

Creating an Energetic Herb Wheel

Maureen and Keith Robertson are the cofounders of The Scottish School of Herbal Medicine in Glasgow, Scotland which was established in 1992. Their own individual stance on traditional philosophy, vegan nutrition and new paradigm holistic research has given the school a unique quality and over the years it has earned the enviable reputation for being one of the most holistic courses on offer in Herbal Medicine. The course is also unique in that it has professional accreditation from the National Institute of Medical Herbalists alongside external University validation from the Univ. of Wales and yet remains an autonomous, charitable organisation. Unusually, the four year BSc (Hons.) course is delivered at weekends and at a summer school in order to allow more mature students to attend. The school was one of the first in the world to offer a Master of Science programme in Herbal Medicine.

On the tradition philosophy, Maureen comments “A lot of our training was to portray herbs as being purely pharmacological agents, whose constituents could be analysed and their effects on physiology carefully worked out. However, in practice, we find that such a narrow view cannot hope to encompass the broad spread of patients’ constitutions. Most traditional disciplines, such as Ayurveda, use a constitutional, energetic system to give a medicine which is tailored not just at general physiology but at the particular state of individual health.”

Maureen and Keith’s vegan stance also dictates the research agenda for the school. Keith states that “Western reductionist science wants to reduce everything down to minute constituents – in doing so it often loses the whole picture. As a school, we do not accept that animal based research has much relevance to the human and in fact, can be dangerous when herbs that have a good, long tradition of human use are fed in large quantities (and often in the form of one concentrated constituent) to animals, therefore, producing negative results. A case in point is when we nearly lost the use of comfrey, due to dubious trials on rats with a species of comfrey that herbalists don’t actually use.”

The MSc programme attracts students for the United States and Canada, as well as the UK and world wide and this has produced a very interesting cross-fertilisation of ideas. British herbal medicine owes a great deal to the influences of First Nation peoples of America and Canada. Maureen and Keith both see herbal medicine as a very practical skill and see the growing of herbs and preparation of your own medicines as being an integral part of being a ‘proper’ herbalist.

When planning a recent new herb garden on their sixteen acre organic small holding on the island of Arran, they felt there was an opportunity to experiment with the age old philosophy of the four directions.

There is a tradition going back at least to Aristotle of qualities associated with the four directions and this is also found in the First Nation People of America in their medicine wheel and back further to the 8 spokes of the Celtic Sun Wheel. This communality suggests that this is an ancient concept and has parallels with the old system in Herbalism of the Physiomedicalists’ cross. It is this kind of rich history that modern Herbalism seems to be in danger of losing, despite the fact that modern research has vindicated the use of many of the historical uses of herbs which were

often worked out in this way. We decided to explore the tradition of the Medicine Wheel physically in planting out a new herb area. Below is Aristotle's Cross and we chose this as our starting pattern.

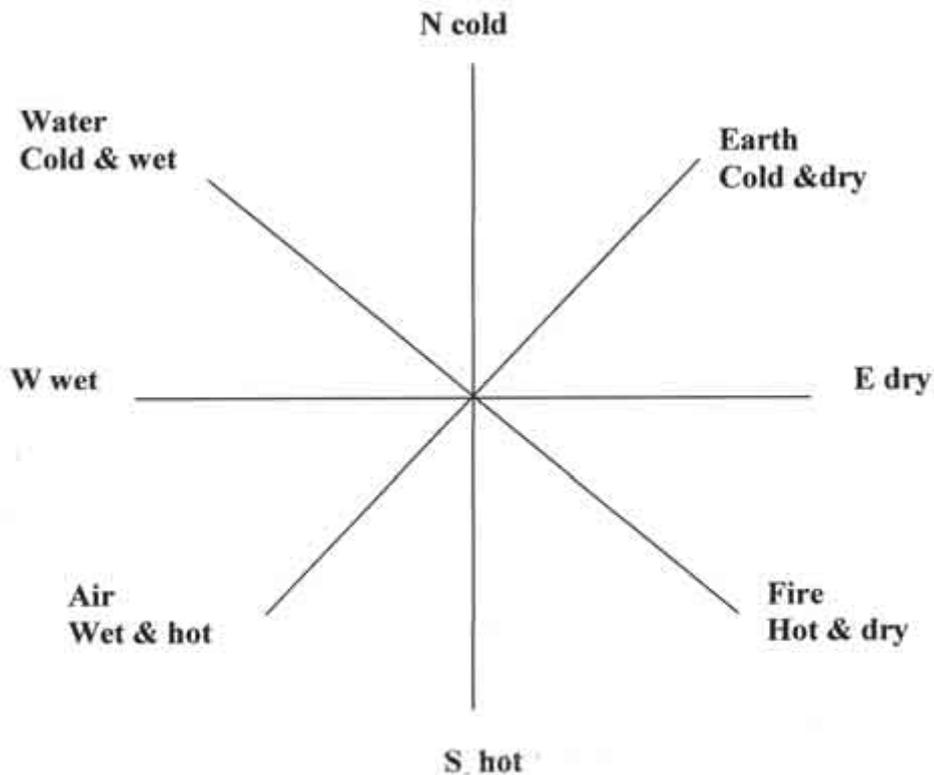


Figure 1. Aristotle's Cross

We were able to identify due north/south using a compass and used this orientation to position the 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 the natural curve found in the surrounding landscape.

From the traditional Humoral system stretching from the Greeks to Culpeper for instance, we know that different people manifest different temperaments or constitutional types, for example, healthy earthy types (sanguine); fiery, dynamic types (choleric); airy, high metabolic types (melancholic) and watery, emotional types (phlegmatic) – 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).



Drimlabarra Herb Farm from the air showing the Herb Wheel before planting.

Given that we already incorporate an energetic approach into our 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 on these principles also. Following the qualities associated with the 4 directions, it was determined which energetic qualities of herbs would be placed in each curved bed or petal. 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.

The result is certainly a visually pleasing garden and it has thrived in its first year. The question is of course, if the herbs have benefited from the underlying framework we have discussed. Only time will tell and we envisage a fair amount of shifting plants around over the years as we explore deeper into the energetic herb wheel. It has certainly been an energetic experience creating it!

Some useful references:

- Bochemuhl, J. (1981). In Partnership with Nature. Bio-Dynamic Literature U.S.
- Buhner, S.H. (2004). The Secret Teachings of Plants – The Intelligence of the Heart in the Direct Perception of Nature. Bear & Co. US.
- Colquhoun, M. & Ewald, A. (1996). New Eyes for Plants. Hawthorn Press UK.
- Meadows, K. (1989). Earth Medicine, A Shamanic Way to Self Discovery. Element Books, UK.
- Steiner, R. (2000). Nature's Open Secret, Introductions to Goethe's Scientific Writings. (trans. J. Barnes & M. Spiegler). Anthroposophic Press.
- Wood, M. (2004). The Practice of Traditional Western Herbalism. North Atlantic Books.

Maureen and Keith Robertson are members of the National Institute of Medical Herbalists and practice on the Isle of Arran and Glasgow. They founded the Scottish School of Herbal Medicine in 1992 and are senior lecturers. Maureen is the Course Director for the MSc Herbal Medicine programme and Director of Research, organising research and plant study conferences for the school. Keith Robertson is Director of Education and designed the MSc, the 4 year BSc Herbal Medicine professional training and the 1 year home help correspondence course. For details phone Karen on 0141 445 2500 or email: sshm@herbalmedicine.org and see www.herbalmedicine.org



Maureen in newly planted wheel.



Hazy sea view last summer.