

Buying Herbs

By Kami McBride

Just about every week I receive calls or emails from people asking where and how to purchase good quality herbs. The herb industry now generates more than 5 billion dollars annually. Any time there is a product that people are buying so much of, you start to have distributors that aren't as concerned with quality but just want a slice of the market. It is worth taking a little time to question where your herbs are coming from.

There are many factors that go into providing high quality herbs. Making sure that herbs are organically grown without pesticides is critical. It is important that herbs are harvested at the proper time of the year so that the desired constituents are at their optimum level. Herbs need to be dried at the right temperature, if they are dried with too much heat, they lose potency, if they are dried when it is too wet, they develop mold. Then they then need to be stored at the right temperature, humidity and darkness.

Some of the more expensive herbs such as goldenseal root are being adulterated and cut with other herbs. Many herbs that cross national boundaries are irradiated or fumigated. Some herb material is just old and may even be infested with insects.

Many companies are still supplying herbs that are being over harvested in the wild. It is important to support herb companies that have an environmental commitment of not destroying the growth of wild plants. Poaching (illegal harvesting) of wild medicinal plants is a serious problem in some parts of the country.

These are just a few of the issues facing a store or mail order distributor as they try to provide the community with the best herbs. It is worth paying them a little extra to have all of this considered when you purchase an herb. The question really needs to change from, "how cheap can I get this herb?" to "How did this herb get to me?" You are using the herbs for healing, so you want herbs that are grown, harvested, dried, stored and shipped in the best way possible.

When shopping for herbs use your senses. Look for color, texture, taste and smell. If there are a few herbs that you are interested in working with, see if you can find the herb fresh in a garden or a nursery so you know what the plant is like when it is fresh and vibrant. Then every time you are in a health food store look at that herb and start to get an idea of what it should be like when it is dried. What color is the herb? What color should it be? Can you distinguish what the shape of the herb is? I have seen herbs that have been sitting on the shelf for so long that it is just brown fluff with hardly any shape. Taste the herb; you should be able to identify an herb by taste.

How is the herb being stored? Light and heat break down the constituents. Are the herb jars in direct light? Is the store kept somewhat cool during the hot seasons? All of these things need to be considered when looking for the best quality herbs.

Most major cities have good herb and health food stores now and that is a place to start looking. For people who live more remotely, there are many mail order suppliers that offer high quality herbs. If you don't have the time to do all of the research that it takes to qualify a good distributor, then find store that you can trust. Buy your herbs from a store that is committed to quality and will do this initial research and screening for you. The following list is distributors that I work with and are committed to environmental sustainability and high quality.

Mail Order Herb Companies

Mountain Rose Herbs: 800-879-3337

High quality herbs and herbal supplies. Herbs can be bought in small amounts

Oregon's Wild Harvest 503-668-7713

High quality organic herbs for wholesale prices. Minimum quantity is one pound per herb

Pacific Botanicals: 541-479-7777

High quality organic herbs for wholesale prices. Minimum quantity is one pound per herb

Wild Weeds: 800-553-9453

High quality herbs and herbal supplies. Herbs can be bought in small amounts

Visit Kami's website at www.livingawareness.com and sign up for her free quarterly herbal newsletter. Or contact her at 707-446-1290 about classes, books and consultations