

## The mighty Calamus

by Will Endres

The last time I dug this beautiful root was in my Central Carolina Community College class at Blue Heron Farm with Tony Mayer in April 2015. As usual with this herb, it was an extraordinary day.

We began with plant identification and usage. Tony and I led the walk as the class asked an array of good questions.

Afterwards, we had lunch with Barbara the elder, and an original member of the community. We then scanned the two areas where Tony had planted Calamus years ago, and chose a small shallow, muddy pond to dig. We gathered around the edges, and some of us waded in with great gusto.

It didn't take long to get plenty for everyone in the class to wash, glean, extract with alcohol, and take some home to dry. There is always a strong component of pure joy in dealing with this root, and plenty of laughter. Everyone worked together as one organism with almost no supervision necessary on my part.

I love this root, Calamus. I have such fond memories of collecting it. I remember one time I drove my dad up to central W.Va. to collect it with me; I couldn't believe that he said he wanted to come. We were driving north to this remote spot, and here's my dad in his mid-80s, riding along with me. He was too old to dig, and actually do anything much, but he was there to keep me company. He was just amazed it required so much effort, and he said, "My Lord! This is what you have been doing all these years!" I still have roots from that time that I've saved. It's such an important memory to me.

Calamus is an heroic herb. It brings out the best in me, and it has helped me in many, many ways in my life. It has been used all over the world, in the major herbal healing traditions for all time remembered. But now, so little is known about it, and in fact, I rarely come across anyone who works with it as much as I do. I know the power it has to help people, and I don't want this knowledge to be lost, which is why I felt moved to be writing this book about it.

Calamus grows in small patches at the edges of ponds. In late fall and winter, when the light tan dried tops of the plant are all down, they are still lying on the surface of the ground, which can help you identify the plant. Besides this, you're not going to see much else above the ground, but you can still find it without seeing the big tops. Calamus has these small green shoots that remain very small until the spring when they grow up, and become full, bright, beautiful, green shoots. If you see any of these tiny sprouts in the fall or winter, you can dig down, and see if you find any of the roots, which is the part we use medicinally.

When you dig down, you'll first discover the main roots. As you examine them more carefully, you'll find smaller root shoots that come off the main one at an angle. There are usually leaf sprouts on the root tips coming from the main roots. There are also small feeder roots, which come off the bigger parts of the roots as well. They are about 1/16" in diameter. Then, there are very, very fine hairs on the main roots, which are the only part of the root that I don't use.

At first, you'll mistake it for a lot of cattails and sedges. There are a lot of similar plants that aren't Calamus. This plant isn't easy to find. It's an heroic herb. "Heroic" refers to the fact that working with it will not be easy. It's not like going out into a field, and gathering some of the more common ones to make a salad. A heroic herb will test you. Despite your plans, you will have to confront some kind of hardship in attempting to find, gather, or use it. Unless these plants are handled, and taken with care, they could have an unintended effect. They also usually involve an ordeal. However, the reward is commensurate with the difficulty of getting it. For these reasons, approach these herbs with care. They have medicinal, and spiritual properties that are very strong, and require a certain kind of savvy to use properly. Heroic plants are often hard to find, and there are always good reasons for



that. If they weren't hard to find, people would be killing themselves with misuse, or over-harvesting. Because they are difficult to find, these plants, and the people are protected.

Calamus has a very wide range of medicinal uses. It can help with digestion, mental focus, energy, endurance, expansion and connection, the voice, detoxification, headaches, hot flashes and menstruation, parasites, and spirituality. In the book that I'm writing, I thoroughly review the contraindications. A contraindication is a specific situation in which this root should not be used.

If you're interested in learning about useful plants and trees with Will, he begins his next 8-week, Foraging and Exploration class on Wednesdays 9 a.m.-4:30 p.m., from March 23 - May 11, 2016 through the Sustainable Farming Program at Central Carolina Community College in Pittsboro. The deadline is March 2. You register through the college at 919.545.8044, but can also contact him at 919.451.6643. You can email him at willswildherbs@gmail.com. You can also visit his webpage at www.willswildherbs.org, or his Facebook, or Instagram pages as well.

*Will Endres is an herbalist, wildcrafter, and outdoor guide with a lifetime of experience. He has had many herbal elders, and has been deeply influenced by the traditional Cherokee approach to plants and medicine. He has taught over 475 apprentices, and countless community members, about the bounty of wild plants in the Piedmont.*

Above, Will Endres displays multiple Calamus roots in hand.

PHOTO BY SEAN ENDRES.

At left he is putting roots on the dry trays.

PHOTO BY NEIL VITTUM

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