

# Ethnobotany: What It Is, What It Isn't, and What It Can Be For You

BY LINWOOD WATSON, MD, HALIWA-SAPONI, NC NATIVE ETHNOBOTANY PROJECT

People hear the term “ethnobotany,” and once they wrap their tongue around its long pronunciation, questions arise about the nature of this subject. In its most basic form, ethnobotany is the study of the intersection of people, plants, and culture. Be careful, though, since such a broad intersection can be open to narrowly-focused interpretations. Like many things in life, sometimes it is more helpful to identify what something is not. To wit, ethnobotany is not:

1. “Hey, I have “X” disease, can you suggest “Y” plant cure?”
2. “Is there a way to maximize the plant chemical I am looking for?”

3. “Can we isolate a plant compound and synthesize it in the lab for purity?”
4. “We had a nice harvest but where is the “official” ceremony?”
5. “I want to learn about all the exotic and endangered plants!”

True ethnobotany circulates around relationships. Moreover, it is about the myriad things that go into maintaining those relationships, both on the plant side and the human side. When practiced properly, ethnobotany is additive, not extractive. It is systems-based, not product-based. It is sustainable and self-replicating, not finite and limited. The “fuel” of ethnobotany—

the things that maintain those connections between plants and humans such as words, ceremonies, dances, rituals, feasts, family stories, laughter, and crying (emotions count, too!)—rekindle and maintain these ties. In essence, they are the cell phone towers between the human world and the plant world, to use modern parlance.

Admittedly, due to our traditions and common closeness to nature, many Indigenous people are ethnobotanical fountainheads. However, as some of the following examples will show, all people can cultivate ethnobotanical ideals in their lives, provided we listen

and remain reflective, patient, open-minded, thankful, and observant with all our senses and our heart about our interactions with plants. Let's chuck the dictionary out the door and get into the nitty gritty of some real life ethnobotanical marvels.

**Example 1:  
The Amazing Plant Sorcery of Saurochory**

The following is a recounting of a keen summary of connections gleaned by The NC Native Ethnobotany Project ([ncnativeethnobotany.org](http://ncnativeethnobotany.org)). Follow along to see if you can connect the dots.

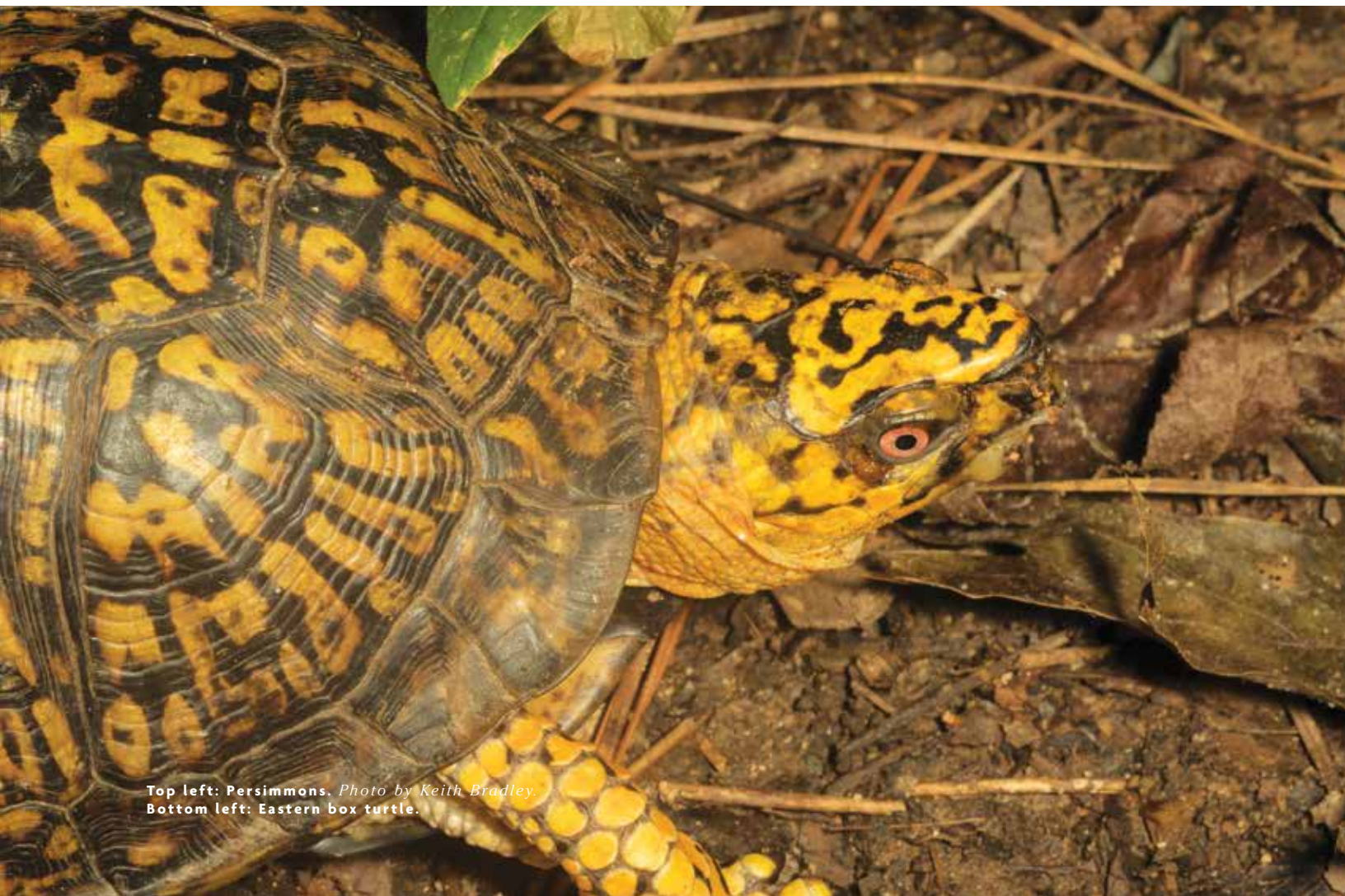
"I'd bet you your last dollar my persimmon seed would sprout sooner and live better than any that you plant! Bring on your concocted soils, chemicals, and hybrids. I only need one thing—a turtle—with the best being an eastern box turtle. Now do you have your dollar ready to lose?"

I eyed the interviewed elder carefully. Then I nervously palpated my wallet and I feigned confidence with a reply,

"Okay, I'll take your challenge, but what is the secret? I am prepared to lose, if at least I know how and why I lost!"

The elder glinted a smirk at me, money the least thing on his mind, and replied, "You see, we are losing our box turtles. It is a shame. They try to move around in the spring and people run over them. Worse, people drain their wetlands. Turtles don't do well on asphalt. But, there's more. Turtles move slowly, and that helps with seed scattering. Seeds need to move from under their parents, but not too far. Unlike a long flying bird that can fly miles with say, a small mulberry, a turtle is just big enough to eat a persimmon, yet slow enough to not leave the proper growing area near the parent tree. Plus, that turtle digestion and poop is perfect, a pure heaven, for a persimmon seed. If you are enjoying an American persimmon this fall, you better thank a slow moving turtle and his poop. That's right, that reptile gave you your persimmon bread. Don't you forget it. And don't run over any turtles!"

I thanked the elder. I double checked my wallet. Then I



Top left: Persimmons. Photo by Keith Bradley.  
Bottom left: Eastern box turtle.

returned home to do some research. After all, the internet is spotty around the elder's home.

"Sauro-who?" I thought as I cranked up the Internet search engine.

Turns out, the elder was schooling me through an, at least through Western science, poorly explored and woefully neglected academic realm of saurochory. (Yes, this would make a killer Final Jeopardy clue, but I digress.) Saurochory is the study of how reptiles aid in seed dispersal. Amazingly in my internet searches, I quickly saw that almost every "saurochory" entry had an introduction along the lines of, "the poorly studied area of," or "the neglected area of." As it turns out, in the few saurochory studies I found, turtles were indeed a major seed disperser. Turtles, due to their size and the typical persimmon fruit size, excelled in persimmon germination. Who knew? Yes, the elder knew.

Fast forward to the present, and my personal actions as well as actions of other tribal members and friends of the elder have changed. We drive carefully in the spring.

We watch for turtles on the road. We connect the spring turtles to future fall persimmons. Our diet is enhanced by our turtle respect. Our minds now know saurochory. Our hearts know an elder who helps us connect the ecological dots. We are thankful for both. Ethnobotany is the combination of both.

Skeptics will say this is all nostalgia, unscientific "sunshine and rainbow" anecdotes. Anecdotes, though, are Native American wisdom. People all too often wrongly confine Native Americans to solely the past. We are not museum relics. We are a vibrant and evolving people. Our respect for turtles has ties to eons ago and that respect is manifest in our driving habits. It also manifests in our enjoyment and gratitude to persimmons. Our current actions, intentions, respect, friendly jokes, and contests all keep in mind eastern box turtles and *Diospyros virginiana*. This example is ethnobotany in the here and now.

### Example 2:

#### The Significance of Some Soggy Days In May

If the name Senora Lynch sounds familiar, it is likely because she is the Haliwa-Saponi artist who designed "The Gift," the eastern woodland themed walkway at the UNC-Chapel-Hill Student Union. If you have not, go check it out near The Pit on the UNC campus. However, this Haliwa-Saponi's artistry ranges from clay sculpture works the size of the palm of your hand to huge works

like "The Gift." Among one of Senora's smaller works lies an excellent ethnobotanical illustration. I recently called Senora and share the following with her permission. I then humbly add some ethnobotanical addendums. Keep in mind the times, plants, and seasons are matched to North Carolina.

As Senora explained to me and I now paraphrase with permission, "The work you mention is called, in short, 'Blackberry Winter.' It was made to honor my elders who planted solely by the moon. Those old ways take much knowledge. Things appear to be quiet and slow in winter and early spring in wild blackberries until the fifth moon (May). This was a key time for my elders. At this time, my elders explained that if around the full moon in May, you had a cool, misty, rainy few days,

don't despair. Don't get frustrated that spring is stalled. Those cool spring days are important. The blackberries won't get plump and fill out unless those cool misty May days bless them. Misty, foggy fifth moon days mean plump berries. It means strong plants. It means bears lurking and enjoying the berries. It is a blackberry bounty. It starts in the winter and blossoms with those cool rainy May days. These things are what 'Blackberry Winter' honors."

True to form, you can see near the top of the piece five full moons for May, and then a full year/circle of growing plants and bear paw prints. Unquestionably, humans are eating what the bears miss!

Think about the lessons Senora just depicted in her work, "Blackberry Winter." While not an artist, I can lend a botanical perspective from raising blackberries (with successes and failures) for a decade here in North



Carolina. As many people know, blackberries usually bear fruit on the second year of woody cane growth. May, in North Carolina, is a crucial time for berries to get a jump on growing. Moreover, the fruit for next year is just sending up its first year canes in this critical growth time. In other words, you have two major water-intensive items in mid-late May—this year's growing berries, and next year's canes. The canes seem to shoot up from nowhere in late April to suddenly be four to five feet high—if the cool moisture arrives in May, that is. If the cool, misty weather comes too early, in April, it might hamper flower pollination. If you are a bee, do you want to fly on a cloudy 62-degree day? No. "Blackberry Winter" is an honoring, teaching tool, and celebration of that commencement. Which is precisely why it is our second ethnobotanical example!

And so, while we focused on two example plants, one quickly sees the importance of interconnections and relationships in ethnobotany. It is truly a dialogue between plants, humans, and the environment. Farming is a monologue, with only a human saying, "Gimme, gimme, gimme! I want yield per acre!" Ethnobotany thinks about not just the berries, but the weather, timing, other animals (the bears), and also people. Moreover culturally, a piece of art was physically constructed to honor these relations

and to serve as a medium to share with others. So go ahead, gently swerve to avoid a spring turtle. Don't fret about your rained out golf tee time on a rainy weekend in May. The ethnobotanist in you is coming alive! In these times, the Earth could use this expansive and more inclusive thinking.

**“True ethnobotany  
circulates around  
relationships.”**

*About the Author: Linwood Watson, MD, is a member of the Haliwa-Saponi Tribe and a board certified family medicine physician. He is a collaborator and contributor to the NC Native Ethnobotany Project ([ncnativeethnobotany.org](http://ncnativeethnobotany.org)). He and his family tend a small two-acre orchard, The AspenSkye Orchard. He is a member and journal contributor to the North American Fruit Explorers ([nafex.org](http://nafex.org)), as well as a member of The Livestock Conservancy ([thelivestockconservancy.org](http://thelivestockconservancy.org)). He deeply thanks all the NC Native Ethnobotany contributors and Mrs. Senora Lynch.*

**Left: Dreamcatcher Turtle with “Blackberry Winter” Design, Artwork copyright Senora Lynch.  
Below: Blackberry brambles with berries forming in June, shortly after the misty, foggy days of May.**

