UVic knowlEDGE

A passion for plants

A UVic researcher helps B.C.'s indigenous peoples preserve their rich botanical heritage

by Valerie Shore

Take a walk outdoors with UVic's Dr. Nancy Turner and you'll enter a whole new realm of awareness about our relationship with plants and the natural world around us.

"That's kinnikinnick," she says, pointing to a ground-cover shrub sprinkled with red berries. "First Nations people fried the berries in grease and ate them as a snack. They also used the leaves for tea, herbal remedies and in a smoking mixture for their pipes."

We stop to gaze up at a broad-leafed maple. "It's called a 'paddle plant' by some of the Coast Salish," says Turner. "The hard, even-grained wood was used for making canoe paddles and spindle whorls."

Next stop, a meadow carpeted with delicate blue flowers. "Camas bulbs were a staple carbohydrate for First Nations on southern Vancouver Island," she says. "Camas fields were managed like a crop, and the dried bulbs were traded all along the west coast."

Turner is one of the world's top ethnobotanists—she studies how people have traditionally used plants for food, material, medicine or ceremony. "We often take plants for granted," she says. "Yet all of us, no matter where our heritage or roots are, have in our own history a deep relationship with plants and the ecosystems they support."

This is especially true for indigenous cultures. Over the past 30 years Turner has been working closely with B.C. First Nations elders—her teachers, collaborators and friends—to document their knowledge and understanding of plants, ecology and use of natural resources. The work is helping to perpetuate traditional knowledge and customs that have been threatened by cultural and lifestyle changes.

In recent years, Turner has delved into ethnoecology, which looks at the linkages between ecosystems and social systems. An example of a linking concept is a *refugium*.

Ecologically speaking, a refugium is a habitat or ecosystem or fragment of an ecosystem that remains intact through a time of great change or disturbance. It can be as large as an area left unglaciated after the last Ice Age, or as small as a single tree spared in a forest fire.

"Refugia are areas that remain habitable, conserve genetic information, and help retain the structure of, and interactions within, an ecosystem," says Turner. "They often serve as a way of repopulating the surrounding areas that were disturbed."

Now, two of Turner's graduate students—Brenda Beckwith and Ann Garibaldi—have taken this concept one step further. In any aboriginal community or family, explains Turner, there are usually one or two people who stand out as sources of knowledge and language about plants and animals and ecology. They also have the desire and ability to perpetuate that knowledge by teaching others.

"Since the colonization of the Pacific Northwest, there's been a tremendous disruption of cultural practices and knowledge," says Turner. "Yet throughout all this change, these key individuals have retained their traditions, understanding the importance of that knowledge for the future of their people. They can be considered *cultural refugia*, and these are the people that I and other academics have been drawn to."

One such person is Lucille Clifton, a prominent matriarch in the Gitga'at coastal community of Hartley Bay, south of Prince Rupert. For the last three years, Gitga'at elders have been teaching Turner and graduate student Judy Thompson about the importance of plants in their territory. Although Lucille died in 1962 at the age of 86, her name still comes up often in conversation.

"I've come to want to know Lucille very well because she seems to me to be the ideal leader and teacher in the way she looked after her grandchildren and other children in the community," says Turner.

Lucille would travel with the children by boat or canoe, telling them stories about the landscape and the people. She'd have them pick and dry berries, show them how to make salmon egg caviar, and how to harvest the inner bark of trees. And every fall, she and other Eagle clan women would organize a feast for the entire community.

"That feast was reflective of the whole Gitga'at knowledge system around traditional food," says Turner. "It gave people an appreciation of what their land provides for them and reaffirmed the importance of each individual to the community."

Lucille's remarkable legacy lives on through her grandchildren and other elders in Hartley Bay. Turner is working with them on a publication about the matriarch and the feasts she provided. "Even today, the community of Hartley Bay is renowned up and down the coast for the quality of its traditional food," says Turner. "Lucille was in every sense a cultural refugium."

Turner, sitting on a path between two patches of camas flowers.