

Creasy Jane's Herbal Remedies

*A Case Study By The
Livelihoods Knowledge Exchange Network*

BACKGROUND AND TRAINING

Ruby Daniels is an herbalist and agroforester carrying on traditional Afrolachian practices from her ancestral homeplace in Stanaford City, West Virginia. After receiving her master's degree in therapeutic herbalism from the University of Maryland, Ruby returned to the West Virginia coal camp which her family had left a generation before. In her youth, she had spent summers learning from her grandmother how to care for and use native ecological abundance to heal and nourish the largely African American coal mining community of Stanaford. Ruby also studied under Paul Strauss at the United Plant Savers sanctuary and learned the business of selling herbal remedies. She started her own LLC - named Creasy Jane after her grandmother - to turn her traditional knowledge into a value added product business.

CULTURAL VALUES AND MEANINGS

Ruby grew up in Columbia, Maryland and moved to Baltimore to finish school. There, she worked to promote native plant populations and species through community garden non-profit projects in the urban core two blocks from where Freddie Gray was murdered. After doing what she could to help heal the community through gardening and sharing herbal products tailored for Black customers, Ruby decided to move back home to the old coal camp in Stanaford to carry on her grandmother's traditions. Facing many of the same problems of racial discrimination and effects of the opioid crisis that she had tried to heal in Baltimore, Ruby began growing her business from her grandmother's old sites as well as some rented land.



"And the person that influenced most of my work and my love for West Virginia [and] this place is my grandmother and my grandfather....that's what brought me back here. And my family always knew that I would probably be the one to come back home. I was born in Maryland at Andrews Air Force Base. But I spent summers here. I used to run up and down these roads barefoot...I loved it here. And I love the people here."

—Ruby Daniels

In addition to native medicinal plants, such as cohosh, ginseng, and goldenseal, that are trending across the region, Ruby stewards African American legacies by planting heirloom varieties of black-eyed peas, as well as *Ipomea sp.* a wild cousin of the sweet potato, known in African American lore as "High John the Conqueror."



The local historical context for Ruby Daniels' forest farm is the former African American coal camp in Lanark, West Virginia, which is part of Stanford, just southeast of Beckley. Artwork by Our Numinous Mind.

"[These] Black Eyed Peas are "whippoorwills" and "iron and clay," which are some of the original black eyed peas that were brought by the slaves to the United States. So they're a little bit smaller. They have a richer taste."

—Ruby Daniels



Agroforestry is practiced in urban settings with botanicals and vegetable crops (Photo by Mary Hufford)

ECOLOGICAL DYNAMICS OF THE SITES

Planting to transform grass lawn to production, converting her small woodlot to production, and managing sites around the state for wildcrafting,

Ruby cultivates a large number of species to create her line of herbal products. Skullcap, motherwort, balm of gilead, blue and black cohosh, bloodroot, trillium, ginseng, solomon's seal, ramp's, elderberry, hyssop, calendula, skullcap, motherwort, hawthorne, poke, comfrey, sassafras, and boneset are just a few of the plants Ruby stewards and harvests. Through rental agreements, participation from neighbors, and new land acquisitions Ruby has slowly increased production towards self-sufficiency to meet increasing demand. Ruby intentionally cultivates in ways designed to improve ecological relationships. She improves the soil through the use of "three sisters" plantings that bring nitrogen fixing beans into collaboration with nitrogen-depleting corn, in soil shaded, for water retention, by squash. And she selects plants that attract pollinators.



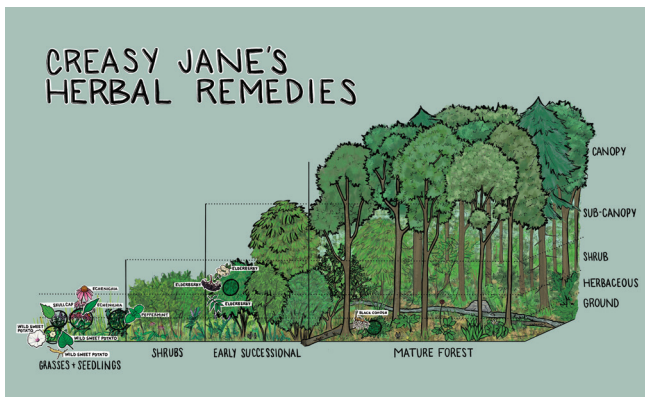
Echinacea purpurea, purple coneflower, known for its antiviral properties, in Ruby Daniel's pollinator garden. Photo by Mary Hufford

"As my plants start to pollinate more, I see more of a variety of beautiful songbirds here. And... I mean, like all that is a part of having a forest and a healthy forest is that you support the animals as well. And I think the Hawthorne will kind of keep the deer population down, because I don't think they want to get stuck in four-inch thorns just like people don't. So I think, you know, there's a way that you can have security, but still also have trees"

—Ruby Daniels

"I try to pick plants that do multiple things, have a purpose, have a way I can make money... you have to always think in your mind....What can I do with it? I mean, it's beautiful. They're all beautiful, but they also have a second purpose too."

Ruby Daniels' forest farm is in an early successional stage of a Central Appalachian mixed mesophytic forest. She is therefore engaging the herbaceous layer, with attention to saplings and trees that will provide additional layers for agroforestry. Her focus on pollinators and soil-building is already producing dramatic results.



Ruby Daniels' forest farm is in an early successional stage, which allows her to engage ground, herbaceous, and shrub layers, where she is introducing plants that are significant to the Appalachian forest farming she practices, including the medicinally powerful "wild sweet potato" to which slaves referred as "High John the Conqueror." Artwork by Carly Thaw.

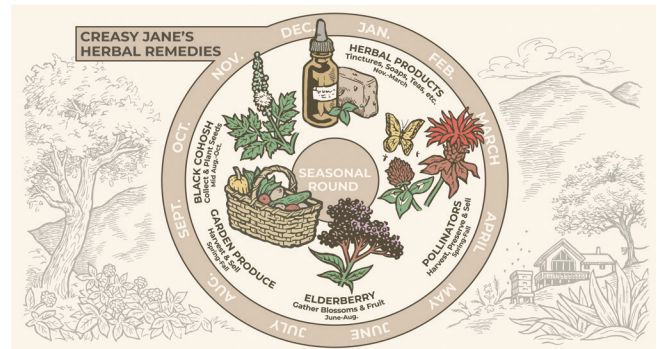


Wild sweet potato, known in slave culture as "High John the Conqueror," is affiliated with a trickster figure named John in slave narratives. John always bested the master through his wits. Photo by Mary Hufford.

FOREST FARMING MANAGEMENT AND PRODUCTION

Through her work as a site assessor for beginner agroforestry operations through the West Virginia Forest Farming Initiative, Ruby understands intimately

the forest relationships that create habitat not just for native plant species, but for an abundance of harvestable populations of those species. Spearheading the effort to educate wild harvesters on appropriate timing of harvests and stewardship of vulnerable habitat, Ruby spends as much time in the woods as she does in her commercial kitchen creating value added products.



Ruby Daniels' annual round of agroforestry. Artwork by Our Numinous Mind.

With her forest in an early stage of succession, Ruby relies on value added products made from traditional crops. Synchronizing her activities with the annual round of plant and market cycles, she is able to spread her labor around the calendar year.

Creasy Jane's product line emphasizes efficacy and testing. Ruby draws on her years of experience and training, to create herbal products that utilize plant material harvested at the right time for the specific chemical compounds needed in the value-added process. All of the labor of planting, stewarding, and testing is important. But, also important, is skilled harvesting. It takes detailed knowledge of each species, to know the best day and even time of day to harvest – when that species is producing the chemical compound needed for the desired product.



Harvesting skullcap (*Scutellaria laterifolia*). Photo by Mary Hufford.

ECONOMICS AND MARKETING

Drawing on her heritage, knowledge, and technical training, Ruby is able to craft products that command a higher retail price. Because Ruby has cultivated a strong following through word of mouth and self promotion, Creasy Jane's is becoming known in the region as a source of effective herbal products specifically formulated to suit the needs of Black communities and consumers. While not catering exclusively to Black customers, Ruby Daniels is creating an unprecedented space for Afrolachian herbal traditions, as she heals her piece of central Appalachia and teaches others to do the same.

FUTURE PLANS

As Ruby develops her plant sanctuary in Stanaford, she looks decades ahead to the growth of her early succession forest into a mature mixed mesophytic forest, providing food and medicine for her community and her clients.

—written by Chrissa Mae Kallal and Mary Hufford

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