

## Plants That Heal Native American Medicine Gardens

Three hundred years ago, before corner drug stores and over-the-counter remedies, how did the Cherokees and Choctaws of Alabama cope with a cold? When there was no aspirin or antibiotics, how did they soothe aches, fevers and inflammation?

The forest was their pharmacy. In a hands-on study of human ecology, anthropology professor Dr. Lori Cormier and her students planted a native garden near the Dowdy building, featuring indigenous plants that Alabama tribes used for medicines.

“Mountain mint was for headaches and fever,” she said. The Cherokee and Choctaw also used many plants in combination, such as coneflower (Echinacea) and sneezeweed for colds. A passionflower poultice was thought to help earache and inflammation. Indians also put plants like bear grass in water to stun fish and make them easier to catch.”

Each student in the three-week summer session was responsible for researching seven plants to identify candidates for the garden. Meanwhile, Dr. Cormier enlisted the help of graduate students Ruth McLaughlin, who works with the Jefferson County Cooperative Extension Service, and Sherry Alexander, a naturalist at the Ruffner Mountain Nature Center.

Ruth designed the garden, sorting plants by their size and the growing conditions they needed to thrive.

“The UAB Grounds team did a wonderful job,” Ruth said. “They built and set up four raised beds and brought in soil. We used compost for fertilizer and pine needles for mulch—materials that would have been available in those days.

Sherry located sources for spiderwort, beard’s tongue, cardinal flower and other plants on the students’ list.

“Rebecca Cohen of Blackjack Gardens near Trussville cultivates native plants.” said Sherry. “We found wild iris, rattlesnake plant, and others like passion flowers that make paw paw fruit.”

Students planted the garden for those passing by to enjoy, and Ruth and Sherry continued to care for it through the summer.

“Learning about the diversity of wild plants in nature helps us stay in touch with the original sources of many of our foods and medicines,” Sherry said. “We can appreciate the ecology that gave us the tomatoes, corn and many pharmaceuticals we have today.”