



Planting a Medicinal Herb Wheel

## THE ENERGETIC HERB GARDEN

Moving to the southern most tip of the Isle of Arran off the west coast of Scotland was an experience of merging with the elemental world and all the forces therein. We came here 5 years ago to raise our two children out of the city and also raise our own organic herbs to better serve our patients at the Herbal Medicine clinics we run in Glasgow and on the island. The south facing village of Kildonan is at an interesting crossroads between the Ayrshire coast to the east, the Mull of Kintyre Argyll peninsula to the west and the open Atlantic south westerlies which blow right onto our 16 acre smallholding slightly up from the shore bringing their rain showers with them. The developing relationship to strong elemental forces of the wind, the sea below and the full force of the sun bearing on our living and growing space made us consider the importance of acknowledging and working with the elements when it came to growing herbs, fruit trees and vegetables.

A contemplative landscape study (based on the holistic approach of the German poet and natural scientist, Johann von Goethe) was undertaken on the land from which there are 2 smaller islands in direct alignment and a headland to the west. This study identified a repeated curve in the landscape: that of the headland and of the natural bay on the adjacent island. We were able to identify due north/south using a compass and used this orientation along with the alignment with the islands to position a herb garden in the shape of wheel. The planting beds of the 8 spokes of the herb wheel represented by the 4 directions (North, South, East & West) and the 4 sub directions between (NE, SW, NW & SE), were designed to mirror this natural curve found in the surrounding landscape.

To consider the elemental world around us as the basis for our growing and positioning of our herb garden was a natural progression from our work through teaching for the Scottish School of Herbal Medicine which we set up 14 years ago to train herbalists following Traditional Energetic methods of diagnosing and using herbs. From the traditions medical systems of Humoral and Ayurveda, we know that different people manifest different temperaments or constitutional types, for example, heavy set earth types (sanguine/kapha-pitta); firey, dynamic types (choleric/pitta); airy, high metabolic types (melancholic/vata) and watery, emotional types (phlegmatic/kapha) – a very much simplified overview. As herbalists, we know that herbs can also be placed within such categories, for example, moistening herbs like marshmallow and cleavers (phlegmatic); heating, stimulating herbs like ginger and garlic (choleric/sanguine); drying, astringent herbs like lady's mantle and geranium (melancholic) and cooling, sedating or stimulating herbs like belladonna and mint (melancholic/cold).

Based on this traditional knowledge we already incorporate into our energetic based assessment of patients, their conditions and the corresponding herbs most indicated for them, we decided to base the growing of herbs in our herb wheel garden based on these principles also. Following the qualities associated with the 4 directions in Fig. 1 below, it was determined which energetic qualities of herbs would be placed in each curved bed. Energetically cold herbs occupy the N petal; cooling, drying herbs to occupy the NE petal; drying, astringent herbs occupy the E petal; warming, drying herbs occupy the SE petal; heating herbs to occupy the S petal; warming, moistening herbs for the SW petal; moistening herbs for the W petal and cooling, moistening

herbs for the NW petal. Thus, heating, stimulating herbs would best be placed in the southern curve bed to correspond with the hot, bright southern aspect; moistening herbs would best suit the westerly aspect where the vast majority of the wet weather approached from; cooling, sedating/calming herbs would best suit the northern aspect and drying, astringent herbs would correspond with the drying, rising sun, eastern aspect. From a practical point of view, those herbs which are physically small growing were positioned on the southern end of each petal bed so as not to be overshadowed by taller growing herbs/shrubs which were planted towards the north, rear end of each petal.

Such a way of thinking is following the concepts of Aristotle (c.400-450BC), who used the compass to bring out the polarity of universal earth laws to allow understanding of the states of being when one moves in a certain direction. To look at the movement and relationship between the 4 elements one need to move between them in an imaginary/contemplative way (see Fig.1).

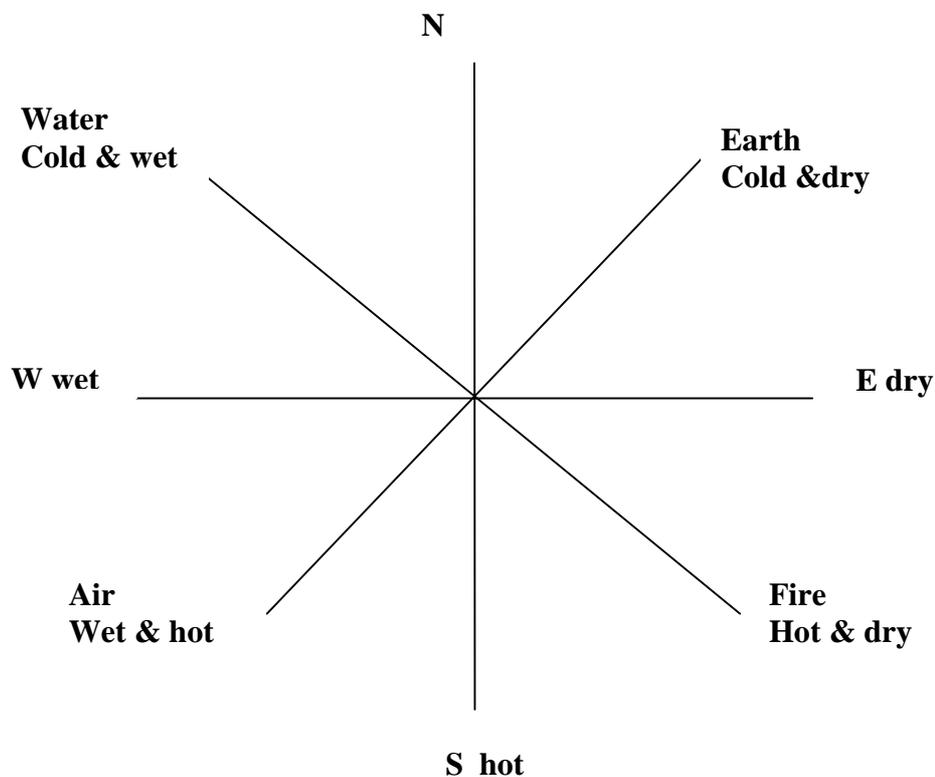


Figure 1. Aristotle's Cross

From a contemplative/conceptual viewpoint, the wheel as a fixed image is only meaningful if taken as a path of living vitality and application to living. Through our contemplative working within the landscape, there is a need to try to make conscious again the old roots where the ethers (which are inside the elements dissolved in water, lifted in air, transformed in fire and earthed) are symbolising life at the first level of spiritual substance. This way of interpreting is crucial to the concepts an intentionality we focus on whilst growing herbs, making medicine from them and administering

such medicine to our patients. We feel that medicine resulting from the process of intention and contemplation of the mind-body-(earth)-spirit phenomenon is the most potent medicine we can offer to patients in need.

We believe that this contemplative philosophy can play a major role in reawakening herbal energetics philosophy. The whole experience of opening up our inner and outer senses through contemplative practice means that we can apply this way of thinking from the heart to all sorts of situations. Our interaction between plants, people, patients, place and planet can all evolve up a notch to a more spiritual, cosmically significant level. Such a concept of understanding the plant (or other) and ourselves, requires us to go back to the beginning, when alchemy and the elemental world was at play. This can, of course still be applied through new alchemy, as a path of self discovery for human beings and as a means of connecting with and making plant preparations respectively. However, it is only when all four elements are in the right proportions can the conversion begin. The ultimate emotion is to be at a state of Oneness; to have an understanding of the underlying organisation of universal earth law ie. the four elements and the four directions. There is a deep element of philosophy and spirituality in this way of thinking, which requires regular practice and reflection to allow sensibilities to develop.

The Medicine wheel in First Nations tradition, as well as the four elements and the four directions, has long embraced such concepts, looking at each element or direction as an entire category of life, with physical, psychological and social considerations. The permutations to the application of the 4 directions of North, South, East and West with a circle around it are many. The eight spikes can also represent the wheel of the celtic year: North = Imbolc (2<sup>nd</sup> Feb); North-east = Spring Equinox (21<sup>st</sup> Mar); East = Beltane (1<sup>st</sup> May); South-east = Summer Solstice (21<sup>st</sup> Jun); South = Lammas (1<sup>st</sup> Aug); South-west = Autumn Equinox (22<sup>nd</sup> Sept); West = Samhain (31<sup>st</sup> Oct) and North-west = Yule (22<sup>nd</sup> Dec. and elemental world).

The future aim is to undertake contemplative plant study to evaluate and ratify our original impressions of the energetics of herbs through prior experiences of pharmacology through taste, knowledge through our training and through clinical observation through herbal practice. There could be a lot of replanting herbs in their true quadrant through the years that such a study will take! Watch this space!

#### BOX 1. How to construct an energetic herb wheel

1. Take a compass and identify the north-south direction over the area you are converting.
2. Decide the radius of your herb wheel, put a stake at the centre and measure a piece of rope the length of the radius.
3. Attach the rope to your central stake and move with it to from the southern limit 90 degrees clockwise to determine your western limit putting stakes in as you go.
4. Continue round to your northern limit, eastern limit and back to south. You can stake your SW, NW, NE and SE limits by stopping at 45 degrees en route.
5. Dig out the paths (either straight or curved) and use the soil from this to add to your beds. If laying out curved paths, take a piece of hose or thick rope and lay it out in a pleasing arc using the radius rope to mark both ends. Mark the length of hose used and repeat this formula for all the paths.

6. Depending on how large an area you want to cultivate, it may be best to either heavily mulch it the season before and/or hire a rotovator to begin breaking up the soil. Use a cultivator to continue this refining of the soil and to remove weed roots and the larger stones to the outer edges.
7. Use a rake to further refine your planting soil, even out the surface of the beds by using the back of the rack to lightly flatten the soil surface.
8. You are now ready to begin transplanting your herb plugs or sowing seeds directly into the designated beds.

**BOX 2. Some medicinal qualities of the herbs you may wish to plant**

1. Southern bed: Heating herbs like ginger, garlic, mustard and thyme are useful to stimulate damp, sluggish conditions such as, poor peripheral circulation, congested muscles or to remove stuck, infected mucous from lungs.
2. South-western bed: Warming, moistening herbs like, rosemary, hyssop, liquorice and plantain and to stimulate and lubricate dry, stuck conditions such as, dry cough, poor digestion and circulation.
3. Western bed: Moistening herbs such as borage, marshmallow, mullein and comfrey to lubricate and relieve tightness and bring relaxation as in dry cough, nervous tension and healing.
4. North-western bed: Cooling, moistening herbs like sweet violet, heartsease, chamomile and wild lettuce to relax and lubricate hot, inflamed conditions.
5. Northern bed: Cold, sedating or stimulating herbs such as, poppies, barberry, wood betony and henbane to treat hot, inflamed conditions, especially where the nervous system is involved.
6. North-eastern bed: Cooling, toning (astringent) herbs such as, mint, catnip, greater celandine and yarrow to reduce inflammation and over production of bodily secretions and for fever.
7. Eastern bed: Toning, astringent herbs like lady's mantle, agrimony, cranesbill (geranium) and greater or lesser periwinkle to tone excessive fluxes of bodily secretions and flaccid, over relaxed conditions.
8. South-eastern bed: Warming and toning herbs such as, St John's wort, sage, echinacea and mugwort to strengthen in healing and over relaxed conditions.

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