

M.A. student, Educational studies, Concordia University

Growing herbs at Concordia: Learning through tradition

In many countries, the process of growing, picking and applying herbs is a subject of transmission of tradition developed over centuries. Herbs, as elements of biodiversity, have played a significant role in the survival of people for thousands of years. Nowadays, we have lost our relations with the herbal tradition, mainly due to living in the big city. The structure of economically developed societies and their way of commodification of health, together with the prevailing science paradigm, has seriously damaged the previously natural interaction between humans and plants.

Today, Concordia students volunteer to grow herbs in the Loyola City Farm and in the Concordia Greenhouse as part Sustainable Concordia. Last year, the City Farm School created the first hands-on internship program on herbal usage. This engagement with sustainability provides students with many opportunities for experiential and transformative learning. The main purpose of this qualitative research, based on interviews with both volunteers and participants in the Internship program, aims to discover what students learn through this particular form of work with herbs. What value does it bring to their life? Does it increase their consciousness in terms of health and well-being? How is it viewed through the prism of sustainability? How does tradition make meaning to Concordia students today? What do they learn about our society? Collected data will examine the link between experience, knowledge, critical reflection and changes of the frame of thinking, feeling and doing.

Bio: Tsveta Krasteva

I am a Masters student in Educational Studies at Concordia University, working with Professor Arpi Hamalian. My interest interests are herbs, students learning about the cultivation of herbs, herbal medicine, education as a tool for liberation, and community engagement.

Herbs have always fascinated me. Perhaps because I grew up in a country with a rich herbal tradition, which is still alive (Bulgaria), and every year in the summer I was gathering my herbs in the mountains. As a graduate student at Concordia, I wrote a paper on the regulations on natural products in the European Union and North America. I chose the topic because our Professor told us to write about something that we love. Well, I loved herbs and wanted to know more about their place in developed countries. This is how it started.

Later, when I discovered that students grow herbs in the Greenhouse and Loyola garden, this triggered my research interest again. I was wondering why they do it, and how they perceive herbs – as part of tradition (but which one), with regard to nature, as a tool to sustain their well-being, or else? And mainly, I was interested in discovering what they learn about themselves and society during their interaction with herbs, and if and how it changes their way of being. Maybe in the heart of my desire was to see how herbs are viewed and used in a culture and society different from these I was familiar with.

I look forward to continuing in this research focus by taking a deeper look at the reasons behind the recent revival of interest in natural products, in the context of our society's complex development – food, migration of people, health system and commodification. I am particularly interested in herbal usage as a way of prevention and keeping good health among the immigrants in Canada, and in herbal traditions of the Indigenous peoples. And not to forget to mention: one day I will have my own big garden with herbs, too!

