

Holy smokes

Smudging is an ancient yet timeless practice. For some it might be spiritual, for others emotional or medicinal, but its potency to reignite the senses and rekindle our relationship with our surroundings recalls our transience – all in a fleeting haze of smoke

The history of the use of aromatic smoke – by burning herbs, bark or resin – unveils a rich and complex narrative, spanning centuries and traversing cultures and regions across the globe. The purifying properties of nature's bounty was sacrosanct among early botanists, who, in some cases, harnessed its therapeutic, healing qualities and revered its relationship with the elements in equal measure. Today, fragrant smoke continues to fulfil different purposes and meanings for communities and individuals seeking reconnection with the self or the environment, or for those looking to start a new chapter, or day, with renewed purpose.

The fluid and often parallel notions behind smoke cleansing as sacred, sensory and purifying can be traced back to ancient civilisations. Illustrations of labourers crushing flowers and spices and adding tree sap to create solid perfumes for burning have been discovered across Ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia. It is believed that the traditions of these civilisations gave rise to perfume whose Latin origin, *per fumus*, translates to 'through smoke'. For Egyptians, the permeating aroma of herb bundles was considered both practical and holy, for masking unsavoury odours during mummification and as a medium to ensure the passage of important figures to the next life. They believed smoky aromas could bind body and soul and, much like in aromatherapy today, combined blends of myrrh, frankincense, cinnamon and balsam to soothe a frayed mind, as well as to treat myriad health complaints.

For Indigenous cultures across the world, burning herbs was, and for some still is, central to ritualistic ceremonies, the rising smoke often representing a connection to the spirit world or a call to nature to purify spaces or individuals. Known colloquially today as smudging, it is the cleansing ritual of Native Americans with which many westerners associate the

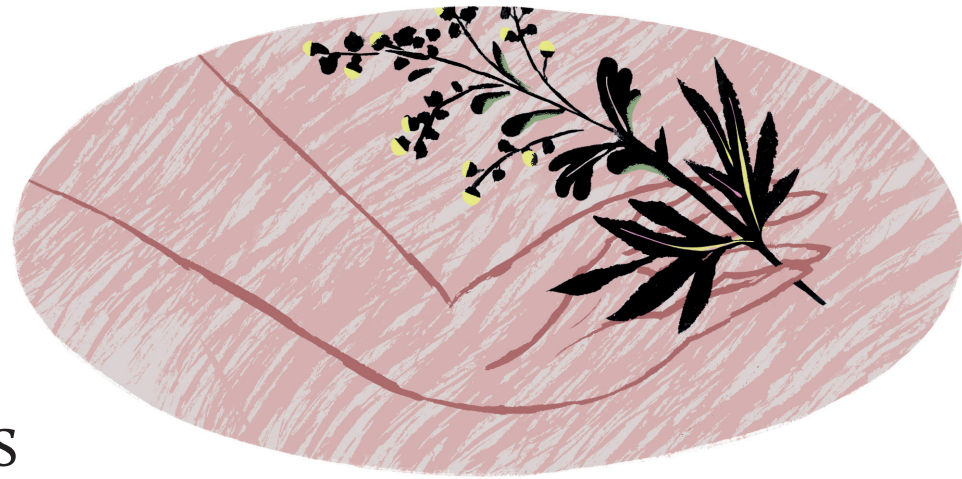
practice. The cashing-in of businesses selling smudge kits is considered undermining to those for whom it is sacred, and has sparked concern about the over-cultivation of white sage, one of the materials central to such ceremonies. Those who cleanse with smoke are encouraged to do so with their own intent, gathering or sourcing their herbs ethically and locally.

Myriad uses

Herbalist Nikki Darrell, who runs The Plant Medicine School in County Wexford in the Republic of Ireland, practises smoke cleansing daily. She says the traditions surrounding it have been mislaid in parts of the west and people often don't realise there are plants around them that their own ancestors might have used. They think instead that they must borrow materials and rituals from other parts of the world. 'Each region used smoke cleansing in slightly different ways,' she says. 'It tended to be used for practical things, as well as spiritual. It was pretty endemic. For example, in Tibet, people wouldn't think of using herbs in any other way. They made piles of charcoals and people would breathe in the herbal smoke, even if it was for something like circulatory problems. Or when animals were being brought into shelters in the winter, they would have driven them between piles of burning juniper wood, to remove bugs and ticks.'

In Scotland, juniper smoke used to be commonly cast about people, homes and cattle, in a ritual called *saining* – from the Gaelic word *seun* or *sian*, meaning 'charm' – to banish negative vibes from unwelcome spirits. As well as to dispel bad energy, juniper is thought to encourage orderliness and fortune and some people still use it in their homes on Hogmanay, to drive out any negativity and make way for a prosperous new year.

Mugwort is another auspicious herb that's popular among smoke cleansers today. In the Isle of Man, it is central to the





annual Tynwald Day, the island's national day and an event dating back more than 1,000 years. The plant, whose legacy as the 'mother herb' is steeped in folklore and mythology, used to be burned during the festival to drive away malevolent spirits. Cattle and people would jump over blazing heaps of mugwort and gorse to ensure optimum purification. Today, a sprig pinned to your lapel will suffice.

In their book, *Hedgerow Medicine*, Julie Bruton-Seal and Matthew Seal advocate the use of mugwort to 'calm frantic energy'. They describe an incident where they cleansed their home with the herb after their teenage son had a boozy party. They add: 'It also helps shift old, stuck energy. We found ourselves therapeutically clearing out the sheds next morning.'

Its genus name, *Artemisia* – after Artemis, the Greek deity synonymous with menstruation and childbirth – reflects its use across Asia to regulate menstruation cycles, as a form of acupuncture, to cure abdominal pain, to relax the body and sometimes to encourage breech babies into the birth position. The treatment, in which the herb is burned near specific points on the body, is called moxibustion.

Therapeutic properties

A 2011 study, by scientists from medical universities in Beijing and Austria, explored the effects of moxibustion on the autonomic nervous system, which regulates processes including breathing, heart rate and digestion. Results showed that the heart rate of all 24 participants exposed to mugwort smoke had slowed significantly and remained so 10 minutes after the trial. The burning of plants today, particularly those from the Lamiaceae family, which includes strong-smelling herbs like thyme, rosemary, mugwort and sage – and whose genus *salvia* comes from the Latin *salvere*, meaning 'to be well' – is still heralded among herbalists and other users of plant medicine.

Nikki, who performs smoke cleansing at the start of each of her classes, notes that there are rarely, if any, colds doing

the rounds among her pupils or in her on-site home. She adds: 'What really affirmed it was when our kids' friends came to visit for a few days and we decided not to smoke-cleanse and, for the first time in a long time, everyone got colds.'

She describes the therapeutic advantages of smoke cleansing as part of daily life at the school: 'When you've got people coming together like this, it really helps ground them into the space and focus together, so it works on an emotional and spiritual level. My husband and I also do it as part of our meditation in the morning. We orientate ourselves to make sure we're present in our place, turning to different directions and remembering the elements.'

Closer to nature

But meaning is not just found in the observing of the smoke. The entire process of choosing, collecting and binding sprigs of herbs and twigs, can be entrancing and mindful.

Nikki adds: 'Growing and gathering the herbs, then drying them, helps our connection to the natural world. And taking care of the rest of nature around allows us to build a relationship with nature and the plants around us. Humans do better when they're relating to plants.'

It's important to respect individual meanings that different people place behind observing herbal smoke, and to recognise rituals might be culturally sacred. But the broader syncretic nature of smoke cleansing, demonstrated by our ancestors and folklorists who harnessed nature's healing properties with tenderness and gratitude, is also a reminder to love and respect the environment that ultimately connects us all.

Words: Cat Thompson

Find out more about Nikki's school at theplantmedicineschool.com. Pregnant women or people with respiratory problems should seek medical advice before practising smoke cleansing.

ILLUSTRATIONS: WERONIKA KUC



Creating your herb bundle

- Before harvesting, Nikki suggests sitting near the plant and setting your intention. Pick your material respectfully, without taking too much.
- Herbs can either be bound together fresh and dried out in their bundle or left to dry beforehand. Hold the herbs tight before weaving string or twine around them in a spiral. Fold the top leaves over, then bind down and secure.
- Once the bundle is dry, light the end until it is slightly smouldering. Either place in a fire-resistant bowl or carefully move it around the area to be cleansed.

Herbs to get started

Juniper: The wood of the juniper tree can be tied together as small sprigs. As mentioned earlier, juniper can be called on to protect, clear negative energy and ward off bacteria.

Rose: Aside from making your bundle look pretty, Nikki says rose petals can help soothe a racing heart, particularly if you're overwhelmed after a busy day.

Pine: Though it might seem counterproductive, pine smoke can help alleviate a tight chest. Think balsam.

Mugwort: As well as its calming properties, mildly psychoactive mugwort is known to recall dormant memories through the medium of dreams, giving it a reputation as a messenger plant.

Wormwood: Despite its notoriety for its use in absinthe, Nikki says that, in small doses, Mugwort's slightly stronger cousin can work wonders for a foggy brain.

Bay leaf: Many swear by the power of this so-called guardian. Bay leaves are thought to soothe anxiety and possess antibacterial properties.