

Yale CANCER CENTER *answers*

WNPR Connecticut Public Radio



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The Healing Power of Plants

Guest:

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Welcome to Yale Cancer Center Answers with your hosts doctors Francine Foss, Anees Chagpar and Steven Gore. Dr. Foss is a Professor of Medicine in the Section of Medical Oncology at Yale Cancer Center. Dr. Chagpar is Associate Professor of Surgical Oncology and Director of the Breast Center at Smilow Cancer Hospital and Dr. Gore is Director of Hematological Malignancies at Smilow. Yale Cancer Center Answers features weekly conversations about the research diagnosis and treatment of cancer and if you would like to join the conversation, you could submit questions and comments to canceranswers@yale.edu or you can leave a voicemail message at 888-234-4YCC. This week it is a conversation about The Healing Power of Plants with Nancy DuBrule-Clemente. Nancy is Owner of Natureworks Horticultural Services in Northford, Connecticut. Here is Dr. Steven Gore.

Gore Natureworks Horticultural Services, can you tell us what that is?

Clemente We are an organic garden center and landscaping business. And I have been organically growing and maintaining plants for 32 years, long before it was popular. We install flower gardens, edible gardens, herb gardens and take care of gardens for people and in our garden center, we sell all the different products that you need to grow beautiful gardens organically.

Gore So this is like a regular garden center, if I wanted to get a dogwood or something?

Clemente Yeah, a lot of what we sell is a little unusual, a little different. We do a lot of butterflies and native plants and plants that are just a little bit more unusual than the average garden center and right now, we are doing a lot with edible plants and herbs because that seems to be what the younger generation is really looking for.

Gore So we are talking like a Harry Potter Mandrake, things like that?

Clemente Well in some ways, but I think mostly young people want to grow food and that is all there is to it. They will grow food in any way, shape or form that they can and they want to grow it organically, so there is no question in their minds, that is they want, and they come to us because we have been organic for a long time and we know all the ins and outs of it. It is not like we are either or, this is what we do and this is what we live.

Gore And so how did you first become interested in the healing power or plants?

Clemente I have always been interested in herbs and herbal growing of plants, even before I started my own business I studied this and I have many different plants that I find are very helpful to me personally, and what I tell people when they are trying to figure out what plants are useful to them, it is also very personal. You will find plants that will work for you and then 10 years later, you might change and find something else that will work for you. I use a lot of herbal teas, I am a very high energy person, owning a business is a lot of work. At night, I cannot sleep a lot because my brain is going, I drink herbal teas, and there are various blends of things like passion flower and

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Valerian. Chamomile does not really work for me, although everybody talks about Chamomile tea, it is just not my herb.

Gore It was big in Beatrix Potter.

Clemente Right, it slightly relaxes me, but some of these other herbs are stronger.

Gore It did not work for Peter Rabbit either.

Clemente Also, during the day when I want to focus and concentrate, I oftentimes will drink sage tea, rosemary and sage tea, and a lot of time I will buy blends. I go to the health food store or even now the grocery store has them and I read the boxes and I read what the different herbs are and I think about what I know about them and what will work for me and I find various blends that work. I have teas for mental clarity, for example, which is really useful when you are running a business and you have to multitask a lot. I also use herbs for digestion which I think is really important especially if somebody is sick and they do not want to take a lot of over-the-counter medications, simple herbs like mint, ginger, fennel, liquorice, those are all really good for digestion and that is important for people to realize, you can grow them very easily and harvest them. You can dry them, you can use them fresh and they will help you tremendously and they are very inexpensive to produce.

Gore Do you think it is better to use the fresh stuff out of your garden compared to the stuff that you get at either GNC or the health food store?

Clemente I think it is really important that the herbs that you get are organically grown because you do not want to ingest any poisons, so there are a lot of organic brands now. If you take herbs from your own garden, herbs contain water, and so you have to use twice as much fresh herb as you do dry herb because the dry herb has the oils concentrated, but you can certainly use fresh herbs, an example would be on a hot summer day, you are working outside, you take lemon balm, which is a wonderful perennial herb and easy to grow, too easy to grow, actually, and you put it in a jar of water and you set it in the sun while you are working.

Gore Make it like a sun tea.

Clemente Like a sun tea, right. In about 20 minutes to an hour later, you drink the lemon balm water. Lemon balm, in herbal lore, is known to chase away melancholy. In other words, it makes you feel happy.

Gore I like that.

Clemente And its scientific name is Melissa, which means pretty. Now you do not have to boil water, you do not have to do anything, you just do this and you are drinking lemon balm tea. I will infuse

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peppermint in tea water and just have that in the summer to kind of feel cooled off, so it could be such simple stuff. I also use clipping of herbs, basically as aroma therapy, lavender is a very relaxing herb. It is wonderful before you go to sleep, to put a couple of drops of lavender on a sleep pillow, I use a lavender spray in my office when chaos is reigning to keep the place a little calm. There are a lot of ways you can use various herbs for purposes that will help you to just sort of clean the air and feel good and I think when people are sick and they are trying to heal themselves and create places of sanctuary and peacefulness, herbs are just the perfect purpose for that, but there are also other plants besides herbs that have many functions. Roses, for example, you can make rosewater and just looking at a rose, it makes you stop and realize the absolute amazing miracle of the flower which I think brings people right down to the present moment which is what you need to do when you are trying to heal yourself from a sickness or relax and unwind, so for me, it is a lifestyle, it is just completely integrated into everything that I do, including edible flowers, which are an interesting way to get vitamins, Nasturtiums. Everybody seems to know Nasturtiums.

Gore I love Nasturtiums.

Clemente They are so high in vitamin C. When you are working in the garden in the summer and you are sweating and you find yourself nibbling on Nasturtiums, it is because you need vitamin C and it is the simplest and easiest way to get it. Borage blossoms taste like cucumber, so they kind of cool you down psychologically, so all of that really just makes me feel like these are the plants that are our allies in life. They are given to us for all these reasons and most people are not even aware of it. When people come into the garden city, they will be looking at the plants and I say, ‘rub it, smell it,’ and who would have ever known because you do not smell an herb unless you touch an herb. Stevia, you know what Stevia is?

Gore It is that sweetener, right.

Clemente It is a sweetener. It is a plant. It is an annual plant. It is called sugar leaf. You should see the look on a child’s face when you give them an organically grown leaf of Stevia and you say just bite into it, and they say no, but then they bite into it and they are like ah, it tastes like candy and this is a sugar leaf, and their eyes light up and they are like this is amazing and then say, what is next, tell me something new.

Gore And you can grow that in your garden, Stevia?

Clemente Yeah, it is an annual.

Gore It is every year.

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Clemente You grow it for one season or you can start it in the house, but it will not live in the garden like a regular annual.

Gore It is not hardy, right?

Clemente Right, every herb has a different life cycle.

Gore That is really interesting. I was interested in what you said about making your own rosewater, do you use the blossoms?

Clemente Yes, the blossoms, right.

Gore So it is not rose hips.

Clemente No rose hips are also very helpful but that is for vitamin C.

Gore Okay, and the rose hips, do they come from roses or from beach roses?

Clemente Beach roses are roses. Almost all roses have hips unless they are bred to be sterile, but the beach rose hips are the ones that everybody seems to know, but every rose that is going to form a fruit, that is what the hip is.

Gore So everything that forms that little green bulby thing.

Clemente It is actually red. It turns red when it is ripe and that is how you know it is ready. Now, a lot of people imagine that I will grow my own rose hips and dry my rose if I want to use rose hips, but I will often buy them, already prepared.

Gore Because you will need a lot of them.

Clemente You will need a lot of them and besides that they are very sour tasting, so I would rather them have them blended with other stuff and companies that do this know how to do this really well and being busy, I carry different types of herb teas and various things with me in the car and in my lunch bag so that whatever I need is there for me, so you can still go to the beach as long as it has not been sprayed for some toxin or something, harvest them, dry them and play around with that, that is all great, but you will find that you probably will not munching on them like candy because they are very sour.

Gore I moved up here recently from Maryland about a year ago and I find that I am confused between beach roses and beach plums.

Clemente Well, they are very different. Beach plums actually are related to cherries and they have little white flowers.

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Gore Okay.

Clemente And they are super-hardy. They have lived through two hurricanes on the Thimble Islands where I garden which is saying something about a plant, and then they get actually a small plum fruit that you make jam out of. The birds often get them before humans get them, so they are a small tree.

Gore Okay.

Clemente They will get to be about 12 to 15 feet tall.

Gore So the things that have the pink flowers are the beach roses.

Clemente Right, pink or white and they are very prickly and their leaves are very corrugated. They are not like fine roses, they are not all glossy and everything. And the flowers are very fragrant, bees love them and then the hips form if you do not take the dead flowers off and so a lot of people will dead head them in the middle of summer and leave the hips to form in the fall so they get multiple rounds of flowers from them.

Gore That sounds beautiful. I see you actually garden on the Thimble Islands. Do you have a house out there?

Clemente No, I work for clients. We take barges out and ferry boats out with our clients and our stuff.

Gore Wow, well that has got to be nice.

Clemente Yeah, talk about the sanctuary. There are some beautiful places out there that are very quiet and peaceful.

Gore I have done only the commercial cruises, which are fun.

Clemente You should see what it is like to go out on a barge with enough plants to plant 25 or 30 giant clay pots, a hundred bags of mulch because you have to bring it down the dock onto the barge and then make sure the tide is right and up the dock. It is quite a project, I mean I have staff that helps me with this, I do not physically do it all myself, but it is interesting. It is beautiful out there.

Gore I have to assume it is harder to garden out there, I would guess just because of the elements.

Clemente Yeah, very much so. When the weather is good, the plants grow beautifully, but the last two hurricanes have been devastating. And because they came one on top of another after we replanted from the first time, the plants did not have time to root in.

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- Gore There is not a lot of top soil.
- Clemente No, we bring it all in.
- Gore That is fascinating. I like the stuff you brought up before, you started talking about herbal infusions, teas and then you sort of segued into the more contemplative fact that the roses have and I think that is such a beautiful thought. In terms of kind of a psychological issue of being in a garden or being in a forest, can you talk a little bit more about that?
- Clemente I just finished reading a book about garden design and it is called *Heaven is a Garden* and in it, the woman who is very spiritually oriented, I went to see her speak, it was amazing, she talked about, in Japan, they do something called forest bathing where they have national forests, they are healing forests for people with cancer and other diseases and they walk through the forest and it has been proven that their whole system increases, the white blood cells and their immune response due to the reaction of them walking through a mature forest. It is called forest bathing. I will be talking about that when I talk at Smilow Cancer Hospital. That to me is amazing because all of us have probably experienced walking in the woods and all of the sudden hearing the silence and the birds and looking at the trees and realizing how big and beautiful they are, or looking down and noticing all the moss and all the little life and all of the sudden, you are in a new place in the world. You are quiet and you are focused and that is because you are in the present moment and that is what gardens do and that is what nature does, so to me I think we desperately need to disconnect from all the technology that we have, from all the stressors that we have, I mean it used be you just answer the phone. Now you have e-mail, voicemail, Facebook, your cell phone, everybody assumes that when they call you, you should be instantaneously available, and to unplug you almost feel guilty and that is what the garden does. When I go out, I live in Middletown, and I bought an acre, almost 2 acres, of which about an acre and a quarter I garden in and I garden on Sundays quietly and alone and it is wonderful for me.
- Gore Nancy, this is really great and I am going to want to pick up on this contemplative aspect of gardening after the break, but right now, we have to take a short break for medical minute. Please stay tuned to learn more information about the Healing Power of Plants with Nancy DuBrule-Clemente.

Medical Minute

There are over 13 million cancer survivors in the United States and over 100,000 here in Connecticut. Completing treatment is an exciting milestone but cancer and its treatment can be a life changing experience. Following treatment, cancer survivors can face several long term side effects of cancer, including heart problems, osteoporosis, fertility issues and an increased risk of second cancers. Resources for cancer survivors are available at federally designated comprehensive cancer centers to help keep cancer survivors well and focused on healthy living. The survivorship clinic at Yale Cancer Center focuses on providing guidance and direction to empower survivors to maximize their health, quality of life and longevity. This has been a medical

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minute brought to you as a public service by Yale Cancer Center and Smilow Cancer Hospital at Yale New Haven. More information is available at yalecancercenter.org. You are listening to WNPR, Connecticut's Public Media Source for news and ideas.

- Gore Welcome back to Yale Cancer Center Answers. This is Dr. Steven Gore and I am joined today by my guest Nancy DuBrule-Clemente. We are discussing various plants and their healing powers. Nancy, before the break, you were talking about these gardens or forests I guess in Japan that people stroll through and have changes in their white blood counts and immune system and it brought me to thinking of walking through the Muir Woods in California which you know, it is so extraordinary to be among those trees just knowing how old they are there is something very sacred about that.
- Clemente Have you ever hugged a tree? It sounds crazy but when I tell you, I have seen people do it, especially before hurricanes.
- Gore I think I have and actually I am a little bit embarrassed.
- Clemente Yeah, you can admit it. I talk to plants, but trees are just amazing when you think about it, the trunks rooted so deeply in the earth and the canopy going up so high and when you go to Muir Woods, you think to yourself, because I have been there to, you think, how many human generations have walked through here, the history, the energy that is in that space, it is stunning and there is also kind of the opposite when it comes to gardens. One of the things I like to create for people are garden sanctuaries and gardens of retreat and relaxation and even if you have a tiny yard, you can figure out ways to design the space to make areas private and smaller and they are kind of like escape pods, I will be outside but do not call me. I am not available and I think if everybody had that and not an indoor room but an outdoor room where they really need to listen to the song of the birds, the chirping of the frogs, there are crickets, the wind in the evergreens and just watch. I watch insects buzzing around in my garden because there is a big problem with pollinators declining and I look at all the bees and all the pollinators in my garden and I watch them because I am curious now if we are having a problem with them. They are all happy in my garden, but I like to watch what flowers they go to and how they operate, how many different ones I can count and things like that. It is like meditation, it is a grounding exercise, just using plants and the natural world and gardens to do so. I have a garden and I made a courtyard and in the middle of the courtyard, I have a 7-circuit walking labyrinth which is a meditative process.
- Gore You did that with bricks or?
- Clemente Stone of two or three kinds, I have a wonderful stone mason that did it and I also have many flowers that are white or pale colored that are vespertine which means they open at night. And because I work during most daylight hours and I relax after dark, I go outside and this is a private space because it used to be a swimming pool, so part of the fences are still up. There are stone walls for sitting and I can do yoga, I can just sit, I can watch the flowers open, I can just smell the

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flowers, I can pick the herbs and rub them and smell them and just drop the stress level down and clear the mind a little bit and everybody needs this, I believe. Especially people who work in indoor spaces that are not connected to the outside on a regular basis, they lose the connection to the natural world that all man has had until very recently. So, it can be tiny, it can be anything, it could be a little patio, it is really fun for me to design these spaces. A lot of my clients are downsizing. I have had many clients for many years and they are moving from larger houses to smaller houses but they still want their garden. And it is really important to them.

Gore Have you been up to the garden on the seventh floor in the Cancer Hospital?

Clemente Oh yeah, absolutely.

Gore That is a lovely spot, the healing garden at Smilow.

Clemente I was there on a cold day in November, but I can imagine how well used that garden is.

Gore It is, even in the winter, we get people out there.

Clemente There is a water feature, there are wind chimes, there are all those kinds of things that awaken the senses. I have had many family members very sick with various ailments and I know that whatever hospital I go to or medical facility I was at, finding an outdoor space was critical. I used to take a great aunt from a convalescent home outside every time I visited her. All she wanted to do was have me bring her outside and look at the ducks in the river. And I knew that she just had to get out of those confines, but yet that is a nice garden and it is very simple in its design. It is not a complicated garden which is also a way to induce serenity because if it was a wildly crazy cottage garden people would not be relaxed when they are there, but to go from a building that is medical and probably pretty sterile inside with a lot of love floating around but probably not a whole lot of green space and to be able to go outside on a roof and hear water and hear wind chimes and birds and even up there I am sure there are butterflies, hummingbirds, everybody is up there.

Gore That is all there.

Clemente Because that is a little pocket in the city. It is a great gift and it is really important, I think every hospital should have a garden.

Gore I think they are doing it more now. When they built a new hospital at Johns-Hopkins where I used to be, it is on quite a busy street in kind of a transitional neighborhood I would say, but right in front of the hospital, they put in this, I call the Zen Garden, it is a little austere, but in a very lovely way, it has some flat water and some plants but it is very simple and it is just a spectacular place to be in. They must constantly have people in it.

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Gore Yeah, I think so.

Clemente It drives you out.

Gore It does. It is unfortunate that it is placed so near the street, but you can feel yourself closed off.

Clemente I have a water garden too with a waterfall that I can adjust. I am not on the main road, but down the hill on certain days, mostly low cloudy days, I can hear the road below and in the summer, I hear the motorcycles and I grew up across from 84 in West Hartford before it opened and then it opened literally across the street.

Gore Surprise.

Clemente And the noise of the highway bothered me so much that when the noise is too much for me I just turn the waterfall up and when there is nobody mowing and there is no noise around, I turn the waterfall down to a trickle.

Gore Gotcha.

Clemente And now modern water gardens all have that features, so it is pretty interesting. The other piece of this is I asked a really dear friend, she does activities at convalescent homes, and she has worked in hospice, and I said, so tell me about what you think the Healing Power of Plants is and her eyes lit up and she said, I have patients or clients where they are so confined that I go outside and I pick flowers and put them on the cart with a vase and I walk into the activities room and I put it down and I pair them up and I make arrangements with the flowers and people that were not talking would start to talk. People would say, this is what my mother used to do. I grew this in my garden. My mother had this in her garden. This was in my grandmother's garden, lilacs and lily of the valley, and all these particular plants that have a meaning to your memories.

Gore I know exactly what you mean. I was in search of a plant that was in my parent's garden when I was quite young and I remember them being, or they seemed like, it must have been 5 feet tall and they had lovely blue flowers and they made like bean pods.

Clemente Wisteria.

Gore No. We called them sweet peas, but what I came to realize is it was false indigo.

Clemente Ah! Baptisia, yes.

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- Gore But they are not so tall when you are not 2 years old. But I love them and they evoke that little memory which was probably when we were in the middle of Chicago.
- Clemente That is a native prairie plant, so they probably loved it out there.
- Gore Yeah.
- Clemente When I was a kid, I grew up in the North End of Hartford and later found out that I played underneath a bridal wreath spirea, I did not know plants when I was a kid, but every time I see that plant or smell it, it is a very common, I would go, I need to have one of those and I always had one everywhere I lived, and I realized that when I looked at really old slides, that was the plant we used to sit under and make little forts and stuff.
- Gore Right.
- Clemente And I did a workshop at the Mercy Center in Madison called Garden Memories where I invited people to come in and we talked about the plants that are memories. It opened up the most unbelievable memories from people and then in the afternoon, I had two helpers that help them design gardens with those plants in them.
- Gore Oh, nice.
- Clemente So they can recreate many versions of your childhood memories and all you have to do is ask the question and people just flow forth with, I mean I grew up in the North End of Hartford, I did not even think we had a garden, though when I look at the pictures, I spent my childhood in Elizabeth Park, can you imagine what roses do for me, just a look of a rose arbor covered with pink roses because that is the most beautiful rose garden and we used to go swinging there and take pictures.
- Gore Nice.
- Clemente So I think that is another way that people could heal using gardens and plants is bringing them back to a safe comfortable place, planting a few things that mean something to them and that evoke safety in the sense of home and then they have a refuge where they go if they have had a rough day, I am just going to go sit and stare at my Baptisia for a while and I am home now, and I think that really could make a huge difference in people's lives rather than the next best videogame or something.
- Gore Absolutely. Tell me about your experience with cancer patients or the impact of plants for patients with cancer if you have anything.
- Clemente My sister is a 6-year breast cancer survivor. And she was at Brigham and Women's in Boston.

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Gore I have heard of it.

Clemente She had a really tough time and one of her best friends also had cancer and they used their garden as a way to keep communication with each other. Then, when she would come to my house, she would just walk right outside, I would take her wig off, I would say because you did not have to worry about what you look like, just walk around, pick, smell, play with the flowers and then always take plants home, pieces of little plants home. So now she has a garden, she has a lot of my plants in it and so it connects us in that way, also at times, I took care of both of my parents at home for many years before they died with the help of many caretakers and when I would get home from that experience, I would be emotionally exhausted and I would go outside and walk around and that to me was, if I did not have my garden at that point to go to, I do not know what I would have done. It really was the only way I could process the deep emotional work of caring for old and dying parents that you love and then having to come home to the real world and get ready to go back to work and still feeling guilty and confused and all of that, so to me I have seen it work in many ways. I have also installed gardens that are memorials to people which is kind of interesting and we have done school gardens and kids gardens as well, but in terms of people that are sick, people are just drawn to a garden, people come to our garden center and we are in a house surrounded by gardens, it is very modest but it is not a busy road and sometimes they have never been there before and will go out to the garden and you will find them wandering around and saying, hi, welcome to Natureworks, how are you today, and they just look at you and they start to cry, like my dog died today and I do not know what drew me in here but something brought me in here and I am walking around and it feels so peaceful and it is so beautiful and there are always butterflies and I do not even know why I am telling you this.

Gore Yeah.

Clemente And I am like, well that is okay, I give them a hug, I do not even know who they are but I am so glad that they came here and something drew them there and then you feel safe and that to me is worth more than all the sales of plants I could ever make, and it happens over and over again to the point where you just think to yourself something is going on here, people say it is magical and I think it is because there is so much life going on because we are an eco system, we do not use poisons, we have so many dragonflies and butterflies and birds and nests of birds and stuff everywhere and people are not used to walking into a place that is so abuzz and alive and we are like look at this bug and we will tell them all about that bug. We are not afraid of the bug, instead we are fascinated by the bug, you know.

Gore You are going to be doing a workshop at Smilow? What is that going to be about? We just have about a minute to go.

Clemente It is called the Healing Power of Plants and it is going to be basically about what we talked about today, two parts, one is specific types of plants and ways to use plants with the healing properties and the other piece would be how the actual garden itself can help you in various ways, so I am

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going to try and break it up into two parts. I am going to show my garden and my labyrinth and some of the special spaces that I have designed to sort of give people inspiration, I am going to bring plants with me of all kinds, so that people can touch and see and smell them and share all of the things that worked for me and I have seen work for others, so it is not just going to be me talking, it is going to be beautiful pictures and lots of hands on smelling and feeling of plants. So it is going to be fun.

Gore And what is the date?

Clemente It is April 2nd and it is free.

Gore Open to the public?

Clemente It is open to the public and everybody should come down.

Gore At the cancer hospital.

Clemente At Smilow Cancer Hospital, right.

Nancy DuBrule-Clemente is owner of Natureworks Horticultural Services in Northford, Connecticut. We invite you to share your questions and comments, you can send them to canceranswers@yale.edu or you can leave a voicemail message at 888-234-4YCC and as an additional resource, archive programs are available in both audio and written format at yalecancercenter.org. I am Bruce Barber hoping you will join us again next Sunday evening at 6:00 for another edition of Yale Cancer Center Answers here on WNPR, Connecticut's Public Media Source for news and ideas.