

## THE LEARNING CIRCLE: NOTES, THOUGHTS &amp; PROJECTS

## I. An Aboriginal Tracker Story

By Frances T. Slack

Reprinted from *Dirt Times*, Jim Lowery, Spring 1992

*Editor's note: Our recent Intuitive Tracking series as well as the upcoming Day Scout Class have prompted me to reprint this interesting article about an aboriginal tracker, written by former student Frances Slack who spent two years in Australia studying trackers there.*

James "Cheeko" Dabb and I sit in the shade of a big gum tree on the outskirts of Kalgoorlie, a rough and tumble mining town in the Western Desert of Australia. Mr. Dabb, a frail, older man with a sensitive face and courtly manner, once was a renowned police tracker, often employed by the local authorities to help them locate missing persons, especially those presumed dead. In recent years, since he's taken to drink, Mr. Dabb has been subsisting mainly on welfare checks and on the sale of his landscape paintings, for which he receives little pay himself beyond the cost of his materials, but which fetch high prices in the galleries. Like many of the aborigines of Kalgoorlie, Mr. Dabb does not live in town, but camps outside of town, sometimes going off into the bush for long periods, then returning, accompanied always by his elderly companion, Judith, and their little dog, Ooee, both of whom are with us now.

The place where we sit, Mr. Dabb explains, is a Dreamtime spot, one of many around Kalgoorlie. A Dreamtime spot is a place that figured significantly in the creation of the world, and is associated with certain ancestors, personages or spirits—in our case, with "two big giant fellas."

"I was born in the bush," Mr. Dabb says, "and I've been tracking all my life. I never had no education of a hospital, but I got a lot of graduation from the bush and the country that I see."

I had heard about Mr. Dabb from other well-known trackers. The Kalgoorlie police also knew of Mr. Dabb's reputation as a tracker, but it was before their time. Police in the outback are moved to a new station every two years, to keep them from becoming too sympathetic to the local population. Their attitude toward Mr. Dabb was now condescending—"Old Cheeko" they called him—and would chuckle as if to indicate, just another drunk old aborigine.

I ask Mr. Dabb about his police tracking techniques. Because of the nature of his work with the police in times gone by, finding dead bodies, the memories seem painful. But he is pleased someone is interested in his work, and wants to oblige me.

"A sign always comes," Mr. Dabb says. "Either a white bird, or a crow. The crows direct me, because they eat—they pick the flesh of the body and bring it back. So I know exactly where the body is. If there's a crow or bird flying over top, then that direction is your positive direction. Even a fly, a little fly, always direct me the right way where they are dead. One time, the only reason I found the buried body was because a little ant helped me. I always have a look before I start tracking, and this little ant, he always going to one hole. I followed him—not very far from Kalgoorlie. The little ant always goes to the body."



A small group of aboriginal women and children walk by across the street. They signal to Mr. Dabb and Judith with finger talk. "What's happening?" their hands ask. "We're right. Talking and drinking," Mr. Dabb signals back. They leave, and we continue, I listening with my soda pop, he talking with his port, Judith humming softly and cuddling Ooee.

"Even in the water—when anybody who got drowned in the water, I get a direction which way to go. I don't see in the water, but the fish, they know, because they live in the water, and when I dive in, I take a deep breath, I listen to the fish, and I find the body. I just find the bones, and it's all like jelly—Ahhh—I tell you, it's terrible. All the memories come back into my brains."

Judith murmurs something to Mr. Dabb in Wangi dialect. A gentle wind blows up, rustling the leaves above us, shifting the red sand. After a pause, he continues.

"Also the smell," he says. "I can smell a long way. The white fellas, they can't. In Kalgoorlie here, not very far from my workshop, the boss called me one day. He said, 'Cheeko? Could you please find 'em?' I only pointed with my hand. 'Over the hill there, not very far.' His body was—it was too smelly on the nose. I smelled it about 100 yards, with the wind blowing in my face."

Later, another tracker, Clem Gable, told me his favorite story about Mr. Dabb—that after following a track for a missing person, presumed murdered, several miles, Mr. Dabb plunked down cross-legged on the ground. With his hand, he started brushing the air before

him, in short, jerky motions, over and over again. The search had been long and tiring, and all the while the police officers hadn't the foggiest idea what Mr. Dabb was following or seeing. When Mr. Dabb then sat down and started moving his hand, the police officer in charge, probably feeling exhausted and frustrated, finally asked Mr. Dabb what he was doing? And Mr. Dabb replied, "It's this blowfly, Boss. When I brush him away, he comes back again and again to this place. Boss, this is where the body is. Dig here." And so it was.



## II. Medicinal Plant Preparations: Dandelion and Plantain

By Tanya Jenkins

*Earlier this year, our instructor Tanya Jenkins led us through some medicinal plant uses and preparations, and I would like to share some of these methods with you.*

Dandelion (*Taraxacum officinale*) is commonly found in lawns and fields. You know this plant... it is best known for its cottony tuft on a tall stalk, made up of seeds waiting to be blown by a gust of wind. It is ground-hugging and forms a basal rosette (3-9"). The flower, which precludes the tuft, is a single yellow flower on the single, leafless, hollow stalk. Each leaf has multiple sharp lobes, some with toothed edges. All parts below the flower have a milky sap. The root and aerial parts are edible and have medicinal purposes.

### A. Dandelion Tincture (*Taraxacum officinale*)

This tincture will have a gentle affect on the kidneys and encourages kidney function with its diuretic action while increasing the body's potassium content. It is also a liver and gallbladder tonic that stimulates the flow of bile that helps with digestion and gently stimulates the liver, and therefore is often termed a "blood cleanser." Dosage: ½ teaspoon (approx. 85 drops) two times a day. To disguise the taste if needed, simply dilute the tincture in tea, juice or water.

#### Ingredients:

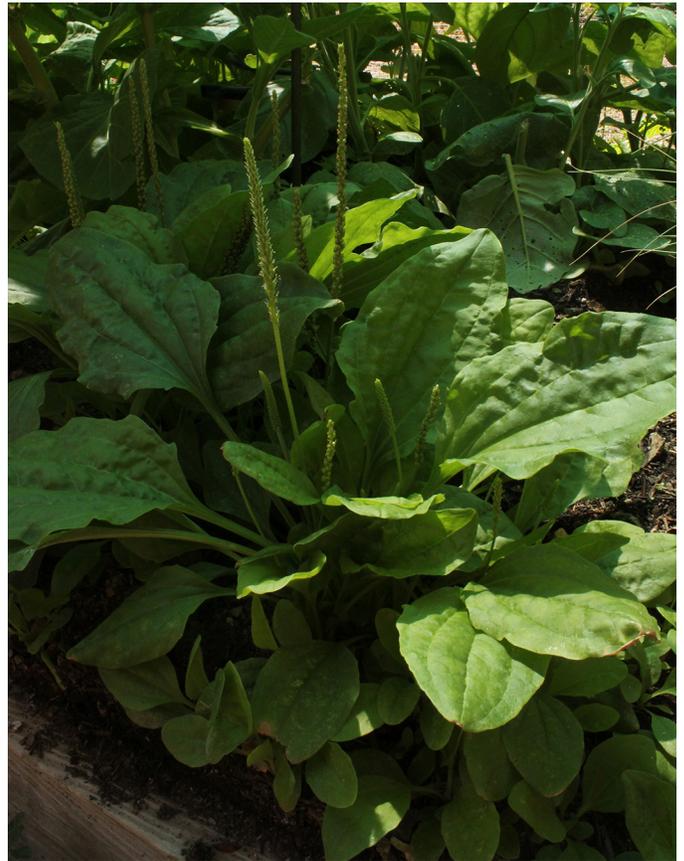
- Whole Dandelion plants (*Taraxacum officinale*) – aerial parts and roots
- 100-proof (50% alcohol) vodka (pure grain alcohol, such as Everclear, 190 proof, available in some states, may also be used)

#### Process:

1. Harvest a large, or a few small, Dandelions – all aerial parts and roots (basically, all of it).
2. Clean thoroughly and dry.
3. Cut all parts of the Dandelion into small pieces. The smaller the better to have more exposed surface area.
4. Place the pieces in a jar with a tight fitting lid.
5. Pour 100-proof (50% alcohol) vodka into the jar, filling it to the top of the plant material and a bit past (plant pieces do begin to float instantly, so eye the proposed vodka level before pouring in).
6. Wipe the top ridge of the jar, cleaning off any stuff that might be clinging to it.
7. For a tighter seal, put a piece of wax paper over the opening as a gasket, and screw down the jar lid. Tighten it firmly.
8. Shake your tincture energetically.
9. Label the container – name of herb, the part of plant used (i.e. Dandelion root and top, *Taraxacum officinale*), the alcohol used, and the date 14 days from the date you are preparing this extract.
10. During those 14 days, at least once, or 2-3 times a day, vigorously (and affectionately ) shake your tincture.
11. After a *minimum* of fourteen days, separate the plant material and the liquid. A simple method for doing this is to line a hand-held strainer with a square-shaped piece of cotton muslin cloth, large enough to hang about an inch or two over the edges of the strainer.
12. Allow all the liquid to flow through the cloth and strainer into a catch bowl and after liquid has finished flowing through the cloth, join together all four corners of the cloth suspending the plant material and using a free hand, squeeze and twist to press out the liquid thoroughly.
13. Pour the liquid now without the plant material into a bottle that can be tightly capped, label and store in a cool, dark location. This alcohol/water extract will keep for many years.

Source: James Green, [The Herbal Medicine-Maker's Handbook](#)

Plantain Broadleaf (*Plantago major*) is an herb in basal rosettes (the leaves grow in a circular pattern from a central point) with elliptical leaves (2-8") that have five prominent longitudinal, parallel ribs. It is found low, or flat, to the ground, depending on how often a lawn mower is rolled over it. When a mature leaf is picked at its stem with fingers, "strings" are found extending from the ribs. The flowering stems, or spikes, originate from the center of the plant and are leafless with flowers that are small, dense and are an inconspicuous greenish-white on the top-half of the spikes. It flowers from April through September. The flowers are followed by many small brown capsules that contain seeds. Plantain is found in moist ground. Both the leaves and the seeds are used as food and for medicinal purposes. Both broadleaf plantain and narrowleaf plantain are introduced from Europe but are common throughout the U.S.



### B. Plantain Poultice (*Plantago major* (broadleaf))

Use Plantain poultice to draw out splinters or insect stingers, and to apply on wounds and bug bites to draw out redness and inflammation.

Pick healthy looking plantain leaves and mash or chop them. You can do this with your fingernails. Mash thoroughly until you see the leaf's juices. Place the mashed leaf and juices directly on the wound, and then wrap a cloth over them to hold in place, or use a Band-aid. Leave on for 30 to 45 minutes and then take a look and if necessary, discard the Plantain and reapply a new poultice.



### C. Plantain Salve (*Plantago major* (broadleaf))

Salves are a great way to have a handy plant remedy when a fresh plant is not available. To make a salve, the first step is to create the salve's first ingredient: the infused oil. Oil will extract a plant's fat soluble constituents and volatile oils. Here is one process, amongst many, to make infused oil. Infused oils can also be used to make lip balm, lotions and creams. Apply Plantain Salve to stings, bug bites and to minor wounds and burns to promote healing.

To make Plantain infused oil:

Ingredients:

- Dried Plantain leaves – enough to fill half-full a clean, fully dried glass jar. If using a mason pint jar, the measurement is about a cup of dried Plantain.

- Olive oil – cold pressed, enough to fill the jar.

Process:

1. Fill the jar half way with the dried herb that has only been lightly pushed down.
2. Pour olive oil over the herb to fill the jar, leaving ¼ inch space at the top.
3. Stir the oil and herb to release air bubbles.
4. Add more oil if necessary to keep the level ¼ inch from the top of jar.
5. Cover jars with a paper towel secured with a mason jar ring or a rubber band. The paper towel cover will allow any moisture to evaporate during the infusion process.
6. Label the jar (name of plant, type of oil used, date – I put start date, date to end stirring, date to strain).
7. Stir oil and herb every day for a week. Check oil level (add more oil if level has gone down), check on how it smells (a foul smell means bacteria growth and the contents are not safe to use), and push down any plant material that is out of the oil.
8. After the first week, let the oil infuse for another 3 weeks, and continue to check the oils every couple of days.
9. When the oil is ready, use a strainer and cloth to squeeze as much oil as possible from the herb. (I prefer to first strain with cheese cloth, then with a muslin cloth to catch more plant material).
10. Place the now infused oil in a labeled jar with very little air space at the top and a tight lid. Store in a cool, dark location.

To make a salve using a Plantain infused oil:

Ingredients:

- Infused oil – this recipe is based on 1 cup of infused oil.
- 1 ounce of beeswax, or for a firmer salve, try 2 ounces.
- (If interested in adding an essential oil, such as lavender essential oil, use 8 drops. General guideline is 2 drops per ¼ cup).

Process:

1. Prepare the salve containers, which can be small canning jars, or small metal tins, by setting them out with lids off where it will be easy to pour the hot salve into them.
2. Using a double-boiler, melt the beeswax fully.
3. Add the infused oil. This will make some of the beeswax re-solidify, so wait till it re-melts completely.
4. Pour contents into a container that has a pouring spout.
5. Quickly, if using essential, add drops and do a quick stir.
6. Quickly pour mixture into salve containers.
7. Allow to cool, then cap and label.

Store salves in a cool, dark place or in the refrigerator. They will last months to years. Look for discoloration, bacteria growth and/or change of scent as clues when to discard.