Plants and Antibiotics: some thoughts on reading the NY Times article "Could Ancient Remedies Hold the Answer to the Looming Antibiotics Crisis?"

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PLANTS AND ANTIBIOTICS

Rabbitbrush. (My photograph)

The article below about the antiseptic and antibiotic properties of plants is from the *New York Times Magazine*. I decided to post it because, as you know from my writing, I'm deeply interested in the relationship between plants and people. The crisis of antibiotic resistant infection is one that stares us in the face. We share the world with these mostly quiet living beings. They contribute materially, but also aesthetically, culturally and spiritually to out busy lives.

I visited some good friends last week. They took advice about wildflowers native to their area and sowed their front lawn with yellow coneflowers – the purple coneflower, *Echinacea purpurea* being the source of the echinacea supplement that we buy to protect against colds. The idea was initially to save water, given that coneflowers survive in the wild in their arid state. Someone complained that they were encouraging weeds and suggested they tidy their yard. People plant coneflowers in gardens all of the time, so I think the problem of perception in this case arose because they were seeded randomly in the lawn. In other words, they had exceeded the boundaries imposed by "normal" gardening. Another friend remembers being asked why she had planted a line of tansy alongside her garden wall. Tansy, *Tanecetum vulgar,* was brought to North America in

the 1620s by European settlers because it has medical benefits and some culinary uses, although it is also toxic if not used carefully. Like the *Silphium laciniatum,* cut-leaf silphium or compass plant which features regularly in my posts, and about which Aldo Leopold so movingly wrote in *A Sand County Almanac,* it's the commonplace plants that are easily dismissed.

Echinacea purpurea or purple coneflower. (Photograph from *NetPS Plant Finder*)

Tanecetum vulgar or tansy. (Photograph Montana Weed Control Association)

Like many other people, I love sagebrush and rabbit brush, plants of the prairie. The pungent scent of sagebrush after rain is thrilling. It's a variety of artemisia, a plant used in the perfume industry – big sagebrush is also named *Artemisia tridentata*. Sagebrush has long been known by indigenous communities to have potent medicinal and spiritual healing qualities. Nevada recognises big sagebrush as its State Flower. Rabbitbrush, a species of *Chrysothamus*, likewise has medicinal qualities that are physical and spiritual. It's sometimes classified as an invasive weed because of its vigorous growth in marginal soils. But the vitality and hardiness of rabbitbrush mean that it is one of the first plants to regrow in prairies areas ravaged by wildfires (I'm grateful to Utah State University's pro-rabbitbrush Invasive Weeds Website for this information). The roots are help to prevent soil erosion.

So this introduction to the essay below is also a tribute to the coneflower, tansy, sagebrush, rabbitbrush and other delectable weeds

Big sagebrush and cottonwoods near Jackson, Wyoming. Cottonwoods are weed trees and the State Tree for Wyoming (plains cottonwood, *Populous deltoids,* sub species monilefera), Kansas and Nebraska (eastern cottonwood, *Populous deltoides*).
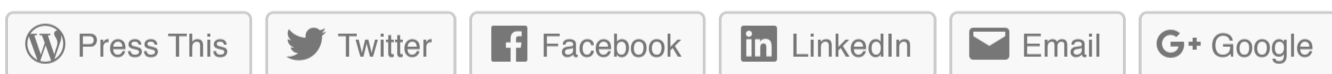(My photograph).

My next post will likely be about grasses.

Here's the *New York Times* article:

http://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/18/magazine/could-ancient-remedies-hold-the-answer-to-the-looming-antibiotics-crisis.html?smprod=nytcore-ipad&smid=nytcore-ipad-share

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