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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. I'm so thrilled to bring you this conversation with my friend, Sharon Gray. Sharon is an acupuncturist, Chinese medicine practitioner and Sufi chaplain, specializing in digestive health and heart-healing. She's also a vegetable gardener, backyard forager, and she loves cooking up simple, wholesome food. Welcome to the podcast, Sharon. I'm so excited to have you here with me.

Sharon Gray:

Oh, thank you so much for having me. I'm really thrilled to be here.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

Yeah. We were kind of talking earlier that we're both at home. We live in the same valley and we got a couple feet of snow last night. So it's kind of a funny thing. It's like a big snow day for us, but we didn't have to travel anywhere.

Sharon Gray:

No, no. And it definitely started off with a bang this morning, getting stuck, and traveling, but it was good.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

Yeah. That amount of snow, it's real. It's a real thing.

Sharon Grey:

It is.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

Well, to begin, Sharon, I would love to hear about your healing path and how you got started and how you found yourself here today.

Sharon Gray:

Well, there were a couple of points in my life where plants played a significant role. And the first one was growing up in rural Maine, so a tiny, tiny little town, 200 people, the deep woods. And I just spent a lot of time outside. I spent hours and hours and hours just building forts and hanging out in the garden or playing along the river that was just right at the end of our driveway. So we were really lucky to have nature just right outside our door.

And so that was a big part of my childhood. And my first memory of that, around plants, was my sister showing me how to find sorrel in the grass. I just remember being down and her showing me how to identify it and tasting that, like, zippy, sour flavor. And, she was a big, big influence for me. Like, she was born an herbalist, she just knew all these things and was always showing me what you could eat out in the woods or in the yard, like plantain and dandelion and gooseberries and dewberries and all kinds of things. And whatever she told me to eat, I would eat, so I was very trusting, now I think about it. It worked out okay. That was the first taste.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

That just reminds me, this is kind of tangential, but I'm remembering that I saw a photo of herbalists gathering together. This totally different context, and there was you in there, and I know you from this other thing. So do you remember what that was?

Sharon Gray:

Oh, my gosh. Was it Robin DiPasquale?

Rosalee de la Forêt:

It might have been-

Sharon Gray:

17 herbalists?

Rosalee de la Forêt:

Think that maybe it involved your sister or something and-

Sharon Gray:

Oh, maybe it was that... Okay. I was thinking of another time. I cooked, there was a Plants in Ceremony class that I cooked for, so you might have seen that, but there was also my sister's herbal solstice gathering in Maine. Gail Edwards, that gathering.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

That's what it was. So I saw the photo from Gail and I was like, "That looks like Sharon." And it was just kind of these worlds colliding because we know each other from living next to each other. And I had no idea that you were hanging out with Gail Edwards.

Sharon Gray:

Yeah. Well, thanks to my sister, we went and spent that weekend together there, it was really incredible. It was a couple summers ago, pre-COVID, we went out there and it was amazing and spent time on the farm.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

Yeah. Yeah. And so you grew up with nature, you grew up with plants with your sister, born herbalist.

Sharon Gray:

Yes.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

And then what happened?

Sharon Gray:

Then? My late teens, early twenties, I got really sick, as with a lot of folks here, and had some very severe digestive issues, dropped down to 72 pounds. My organs were shutting down, almost died. And there was a time where I couldn't do anything, but as I was recovering, there was this time where all I could do, like my entire life was devoted to cooking and eating. That was my entire day.

And that whole practice, that experience, was this opportunity to learn how to love myself and nourish myself and to begin listening on a deeper level to what my body was asking for. And not just my body, my heart, everything. And so that was pretty much my

life. And it really got me, not just interested, but devoted to the subject of nourishment, both physically and emotionally, spiritually.

And so that got me down into the formal study of nutrition at first, because in my mind as a 20-something-year-old girl, I thought, well, it was about food. And it was. I mean, for me, there was that physical sustenance that was really important, changing the kinds of things I was offering myself.

And then there was also this shift into realizing just how much went into tending ourselves. And that got me more into Chinese medicine and learning about seasonal nourishment, and living in harmony with nature. And nurturing our true selves, our true nature, and helping us be our most fruitful selves, and who we're supposed to be. Which is very different, we're very different, everyone's very different and we need different things to be who we are. And so, that was a big, big part of it right there, what got me down this path.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

I have the sense that maybe we had a similar path where we went searching for answers for ourselves. And we might have had that evolution of finding the one truth, and then finding Chinese medicine and seeing that there is no one truth, and that deeper explanation of what works as individuals and how that is immersed within seasonal living. And there's not one way.

Sharon Gray:

Absolutely. Even when I was studying nutrition, that was my philosophy. I'd been getting acupuncture for several years at this time. And I truly believe that we're all nourished in different ways. And even just on a physical level, like the qualities of food and the qualities in our body, they're very unique and we can work with that and find ways to balance and strengthen by paying attention. And, I mean, I could go on and on about that, but, absolutely. And Chinese medicine, really, that's the heart of it all, is that, in nature, everything needs something different to thrive.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

And you mentioned the word nourishment, which I love that word because if I was asked to give synonyms for Sharon Gray, nourishment would be high up on the list of just something I strongly associate with you on many different levels. Which seems especially fitting that you chose oats and oatstraw for today. So what called you to speak about oats today?

Sharon Gray:

Well, oats to me are the epitome of nourishment. That's exactly why I chose oats. And I appreciate you saying that. I will say that I chose oats in my life because nourishment

didn't come easy for me. I mean, I always ate a hearty diet and didn't have a problem taking in food, but I tend to be, I won't go into this all right now, but I tend to be someone who just goes, goes and goes and really puts out a lot of energy.

And so I need a lot of nourishment to sustain myself. And so that's a very easy way that I can fall off balance. And so oats, to me, is an incredible antidote for that, as someone who tends to do that, and I'll share more about what else I recommend that for if you'd like, but that's why I chose oats. It is my friend. I buy it literally by the 10-pound sack, and I have some with me right now. It's definitely something that's always on hand.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

One thing I love about oats is the many versatile ways that we can experience oats. And I thought maybe we should just clarify that a little bit, because some people watching this might be thinking about oats, like breakfast oats.

Sharon Gray:

Right, right, right.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

It is the same plant, but often, as herbalists, we're talking about oatstraw or milky oats, one of those.

Sharon Gray:

Absolutely. Yeah. I mean, I have nothing against the oat plant, but the one that I'm referring to is definitely in the dried stage. And I love milky oats, as well. So, the immature seed of the oat grain is this milky little pod that has this very nourishing substance. And depending on how you harvest it, that same milky oat can be a dried little oat pod, or the grass can be used also, as the straw to make herbal infusions or tea. Many different things that we can talk about later, too.

But so those are the two kinds, or really the one that I like to focus on the most is just the dried oatstraw or oat tops. I tend to buy the oat tops. I don't know why, I just really like them. And that's what's available to me here, so that's what I tend to use the most.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

I love the dried oats just for the sensorial experience. It's just fun to have those dried oats, like the oat top specifically.

Sharon Gray:

Yes. Oh my gosh, I know, especially a 10-pound sack of them. Yeah. Nothing to get you connected with the sense of abundance with that much.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

Do you remember when you were first introduced to oatstraw infusions or oat top infusions?

Sharon Gray:

Yes. It wasn't until maybe about 16, 17 years ago. And someone made a big vat of oatstraw lavender infusion. And I mean, I felt it entering my body and it had this substance to it that I had never experienced before, despite its simplicity. And I knew, at that moment, that I was in love. And then as I learned more about it; I mean, I had the experience of Chinese medicine already, so after that experience, I started looking into it more from a Chinese medicine perspective.

And that's when I really began to connect the dots and realize why it's so connected to the word nourishment. The simplicity of it, the mild, sweet flavor, so gentle, it's not too warming or cooling, it's very much in the middle.

And that all those things really help nurture and support what we call the spleen and stomach in Chinese medicine or the Earth element. And the Earth element is all about nourishment and satisfaction and fulfillment and grounding and resilience. And also just that feeling of being held and supported and like you belong to something bigger.

So that is what I feel when I drink oats, oat infusion. It tonifies Chi and blood, too, which I think is really important to mention in Chinese medicine, which is like the foundational building blocks of life, that gives us vitality. And so, that is what I take away from oats right now.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

That's a beautiful sharing of oats and the Earth element. And I'm glad you brought up the Earth element because that is a shared love of ours, the Five Phases or Five Elements of Chinese medicine. And something that we've gotten to know each other better through, since we share a mentor, Thea Elijah, whom I met, I'm pretty sure because of you, actually. I think you encouraged me to go to my first class and it's been a concentrated field of study for me ever since.

And I love how you described the Earth element and all those beautiful things and how oats is kind of this embodiment of the Earth element. I'm wondering if it would be helpful for listeners, if we kind of turned it on the head, like who would be ideal for oats?

Sharon Gray:

That's a great question. I love that. The people I would recommend oats for are the ones who just go and go and go and go, until there's nothing left. And then they keep on going, to the point of exhaustion. That's one aspect of people who I'd recommend that for.

And also for people who think a lot. Maybe they're always planning or strategizing, or making their to-do list or even just thinking about other people and what's going on around them a lot. That's also something I'd recommend oats for.

And, also there's this really big, for – around the Earth element – people who are incredibly generous. Even if they don't think they're generous, they're the people who have a much easier time helping other people, giving to other people, than they do taking in and getting help, asking for help, receiving. Those are the people I just want to make a nice warm cup of oatstraw infusion for and tell them to just kick back, and just take it in.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

There's such a soothing quality to oats and we've mentioned it's nourishing. And another plant that is very similar, but very different is nettle. And that those are often considered two of our most nutrient-dense, but oatstraw is so different in that there's a softer quality to it. It's more moistening in quality as well, than nettles are. And when people are just getting started with the idea of drinking herbal tea as nourishment, oatstraw generally tastes better for a lot of us.

Sharon Gray:

Oh, definitely. Yeah. That very mild sweetness. Some people I warn and say, "It's a little bit like drinking a cup of a barnyard tea, sort of," because I know what they're going to think. It's very different than some of the things they're used to, but it's just, I mean, my goodness, I think once you take that in and really embrace the simplicity of it, it just has such a richness, there's so much going on.

And it does so many amazing things, and it's not just for those people. I mean, my goodness, it's amazing for, I mean, most famously, I think, calming nerves. So anyone who's feeling frazzled or just stressed out or just anxious, it's so good for just bringing us down a notch.

And also good for digestion and our moods, even good for our hearts. That's even acknowledged in Western mainstream medicine. Even the mojo, good for your libido. It does so many things. A simple, simple herb is just incredibly powerful, I think.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

I love the recipe that you shared. And I don't think there's a wrong way to make tea with oatstraw, but because it's so nutrient dense, in order to get those nutrients out, you need to make it in a special way. So I want to hear about your oatstraw infusion with lavender, which I love that addition.

Sharon Gray:

Oh, yay. Okay. Well, I mean, it's about as simple as you can get without just doing the straight oats, but I think the main thing is really giving it time to steep. So for this, it would be an infusion where you boil the water, you pour it over your herb, and usually I go for a full ounce. Sometimes I just dump it in. I don't even just stick with an ounce sometimes.

And a little pinch of lavender, not too much.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

Yeah, a little goes a long way with lavender.

Sharon Gray:

It really does. It really does. And for me, it's more like an essence of lavender. I don't really want to taste it strongly. I just want to kind of feel the soothing quality of that herb, as well.

And just let it steep. Really important to just keep it covered, so keep all that good stuff in there while it's steeping. And then after four, six hours or longer, if you can do it overnight, then just strain it and drink.

And I think it's important to mention that we could drink all the oatstraw in the world, but it's not going to change our patterns. It's really important also to remember why we're depleted, what are the things? Without judgment, but just recognizing our role in how we're feeling at that time, and just taking the opportunity to listen.

Even in these small moments, like pouring yourself a cup of oatstraw and offering it to yourself is an incredibly powerful gesture, that can create a cascade of events leading to more nourishment in your life. So really take it seriously when you're making this. This is powerful medicine and a gift to yourself. So I think that's what I learned when I was sick. It's a gift, so offer it to yourself and receive it. Not like, "No, no, I can't do that." None of that.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

This message is for the listeners. As you probably know by now, I love to share recipes when we talk about these plants. Recipes are a wonderful way for you to get involved and create your own experience with herbs. It's one thing to hear about someone else's experience of oats, but an entirely other thing to form your own relationship with this plant through observing, tending, and of course, tasting.

To help you get to know oats more deeply, Sharon is sharing an oatstraw and lavender infusion recipe. You can download your recipe card by visiting HerbsWithRosaleePodcast.com. There, you'll also find the show notes, including direct links to Sharon's offerings and the transcript of this interview.

I'm wondering if we could take a moment to talk about the back body concept, because this is a concept that – I need it in my life a lot. So I think about it, it's something we learned from our mentor, Thea Elijah, and something, I think, oats helps. All the things you've been talking about is kind of like this parallel line with that. So I wonder if you'd be open to talking about that concept.

Sharon Gray:

Yeah. In fact, you might even see me. I just caught myself kind of holding my heart. Sometimes that helps me bring more attention back down into my body when I get really excited and kind of welled up. It's like the anti-oat feeling when we're coming up and out of our bodies, which we tend to do so much in our lives. Especially when we spend a lot of time on the computer or just caring for other people, I think we're habitually pulled out; we're two steps, three steps, ten steps ahead of ourselves. And so the back body is like coming back all the way in, all the way down.

And even just beginning, before we even think about the back body, even just thinking about our chair. How much are you trusting your chair right now? Are you really allowing it to hold you? Or if someone were to pull it out from under you, would you still be in the same position? So it's a good opportunity to just check in. It's a first step. Like, "Oh, maybe I'll just listen in to my body for a moment. Where is it?" Again without any judgment and just see if you can give it a little bit more of your weight, even a few more ounces of your weight.

We are so much heavier than we think we are. We try to go around and not take up too much room and I think we make ourselves a lot smaller than we are. And so this is an opportunity to kind of poof out a little bit more. Not just in our front, but in our back, too, and take up more of our space and not be so worried.

We're not going to offend anyone or hurt anyone. In fact, if anything, we actually invite people that we're with to come back into their bodies more. And I think that those connections when we are connected to self first, connected to the ground first, the heavens first, then whatever we're doing and whoever we're connecting with, those experiences will be a lot richer.

And we might feel so much more of their flavor of who they are when we allow them to come to us. It sounds a little funny when I say that, but what I mean is, we don't need to jump out of our skin to connect with someone. Do you know what I mean? It's a very easy thing to do.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

Oh, I know what you mean because I do it all the time.

Sharon Gray:

Me, too. And this is my practice, not my natural gift. And so, if we're both doing that, we're kind of like in our bubbles and we can feel each other, but we don't have to leave anything behind. And so our back body, there's infinite space behind us as much as there is in front of us, above us, below us.

And sometimes we just need to remember that. And I think if we did, even just a little bit, then we start making different decisions. We start choosing different things to put into our bodies because we're just more connected to what's going on inside of us.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

And I really feel like oats can be our companion with all of this because they can serve as the reminder. And what I love about this is like, in some ways we're talking about ethereal things like, "Oh, you feel like you're outside of your body or back of your body," but I think we all know what that feels like and experience it. And that's why I like actually thinking about our back body, because it's a physical presence that we can easily forget. But oats are grounding, they're nourishing, and they can just help bring us back in.

Sharon Gray:

Yeah, exactly. I mean, I don't think it's even something that's, yeah, woo woo. Or like out there, some existential, it's a very human experience. It's like we have this sensory system within our bodies that we just oftentimes, just don't tap into.

And so oats is kind of a way, a reminder, to just simply come in and come down and just allow ourselves again, to just be held. Earth is about being filled and held and supported. And oats, I think, kind of help us feel that from the inside out.

But this can take practice. So if you drink a cup of oats and you're like, "I don't feel held." It's okay. It's okay, because I mean, for me, I've been trying to practice being held for almost 20 years and it can take a lot of time, so be gentle with yourself. But even begin to be open to the fact that maybe, maybe you could be.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

That is, I think, the most important part, is putting that seed out there to germinate with that. The getting started is the most important thing. And then with practice, it grows. But until we plant the seed, it doesn't grow. So it really just starts with the intention.

Sharon Gray:

Yeah. And Earth is not about perfection. Earth is about good enough. And just like rolling up your sleeves and doing the best you can and just, like, unbutton your pants and let things hang out a little bit more, that's Earth. So it's just an opportunity to allow ourselves to be good enough.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

And oats is wonderful for allowing. Absolutely.

Sharon Gray:

Absolutely. Yeah. It's good enough. It's good enough. Just the way it is, in an infusion or tea, or however you'd like to make it. But it's also a base that can just receive so many other different ingredients. Like you said, with nettle. I love making oatstraw and nettle tea or infusion or so many things. But anyway, it's like the base. It's like, you're just the foundation, so it's good enough just the way it is.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

Well, Sharon, I'm excited to hear about what projects you have going on in your life right now.

Sharon Gray:

Projects. Well, the biggest one that I have going on right now is creating my first real... I mean, I've done this live several times, but this is my first comprehensive, really meaty digestive health class that's based on Chinese medicine.

And so I'm hoping, hope, hope, hoping, that it will help people kind of really understand what's going on in their digestion, really breaking it down and just simple, bite-size pieces. And so that's what I'm really excited about right now is putting that together. And I'm hoping to be done with that here pretty soon. We'll see.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

That is so wonderful. I'm so excited for the people who are going to be participating in that because you have the wounded healer background of dealing with digestive stuff yourself, but also the perspectives that you bring through nutrition and nourishment, as well as herbs, as well as Chinese medicine. And so many other aspects I know that you bring in, as well. So it's a unique set of offerings that I think will be really powerful for a lot of people.

Sharon Gray:

Thank you. Thank you. Yeah, there's so many things I want to share around digestion, but what I'm trying to do now is just like, come back to the physical self. Primarily, I can't take the spirit out of it entirely, but like the physical level and then add on. Even the physical part is adding on layer upon layer and then get into more of the psycho-spiritual aspects of digestive health on top of this.

But we need a foundation. We need to all be on the same page of what's going on in our bodies. And so that's my plan, trying to keep it simple and build on that.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

Yeah. Well, it sounds wonderful, Sharon.

Sharon Gray:

Thank you.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

My last question for you is the question I'm asking everyone in Season Three, and the question is, what are you doing with herbs lately, that's new to you maybe? Might be something that you're thinking about or a recipe, or I don't know, just something new with herbs.

Sharon Gray:

Yeah, yeah.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

New to you.

Sharon Gray:

Actually the newest, newest, newest thing as of just two nights ago, is... It actually involves oats. I've been hanging out with oats a lot this week and this is something I've been wanting to do for a really long time, like years. And for some reason, I've never tried it until two nights ago and it's baking my oatmeal.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

I love baked oatmeal.

Sharon Gray:

Oh my gosh. I am the only one who has not had this yet. It's like all the rage on the Internet. Everyone has a recipe and I just picked one and I tried it and it's amazing. I don't know why I haven't done it yet because I've been baking other grains for like 20 years. Rice, quinoa, everything, everything I baked except for oatmeal.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

Yeah, so it's kind of like, is it dessert? Is it breakfast?

Sharon Gray:

Everything. Everything.

We have tried it all in the last 36 hours. In fact, most of it's gone. There's just a little bit left. We did a good number on it. Blueberry. Oh my gosh. It's so good.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

Yum. Well, that's a lovely new thing.

Sharon Gray:

Yeah. Yeah. And so sometimes it's like, it's not so much the thing that's new. I mean I've eaten oats plenty of times in my life, but just the way of preparing it makes it an entirely different experience.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

And the reason I asked this particular question of what's new is because I have people on the show from all walks of life. People like you who have been working with herbs for decades, people who are newer to it. It doesn't matter how long you've been working, something new is possible all the time; as herbalists, we never get bored.

Sharon Gray:

Yeah. Yeah. Well, and for whatever it's worth, I mean, I'd love to share a little tidbit about that too, because it got me thinking about how much the way we do something different can change, not just the experience, but the actual food.

In Chinese medicine, say you take something and you steam it, it has one energetic quality and maybe it's neutral or slightly warm. And then you take that same food and you bake it and it becomes even warmer. It actually changes the energy and what it does in your body, and roasting and so on.

So, to me, it's like the same thing I've eaten, but it's completely different in how, one, it tastes, but also how it feels when I eat it. So anyway, for whatever it's worth, I just wanted to say that.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

Yeah. Thank you so much for sharing that. That is such a cool aspect of Chinese medicine and something you don't, obviously, need to be a Chinese herbalist to figure out because it really is about that presence and experiencing it and just being open to feeling what is.

Sharon Gray:

Yeah. Trying it out and listening.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

Well, thank you so much for being here today, Sharon. I really enjoyed our conversation and hearing about oats and all of its nourishing, nourishing ways. Thank you so much for being here.

Sharon Gray:

Thank you so much. It's such a pleasure. I'm really, really excited to be here.

Rosalee de la Forêt:

Thanks for watching. Don't forget to click the link in the video description to get free access to Sharon's oatstraw and lavender infusion; also available are the complete show notes, including the transcript. You can also visit Sharon directly at BellyAndSoul.com.

If you enjoyed this interview, then before you go, be sure to click the 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 lovely oat plant.

I deeply believe that this world needs more herbalists and plant-centered folks. I'm so glad that you are here as part of this herbal community. Have a beautiful day.