

GHOST PIPE

A plant that has inspired poems (Barbara Kingsolver), wonder, and intrigue for anyone who has stumbled upon it in the forest, Ghost Pipe's (*Monotropa uniflora*, Indian Pipe, Ghost Flower) is a powerful plant teacher and medicine to herbalists who know it. With brain-like mazes of roots and ghostly white stalks sometimes with tints of purple and pink, Ghost Pipe seems to thrive in the midst of disturbance, growing in the middle of many old dirt roads and trails, determinedly pushing through any duff, dead logs, or fallen branches in its way.

Ghost Pipe is a saprophyte, a “parasitic” plant (often mistaken for a mushroom) that contains no chlorophyll and therefore cannot make its own food. With roots that mimic tree roots, it shares in the nutrients that move between the trees of the forest through the mycelial web in which they are all connected. (Some herbalists think it also shares in the information that is passed through the network.) One might view this as trickery or self-serving parasitic behavior, but it is thought that, much like its medicine for humans, the Ghost Pipe roots serve as a peaceful haven for mycelium amidst the large amounts of information passing through mycelial network.

Ghost pipe is directly linked to the health of the forest—it grows in healthy boreal forests from continent to continent throughout the northern hemisphere and can grow for centuries in one place. Some years, depending on rainfall amount and timing, many plants will return to life in a vibrant flush, usually producing flowering stalks in late June or July. Scientists helping to restore a woodland in Massachusetts that had been decimated by logging, ploughing, haying, and grazing were surprised to find that Ghost Pipe was already coming up amidst their early reforestation efforts. A small miracle, considering that its seeds consist of only ten cells and are solely dependent on specific fungi to nourish and help them get established. In this way, Ghost Pipe brings hope that even places most impacted by human activities can evolve again into healthy, diverse forests.

A medicine for intense physical pain, emotional pain, and overwhelming experiences, Ghost pipe helps us to step outside of these experiences and work through them from a calm, detached place. Ghost Pipe was used by the Salish externally for wounds that would not heal, as well as for colds, fevers, pain, and toothache. Just as it works with the nervous system of the forest, Ghost Pipe was historically used in nervous system conditions as an “antispasmodic, sedative for convulsions, epilepsy, spasms, restlessness, and nervous irritability and as an opium substitute for pain.” (Foster and Hobbs) With its deep connection to the spirit of the forest and medicine for our consciousness, Ghost pipe is a teacher of interconnectedness and community, of the great cycle of life and death. It is a powerful medicine for our times, a time of great transition and shifting consciousness: it helps us move through the overwhelming problems that we face.

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Look for more plants articles from Kristy and Madrona Murphy on our website during the summer. To learn more, please attend Kristy's Walk and Talk: **Medicinal Plants of Moran State Park** Sunday, August 1st, 6 – 7pm at the Cascade Shelter.

References

Sean Donohue, <http://greenmanramblings.blogspot.com>

Jim Pojar and Andy MacKinnon, *Plants of the Pacific Northwest*

Steven Foster and Christopher Hobbs, *Western Medicinal Plants and Herbs*

Ryan Drum, "Three Herbs: Yarrow, Queen Anne's Lace, and Indian Pipe"

Merlin Sheldrake, *Entangled Life*