, you know?

So I love that you're saying to ask questions. I guess I'm adding ask harder questions too, because it's really easy to just say, yes.

Ben LeVine:

You're not alone either. I know personally several people who also bugged that particular company, and deal with the same sort of responses. They're getting it from multiple angles. At Rasa, we started off using wild Chaga and then did a little digging and then went, "Oh man." We only use Fruiting body and we switched to cultivated mycelium for Chaga, because of it.

The cool thing just for anyone who loves Chaga and is listening, we found that the cultivated Chaga actually ... It has similar beta glucan levels and it also weirdly has Betulinic acid still, which we all thought was from the birch tree that the Chaga grows on, but in a lab, the Chaga still produces that acid, which is super cool.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

It is really super cool. Well, I think I want to go next is ... There's all these things I'm excited to talk to you about but maybe let's talk about your recipe, because now we know, look for cultivated Rhodiola, and so we find cultivated Rhodiola, then what do we do with it? I think your recipe ... I love it, because it's food-based, Rhodiola Energy Balls, or at least we could call it snack-based. Would you share just a little bit about this recipe? And then folks can get the recipe card when they visit HerbsWithRosaleePodcast.com and get the whole thing.

Ben LeVine:

This recipe is a bit of a challenge. We talked a little bit about buying the raw root and making tea or making a 40% alcohol infusion, vodka or something like that, and that's a great way to start taking Rhodiola.

This recipe uses an extract. My challenge to you is to ask the company about the extract, about the sustainability and start this process we were just talking about. The reason I use an extract in this recipe is it can be hard to get a good dose of Rhodiola without an extract, because it is so astringent.

I'll back up and talk a little bit about Rhodiola. Rhodiola Rosea, it's basically rose rose, Rhodiola comes from the greek Rhodin, which means rose, and then Rosea is also a rose. It has geranial

in it, an essential oil that's also in the rose, and it smells really rosy, but the taste can be challenging, because it's so astringent.

I would almost never recommend it by itself to anyone, because of the energetic constitutional challenges. In practice, I would use it 5% to 10% in a formula. As a products company at Rasa, we use it usually at a lower percentage as well. It's also very stimulating, so you don't need a huge amount.

When I'm getting to know an herb, I love to take a macro dose to really understand it. The first time I take an herb, I want to really go for it. Then I can be super subtle thereafter, because I'm like, "I know what I'm looking for and I know what this herb does and I don't need very much."

These energy balls are an attempt to have Rhodiola by itself and get an understanding of what does it feel like if I take Rhodiola for two weeks? We also want good daily dose without totally killing your mouth. That's why I suggest an extract.

It's a twist on the classic energy balls with dates and nuts. I use Brazil nuts, because I wanted a daily dose of Selenium, and almond butter and cacao powder, and then 250 milligrams of extract per ball. It's kind of one a day.

I love these types of recipes because it's tasty and I find myself ... I never miss a day, because I'm like, "I get to have my energy ball." You know, sometimes love two as well. It gives us an opportunity to be super consistent and say, "Okay, what does Rhodiola feel like on day one? What does Rhodiola feel like after two weeks of consistent use? Maybe I'll eat three balls one day and just see what a super high dose feels like."

They're great. They live in my freezer and they last forever that way. You can double the recipe. The recipe is for 15 balls, but you could double it and have some on hand for months after you do a two week trial.

That's one thing I've learned from Rasa is having a routine and a ritual that tastes good, enforces that habit, and Rhodiola acutely you'll feel, but the more magical effects of Rhodiola are cumulative.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

That was going to be my next question. I'm glad you said that and that Adaptogens tend to be like that, that it's the long-term that we take them and kind of develop that synergistic relationship between what they're doing and what our bodies are doing but things we really get the most benefits.

Ben LeVine:

Yeah. They're kind of like probiotics for your stress response. Like probiotics, many of them don't have what's called a memory function. Two weeks after you stop taking probiotics, they're out of your system in a lot of ways. They may help rebalance your system but repeat exposure, continual eating of probiotics, which is how we used to consume probiotics, is the best way to get continual effects.

Same with Adaptogens. It's kind of like ... One way I explain how Rhodiola works to folks is through ... It's a stress mimetic. It mimics stress in a similar way to saunas or exercise. Saunas are good for us primarily because they stress our system and they up-regulate what's called heat shock proteins, which were named after research with saunas. Exercise also up-regulates heat shock proteins.

Rhodiola, a cumulative use, has been shown to also up-regulate heat shock proteins. We're stressing our system in little ways with the effect of building more resilience towards bigger stress and more insidious chronic stress.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

I wanted to circle back about the Brazil nuts, because I really love that they're in this recipe. Almost all of my food comes locally, either from my garden or from our neighboring farm. Our soils are known to be low in Selenium, so I eat a Brazil nut a day, which is kind of ironic. I'm getting it from far away, but I just would prefer to eat a Brazil nut rather than supplement Selenium. When I saw that in the recipe, I was like, "Oh, perfect. This is great."

Ben LeVine:

That was my thought exactly. I, too, have tried to eat a Brazil nut a day and it's not usually successful.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

Yeah but you add cacao and dates...

Ben LeVine:

Exactly.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

And Rhodiola. It all adds up to a more consistent routine.

Ben LeVine:

Yup. Exactly.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

Well, I think next I want to talk about Rasa. I'm going to preface this by saying that when I was first contacted about having you on this show and it was a lot of Rasa, Rasa, Rasa. I was kind of like, "Is this somebody who wants me to advertise for them or whatever?"

I got the sample product and then I started looking into Rasa more and I was honestly so impressed. If anyone is out there thinking like I'm going to be a commercial for them, that's not the case. But what is the case is that your company is really holding up so many values and

really going the course for what I want to see herbal product companies doing, and in that case, it made me very excited to talk to you about ... We're going to talk about community relationships in terms of sourcing and even formulation, so I'm excited to talk about Rasa with you.

Maybe we could just start back and you could just explain what Rasa is for somebody who hasn't heard of it yet.

Ben LeVine:

Sure. Thank you, Rosalee. That means a lot coming from you, truly. Rasa is an Adaptogenic coffee alternative. We make a line of drinks with the intention of replacing coffee or supplementing coffee, if you don't want to let it go, plenty of those people, and many people that work at Rasa also drink coffee, so don't think we're total purists over here.

The idea is to get Adaptogens at a more tonic, nourishing daily dose in your system every day as part of a ritual. It was started by my friend Lopa when she had her first kid. She was just totally ... I mean, you know how it goes. It's totally stressful, you're not sleeping, it's overwhelming, and she was in a mom's group and they all had the same problem. They were drinking a lot of coffee and struggling with it. Coffee wasn't working for Lopa at all and she thought, "I'm going to try some coffee alternatives." Couldn't find any that really met what she wanted out of a coffee alternative and so she worked with the herbalist friend of ours, Jamie, and created it.

That was the first Rasa, it's our original. She tested it for a year or so, tweaking the formula, figuring out is this a good idea? Is it worth launching this thing? She had such good feedback and reviews from folks, that we decided to go for it.

I joined during the hard launch. I'm a late founder but I have since done all the formulation for the rest of the blends and tweaked original a tad and do a lot of the sourcing and education and things like that.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

One thing I immediately loved is that all of the blends seem to have this base of burdock, chicory, dandelion roasted root, which is one of my favorite flavors in herbalism and I drink a lot of those kinds of blends. You have that as a base that then gets all these different variations with these different Adaptogens.

Ben LeVine:

Yeah. We wanted to build a base that we could add flavor to and add more functionality to, and we have the roasted base, which also we're adding in roasted date seed to some of the blends, which it's the most coffee-like taste I've ever experienced. It's really cool, and a beautiful story. It's from Jordan.

Then we have our core toning, nourishing, Adaptogens. These are a little gentler than the Rhodiolas of the world. Those include Codonopsis and Shatavari, Maca, and that makes up a lot of the base Adaptogenic profile.

Then there is Rhodiola in a lot of the blends at a pretty small percentage. In some blends, like bold, which is more energizing and more the really want the Adaptogen punch, it's in there as an extract.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

When I initially hear things like these kind of Maca and these ones that can be sourced so poorly, I do have alarm bells going off. I would love to hear from you about how Rasa has been sourcing their ingredients. I'll let you explain it.

Ben LeVine:

There's so much there. Maca is a good example actually. When Maca was ... Was it five years ago, 10 years ago when it got super popular? There's some fascinating things that happened. China stole some seeds or some roots and planted it and started selling a good bit of the world's Maca and it was not Maca anymore. It was heavily fertilized, it was not grown super high up like Peruvian, Indian Maca is, and as a result, it didn't have nearly as much of the beneficial compounds. This has been proven with HPTLC and other ways of measuring compounds.

I mean, that's the first point, like Di Dao authentic source in China is a huge concept. Where is the plant from? That's where you should buy it from. We try and follow that as much as we can. We don't buy Maca from China. We buy it from Peru.

We also look for relationships. In the industry, there can be a lot of price buying and that destroys the quality of products really quickly. We like to bash countries like China for selling us adulterated, contaminated product and the reality is it's not China's fault. It's our fault, because there are buyers that know perfectly well this herb should not cost as much but they look the other way, they don't ask the questions they should, and then we end up blaming China for all the problems. They're finding so many buyers here that know what they're doing. We prioritize relationships.

We want to grow with suppliers and support them. For example, that is the roasted date seed. We paid for their first year of organic certification as a sign of good intent, like we're here for the long run and we want to grow with you. That also includes visiting, which hasn't happened too much during COVID but, back to Rhodiola, I'm going up to see the Rhodiola harvest in Alberta in May, which I'm really excited about and see the whole process of the farms and the harvesting and the processing and learning more there.

And asking a lot of questions. Ann has been awesome. Ann Ambrecht with the Sustainable Herbs program, she's putting together some industry working groups to tackle the bigger questions. I mean, there's no easy answers in this industry. It's one thing I've learned. I started buying 10 million pounds of herbs for Celestial Seasonings, and saw a lot of issues there. Now I'm at Rasa and I'm 100% in control of our supply chain and now I'm at the point where, "Oh, I don't have anyone to rail against. I actually have to roll up my sleeves and change things", because there's no one between me and my ideal anymore.

That's been a really eye-opening experience of what do we focus on? Is it living wage? Is it regenerative? Agriculture? Is it small scale farmers in India? Is it local farms in the US? There's so many things and they're all herb-specific and it's been so much fun to pick an herb and then go super deep with it.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

I just want to reiterate ... When I first heard this from Rasa, I was like, "Oh, okay." It just got into a little bit ... It sunk deeper into me, that some people who are sourcing herbs, they go to the open market and they're looking for bids and their ideal really is how can I get the cheapest Rhodiola or chamomile or whatever? That's their number one priority is to get the cheapest thing.

Ben LeVine:

Yup.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

What Rasa is doing, and a growing number of really awesome herbal companies are doing, are saying, "We're not going so much to the herbal market to look for the cheapest price but we're going directly to farms and forming those relationships and having those relationships just be ..." There's no one in-between you. There's no middle person. It's you're working with these farms.

Ben LeVine:

Yeah. I mean, that's sometimes a hard decision. Like Rhodiola, for example, we were buying wild from China and then I went to China and I learned more about it and was like, we can't do this anymore. We're paying double to buy from Canada. I mean, a lot of companies can't swallow that or their upper management won't approve it.

I didn't even ask permission. That's the privilege of being a co-founder and also handling sourcing is that I was like, "We're switching to Canadian sourcing. It's double the price but we have to deal with it", because the more volume they get, and the better they get at farming it, the lower the price will go over time and it will work out in the end.

Those are hard decisions for bigger companies to make for sure.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

I would say it's also impressive that smaller companies like Rasa are making those decisions, because that is a big deal.

Ben LeVine:

Yeah. Yeah. There's so much more work for us to do. I'm proud of what we're doing already and it's been challenging to be growing the way we are with ... We were boot strapped. We're in a crowdfunding round right now, but we were bootstrapped and trying to prioritize ... An example is compostable packaging. We tried so hard to get compostable packaging over the last four years. We went through five different packaging companies, got lied to one, one product bag fell apart, one they did a run and it worked but they had such big waste numbers, they said we're never running this again.

We wasted so much time and money on that and we still don't have a compostable bag. We're really close with the next company now. Hopefully, you'll see a 2022 announcement but it was a horrible business decision and too many of those and you're sunk. It's a constant conversation of we can't innovate in every single area, so we need to pick the areas that are really important to innovate and one of those is the supply chain.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

Ben, is there anything you'd like to add about Rhodiola or Rasa or anything else before we get to the final question?

Ben LeVine:

Rhodiola? I will toss in a couple caveats, because I think Adaptogens and Rhodiola, in general, have a glow of panacea around them, often. They're the wonder plants for all uses. In a lot of ways, they are. Rhodiola is so good for immunity, it's so good for mood. It's traditionally used as an Aphrodisiac.

I want to just throw in some words of caution to go with the hype as well. I think Betsy Costilo Miller, awesome herbalist, one of my mentors, used this, so I want to credit her, a lot of the early research on Adaptogens was done with these horrible forced swim tests.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

Yeah.

Ben LeVine:

Where they put mice in a bucket and eventually the mouse gives up and drowns. If you give them Rhodiola, they wait a little longer until they drown. I say this to clients all the time, when using Adaptogens, what are you doing? Are you using Adaptogens to build a ladder out of the bucket or are you just using it to struggle longer? Because anything that's stimulating and gives you energy can be abused, like we abuse coffee. It's a little harder but it's definitely still doable.

I want to leave you with that... Our culture so easily co-opts our beautiful plants and I'm seeing Adaptogens sometimes co-opted this way of like a one to one replacement for coffee with no lifestyle changes, no introspection. I want to add that.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

Thanks for sharing that. 2022 is my year actually of pulling back and simplifying, so I can appreciate that and how plants can support us and how we also need to support the work that they're doing within us, as much as we're able to in that way.

Ben LeVine:

Yeah.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

Yeah. Are you ready now for our last question then?

Ben LeVine:

Let's do it.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

I'm excited to ask this of you. You're our first person for season four. I'm curious what do you know now that you wish you'd known when you first started working with herbs?

Ben LeVine:

A couple of things come to mind. One, I wish I had trusted the plants earlier. I have had a really, extremely blessed path through herbalism. I've still struggled a lot and had a lot of anxiety around ... I mean, it can be hard to make it as an herbalist sometimes. I struggled against my corporate job when I had one and I struggled against all of the nights and weekends and herb school and how tired I was, and trying to always do an extra thing to maximize my future potential.

I look back now and there were certain points where plants just showed up and carried me to the next step and if I had just trusted that happening, it would have made the last 10 years a lot easier for me. I tell that to myself now too, like just relax, things happen as they happen, and really felt that plants have reached for me so many times in my career and my development as an herbalist, and just letting that happen and going with it.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

I really resonate with that. That's a good one. Well, thank you so much for taking the time to be with us today, Ben.

Ben LeVine:

Thank you, Rosalee. One other thing, since we were talking about Rasa, I have a discount code if now is a good time to share.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

Now is a great time. Yeah.

Ben LeVine:

Awesome. If anyone wants to try Rasa, we have a sampler pack with all of our blends. We have a discount code ROSALEE15, all caps, no spaces. Yeah. You have your own discount code. We're at WeAreRasa.com. All of the socials by the same tag, We Are Rasa.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

Fabulous. I'll be sure to put all of that information in the show notes as well. Thanks again, Ben. It's been a pleasure.

Ben LeVine:

Thank you so much. Yeah.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

Thanks for watching. Don't forget to click the link in the video description to get free access to Ben's recipe for Rhodiola Energy Balls. You'll also get access to the complete show notes, including the transcript. If you'd like to try Rasa, you can visit WeAreRasa.com and use the discount code, ROSALEE15.

If you enjoyed this interview, then before you go, be sure to click that subscribe button, so that you'll be the first to get my new videos, including interviews like this.

I'd also love to hear your comments about this interview and this stimulating herb. I deeply believe that this world needs more herbalists, gardeners, and plant-centered folks, like you. I'm so glad that you're here and a part of this herbal community. Have a beautiful day.