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Woman believes in healing powers of herbs

HAGERSVILLE — To Janice Longboat, an herb is more than an ingredient that adds zest to food — it is medicine.

The range of illnesses which some herbs and plants are said to cure is almost limitless, the herbalist says.

Ms. Longboat knows that there is debate about the validity of "natural medicine", but she stands by her beliefs in the curing powers of some vegetation.

"Herbs have very powerful medicinal properties and they've been used to cure illnesses for hundreds and hundreds of years," she said in an interview.

The 47-year-old native woman was first introduced to the world of herbalism — "the use of medicinal properties found in non-poisonous plants for the prevention and correction of diseases or illnesses" — at age six. She recalls helping her grandmother gather herbs in the bush.

Her interest in herbs has never waned, and she has satisfied her need to know more by pursuing related courses of study. She has taken several courses on herbalism, reflexology (an oriental method of massage), iridology (study of the iris of the eye), touch for health relaxation, massage and nutrition.

Ms. Longboat has been growing herbs and providing mixtures made from them to friends and family for about eight years. During the past three years she has been offering health-related consultations to the public.

About 75 herbs can be found in her garden located on a four-acre lot on the Six Nations Reserve. Hundreds more have been cultivated in the bush surrounding her rustic, four-room cottage where she lives with one of her four grown children, and where her grandmother was raised.

Ms. Longboat does not have any type of licence to practise medicine, and doesn't consider herself a doctor. "I am not a doctor, I don't diagnose or prescribe — I recommend and suggest," she said.

Much of what Ms. Longboat re-

commends and suggests is similar to the holistic approach to medicine.

She believes health is not only freedom from disease, but also involves what people think, feel and do. She stresses the importance of fresh air, nutrition, exercise proper elimination of bodily wastes, and the balance of an individual's spiritual, mental and emotional states.

"Nature teaches us that life is a circle and within the circle we have the spiritual, physical, emotional/mental being, and each must balance, one with the other.

"When we become out of balance, the body begins to experience negative changes. Thus, we look at the circle of life as holistic."

Another aspect of holistic medicine is responsibility. "People are responsible for their own health. You can't always leave your health up to a doctor or drugs," she said.

Holistic medicine and natural healing are not new. They date back thousands of years, Ms. Longboat said. In her own family, herbalism has been passed down for generations.

A significant difference between natural healing and conventional medical methods is "natural healing methods deal with the cause and not the symptoms," she said. "When we practise natural healing, we practise prevention."

Ms. Longboat noted that because of the "strong powers" of herbs and plants "it is very important to know what you're doing."

However, one problem is that "sufficient material on the subject is still not available and much of the knowledge has been passed down orally from one generation to another."

Some examples of how Ms. Longboat has used herbs to treat various ailments include: garlic for

high blood pressure; maple sap to cleanse the body; ginger, sage and colts foot for colds and flu; yarrow or juniper berries for kidney or bladder infections; plantain for poisonous bites or skin rashes.

Ms. Longboat is a member of the Ontario Herbalist Association, a group which is currently working to

achieve some sort of official recognition from the government.

"In four to five years, I foresee that we will be (recognized)," said Ms. Longboat. "That is so important."

Ms. Longboat, who is an employment co-ordinator for Special Services for Special People in Ohsweken, hopes someday to open a natural

health clinic in her home. This summer she will be offering tours, herb walks, workshops and lectures at her farm, named the Earth Healing Herb Farm.

Her ultimate goal is to teach others about natural healing and herbs. "This is something that has been given to me and my goal is to share it with others."