



Washington State University

## Native American Herbal Workshop

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### Students Learn to Prepare Ointment Using Native Medicinal Plants

by Faith Price

Participants at the American Indian Herbal Workshop on September 29, learned how to mix up natural lip balm using medicinal plants under the direction of Dr. Terry Maresca and Polly Olsen.

Dr. Maresca and Olsen were on the WSU campus to lead the hands-on workshop sponsored by the WSU Native Health Sciences program and held in WSU's Native American Culture House. Dr. Maresca, from the Kahnawake Band of the Mohawk Tribe, is a physician and medical director for the Snoqualmie Tribe, as well as a faculty member at the University of Washington's School of Medicine. Olsen, a member of the Yakama Nation, is the Director of Community Relations and K-12 Education Initiatives for the Indigenous Wellness Research Institute at the University of Washington.



*Greg Urquhart (l) and Polly Olsen (r) listen while Dr. Terry Maresca (center) instructs the group on the medicinal properties of plants they will be using to make an ointment.*

Workshop participants became familiar with four plants helpful for skin conditions. Dr. Maresca provided freshly harvested Plantain, Self-Heal, Chickweed, and Calendula, as well as Sweetgrass, although she noted that the sweetgrass was brought for scent and for what it represents rather than inherent medicinal properties.



*Melissa Schmitz, a pre-nursing student, helps Dr. Maresca strain the plant mixture while Robbie Paul looks on in the background.*

"If your skin is prone to eczema or allergic conditions, these plants are helpful for that," Dr. Maresca told the group.

Participants learned to identify, clean, and chop the herbs, which were then stirred into oil and cooked on the stovetop. While olive oil was used for the workshop because of its ready availability, Dr. Maresca told listeners that traditionally oils were rendered from jojoba, sunflower and animal fat, among other things, depending on the region and beliefs.

Participants were careful not to fry their plants.  
"This is not a frybread situation," joked Dr. Maresca.

After the plants had cooked down enough, students helped strain the mixture. Beeswax was added to help the ointment stick together. Participants could choose to add natural shea butter or essential oils if they desired, and the hot mixture was poured into a chapstick-like tube. Every student took home multiple tubes of their handmade product, many excitedly anticipating giving some special homemade gifts this year for the holidays.

Dr. Maresca includes traditional plant medicine in her practice at the Snoqualmie health clinic, and may prescribe her patients natural remedies as well as pills. She also includes plant medicine in some of the courses she teaches at UW for students who intend to practice medicine in Native communities.

She voiced excitement for Native women and men going into the medical field and wanting to also learn about plants traditionally used for healing.

Her pupils that night also expressed enthusiasm to

learn.

"This will be the best workshop I attend in my WSU career," stated Matt Hale at the end of the evening. Hale, Cherokee, is a graduate student in counseling psychology.

Dr. Maresca said she learned what she knows about medicinal plants from family and other teachers. While there are some reliable books available, she recommends the hands-on method of learning.

"The old way has nothing to do with paper. It's about ears and eyes and hands," she told her class. "This way, you'll remember it because you experienced it."



*Greg Urquhart, doctoral student in counseling psychology, and Matt Hale, master's student in counseling psychology, test the consistency of the ointment they've created.*

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