

EXCERPT FROM RECORDED INTERVIEW OF KAREN BROOKS, PART 2

TALKING ABOUT NETTLES

CONDUCTED BY JENNIFER ANDRULLI

IN SOLDOTNA, ALASKA

DECEMBER 30, 2021

ORAL HISTORY 2021-02-31 PT.2

JENNIFER ANDRULLI: What is the role of plants in your everyday life now?

KAREN BROOKS: In my everyday life, plants play a very important part. I use -- I pick nettles. Nettles is a very, very special plant. It's -- oh, it's so special. My friend, my herbalist friend Debra, she always had nettles. I -- nettles is high in protein. It's amazing if you dry it and sprinkle it on food. It just looks beautiful. And the -- uh, nettle vinegar. Oh gosh, it tastes -- it's really earthy and dark. And it's just really yummy. Nettle vinegar. Uh, I make it both for putting -- using on salads to eat internally. And I also make nettle vinegar to put on your scalp, because it promotes growth -- hair growth. It makes your hair shiny and soft. It's -- it's an amazing plant.

JENNIFER ANDRULLI: You use that every day. Your hair is beautiful and shiny.

KAREN BROOKS: Yes, yes.

JENNIFER ANDRULLI: And so, you harvest -- you have a harvest schedule, and that's part of your cycle of the year. You travel to harvest your plants.

KAREN BROOKS: Correct. I live in Manley Hot Springs, which is in Interior. It's actually in the middle of the state. Nettles doesn't grow readily in Interior. There's a few secluded spots that you can find it, but not to the extent of what I pick. I pick bushels. I have baskets that -- of different sizes. And I would say like a -- a clothes basket, I pick about 10 of those a year. And when you -- I dry 'em and I dry 'em -- The first couple of years, I dried them in a sauna. I turned an outdoor sauna into a drying shed. And that was the fastest, uh, way to get the plants dried and put away. Because, yes, there is a time schedule there, because it's right around the time of -- of arnica. And, you know it -- depending on the winter, you gotta pick when it's ready, because you gotta pick that nettles before it flowers.

JENNIFER ANDRULLI: Why?

KAREN BROOKS: Because of the chemical in the plant. It is not good. Um, so, you -- you pick it young. You know, you pick it when it's about 12 inches and smaller. You know, and it's -- it's a big deal. It takes like -- me about five days to pick that much, you know.

JENNIFER ANDRULLI: Five days to pick, five -- and dry at the same time?

KAREN BROOKS: Right.

JENNIFER ANDRULLI: And process. Processing looks like cleaning the plant, then drying it, then putting it in bags.

KAREN BROOKS: And I put it in bags, uh, paper bags. I don't put it in plastic. I

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don't like plastic. Paper or glass jars. Now, I pick for you, I pick for Molly. I pick for my family, uh, first. Then I process, uh, however -- you know, if I need more vinegar. You know, I always make nettle vinegar. And depending on how much I get that year, depends on how -- what I'm going to do. Sometimes I don't get enough to make much of the hair rinse.

JENNIFER ANDRULLI: Thank you for your help and picking nettles. Mom also picks the nettles for our classes that we teach at UAA and other work that we do around the State of Alaska. It's such a precious plant -- it -- you might pick 10 hampers, and it shrinks down to the size of two hampers.

KAREN BROOKS: Oh, smaller than that. Not even full paper grocery bags. Maybe one-and-a-half bags is what that ends up. So, three half bags of nettles is what it is. It's a very succulent plant. And you keep just the leaves.

JENNIFER ANDRULLI: And to clarify, you harvest the nettles before they flower for internal use?

KAREN BROOKS: Right.

JENNIFER ANDRULLI: For food and medicine. At the end of the summer, if you're in a nettle patch, you can look deep next to the ground, and you'll find fresh nettles throughout the summer and fall, that have not flowered yet. It's just harder to pick at that time?

KAREN BROOKS: I -- I think so. And we're so ready to eat fresh green food that, you know, while nettles is in season, you know, at -- When you, uh, steam it, it's -- it's just as good as spinach steamed with -- oh gosh.

JENNIFER ANDRULLI: Well, and it's -- Uh, like you said earlier, more mineral rich and it has trace minerals in it.

KAREN BROOKS: Right. Yes, it's very nutritious. It's one of the seven sacred plants and, um, everyone knows nettles. Everyone on the planet knows nettles.