

Home-Grown Remedies for the Peak Oil Crisis

by David Melly, LAc

The prospect of petroleum shortages threatens the future supply of pharmaceuticals, many of which contain petroleum byproducts, and of medicinal herbs shipped to the United States from China. TCM practitioners can prepare for this eventuality by supporting the domestic cultivation of herbs, many of which can be grown in the climatically diverse regions of North America. Advantages to domestic herb cultivation include environmental sustainability, quality control and improved freshness. Moreover, as many common Western medications become unavailable or cost-prohibitive, an increasing number of patients may turn to TCM remedies out of necessity.

The public's attention is focused like never before on shoring up our floundering health care system. Meanwhile, practitioners and consumers alike are about to be caught unprepared by a major problem that hasn't yet hit most people's radar screen: peak oil.

Peak oil refers to the peaking of global oil production, an event that may have already occurred or will certainly occur in the next few years. Once oil production hits its peak, it begins a sharp and permanent decline, after which demand will quickly outstrip supply. Although US Department of Energy consultants warned almost three years ago of the urgent need for a "crash program" to prepare for oil scarcity, the government has taken no action.

Oil shortages threaten every sector of our economy, including agriculture, manufacturing, transportation and health care. Allopathic practitioners will be most affected, for the majority of medicines they prescribe are manufactured with petrochemicals. The US Centers for Disease Control's Center for Environmental Health is starting to investigate the issue of how peak oil will affect the pharmaceutical industry. But herbalists too will feel the effects, as most herbs are imported from China and Eastern Europe. At some point in the near future, shipping herbs across the ocean will become prohibitively expensive, and practitioners will have to rely on local sources or grow their own.

That's where visionaries like Peggy Schafer come in. Schafer is a horticulturalist and organic farmer who founded the Chinese Medicinal Herb Farm (CMHF) in Petaluma, California. CMHF grows and sells fifty varieties of Chinese herbs (fresh and dried) as well as seeds and plants. CMHF also offers an internship that runs from March through November, where herb enthusiasts can learn to propagate, harvest and dry medicinal herbs.

Schafer says interest in local herb cultivation is growing, particularly among newer graduates of acupuncture schools. She and New York grower Jean Giblette are members of the Medicinal Herb Consortium that represents ninety growers in five states. The Consortium's goal is to increase the availability of fairly priced, high quality, domestically grown medicinal herbs.

Here in North America, it may be difficult to cultivate some of the herbs we now import, for reasons that have more to do with economics than climate. It's hard to compete with the average Chinese picker's wage of 75 cents a day. And some herbs, says Schafer, are just too labor-intensive or slow-growing to propagate. *Du zhong* (Cortex *Eucommiae Ulmoidis*), for example, is a bark from a tree that takes too long to grow to be financially viable. But as more practitioners in more geographic regions learn how to cultivate herbs, the variety of species grown domestically will increase. And as our agricultural system evolves toward a more sustainable model, so too will market forces shift in ways that may support the propagation of even the more challenging medicinal herbs. In other words, if oil and petrochemical scarcity puts conventional farmers out of business and permaculture becomes the norm, many more people will out of necessity be involved in growing their own food and, perhaps, medicine.

Local sourcing offers many advantages, beyond the obvious ones of ecological sustainability and fossil fuel conservation. The herbs imported from China vary in quality and have a very long lag time between harvesting and retail sale. This can certainly diminish the potency of



Horticulturalist and organic farmer Peggy Schafer harvests salvia at the Chinese Medicinal Herb Farm in Petaluma, California. The farm grows fifty varieties of Chinese herbs and offers internships in propagating, harvesting and drying medicinal herbs.

aromatic herbs. Buying from a local grower improves freshness, and the direct relationship between growers and buyers makes it easier for buyers to monitor quality.

No need to wait until peak oil forces your hand: Supply your patients with the freshest herbs you can today, and grow the local market so that when peak oil does hit, we're prepared.

Domestic herb sources:

Sonoma County Herb Exchange, www.sonoma herbs.org (Chinese and western herbs)

Chinese Medicinal Herb Farm, www.chinesemedical-herbs.com (grown in Petaluma)

High Falls Gardens, www.highfallsgardens.net (Chinese herbs grown in New York)
www.localherbs.org

To learn more about peak oil, visit:

www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2007/08/26/IN F7RM3OC.DTL;

www.energybulletin.net;
www.relocalize.net/groups/oilindependentberkeley

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