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Contributors

Our contributors bring herbal medicine to life from every perspective. From clinic to countryside, research to remedy, they share expert knowledge, thoughtful insight and a genuine passion for the plants and people at the heart of our profession.



Alice Johnston

Alice graduated from Heartwood Education and received the Arthur Barker Best Graduate award. Alice has a particular interest in biophilia. She co-led the NIMH baseline study Biophilia – Nature in Herbal Practice. Her approach reflects over 20 years of involvement in the environmental movement and deep commitment to ecological awareness and sustainability. She regularly conducts herb walks and community talks.



Elisabeth Brooke

Elisabeth qualified as a Medical Herbalist in 1980 with the NIMH, winning the Pharmacology prize. She ran a training clinic for herbal students on behalf of the NIMH and was a tutor at the School of Herbal Medicine. She taught the first Adult Education evening class in Herbal Medicine in London, and had a private herbal practice. Elisabeth has taught workshops all over the world.



Hannah Charman

Hannah qualified as a Medical Herbalist in 1999 and has 'one foot in science and the other in the esoteric'. She studied astrology and advanced hypnotherapy. She runs a home herbal practice in Shropshire, specialising in natural approaches to menopause. Hannah is Shropshire Ambassador for the Herb Society. In 2022, Hannah published her first book 'Minted'.



Dr. Anita Wąsik

Dr. Anita Wasik is a biomedical scientist, medical herbalist, and energy and intuitive healer specialising in complex, multi-system chronic illness. She works with the physiological, emotional and less tangible dimensions of chronic illness in a grounded, structured way. She has a particular interest in environmentally-driven illness. Dr. Wasik is an author, international speaker, and co-host of the *Source Medicine Podcast*.



Elizabeth Fisher

Elizabeth is a medical herbalist and English teacher in a state secondary school in Hampshire. She trained at Betonica School of Herbal Medicine in Devon and qualified in 2025. Having had neurodivergent children of her own (now in their 20s), she has a particular interest in supporting students with Special Educational Needs at all stages of their education.



Kevin Orbell-McSean

After thirty-five years in full-time herbal practice, Kevin embraced semi-retirement in January 2026. His professional life was devoted to patients and to promoting herbal medicine as widely as possible: through radio, newspaper and magazine interviews, talks, lecturing, hosting practitioner meetings and student clinics. Kevin now devotes time to writing. With three books completed, the hunt for a literary agent begins, which Kevin confesses feels more daunting than finding patients...

Sustainability in Herbal Practice

By Alice Johnston

When we talk about sustainability in herbal medicine, the conversation often begins with the herbs themselves. Are they organically grown? Ethically sourced? Wild harvested with care? These are important questions, which I ask, but due to the complexity I have to rely on the trust I have in the producers I buy from.

From my mid 20s onwards, I was involved in the environmental movement and for almost a decade worked for Friends of the Earth Scotland. My early awareness of my footprint on this Earth informed many of my life choices, private and professional. The climate and biodiversity crises are accelerating. When I set up my herbal medicine practice, I treated this as an opportunity to consider every aspect and to make the most sustainable choices within my own context. Like many of you, I am mindful of the sustainability of the herbs that I buy, choosing not to use herbs which are under strain, and trusting that companies that I buy from use their expertise to make sustainable decisions, influencing the supply chain in a positive way.

Seeing patients and dispensing sustainably sourced herbs is only one part of being a herbalist. It requires a herbal practice, which is shaped by energy use, banking, printing, digital services, devices, pensions, insurance and the many ordinary systems that sit quietly in the background of our work. And these, too, deserve our attention.

Sustainability

Many definitions of sustainability exist for every context, including economic, biological and organisational. I am guided by two; the first, for the here and now,

by Greenpeace: “a sustainable activity is able to be sustained without running out of resources or causing harm”.¹ The second is by the United Nations (UN), which states that sustainability is “meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”.² It is my guide looking forward, as I want there to be a future full of diversity and resilience in which nature with humans in it can thrive, and where there are future herbalists.

Linear versus circular economy

We are all actors in the material economy, as private individuals and professionally by running our businesses. The current global economic model mostly relies on a linear economy,³ in which we take virgin materials from the earth, make them into consumer products, use them, and then discard them into landfill.

By contrast, in a circular economy we keep products in high-value economic use for as long as possible: re-use, repair, recycle.

This concept encourages me to not only think about what it is I am buying but also to consider where it has come from, how long it will last and what will happen to it after use.⁴

Business areas to consider

Let us take banking. Have you ever thought about what your bank does with your money? You can do so by checking out the bank's positive and negative investment criteria. You might be surprised to find out that your bank invests in weapons, tobacco, gambling, porn or activities linked to child labour, for example. Ethical banks vary in their investment policies, but often

Linear versus circular economy



avoid financing fossil fuels, arms, or environmentally destructive industries. Additionally, they support initiatives based around sustainability, community, and charity.^{5,6} You can ask the same question when it comes to savings and where your pension is invested. Pension providers like the National Employment Savings Trust (NEST) offer an Ethical Fund, which avoids companies that harm the environment and society, focusing heavily on sustainability and ethics.⁷ As with everything in life, no institution is entirely without compromise, but having investigated the matter, I have made an informed choice who I bank and save with, making sure that my money supports sustainability

I use payment services for my practice and regularly check for a sustainable option. However, to date I have not found a service provider who is convincingly sustainable by for example running their technologies on renewable energy or having convincingly sustainable investment criteria. It is important to be vigilant of greenwashing and I check any sustainability statements against rigorous and reputable third-party environmental, social and governance (ESG) certification like B Corp or CDP scoring. Being a customer gives me the opportunity to check in and lobby with my payment platform to make better choices and become more sustainable.

Communication is an important part of my practice and includes marketing materials such as printed leaflets, business cards, posters and handouts. They all involve material resources: paper, inks, coatings, transport, and waste. I work with a company in the UK, which offers professional products based on fully recycled paper, plant-based inks and no plastic coatings.⁸ In addition, they run their facilities on renewables and look after their staff. Importantly, their prices are competitive with other providers.

At the same time, information technology (IT) and digital communication are not impact-free. Website hosting, email, newsletters, video calls, office applications and cloud storage all depend on energy-intensive infrastructure. Sustainable choices exist from small local service providers to the large players in the market. As a herbalist, I store health data of my patients and online cloud security was the additional factor in my decision making.^{9,10}

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is quickly weaving its way into our personal and professional lives and is here to stay. It is important to understand that it is not impact free. The data centres have a significant energy and water footprint and training AI is very energy intensive.^{11,12} I use AI and I believe that AI literacy helps me to decide what I want to use it for, when it provides a genuine benefit to my work, such as drafting content and marketing materials for me to edit and finalise for example.

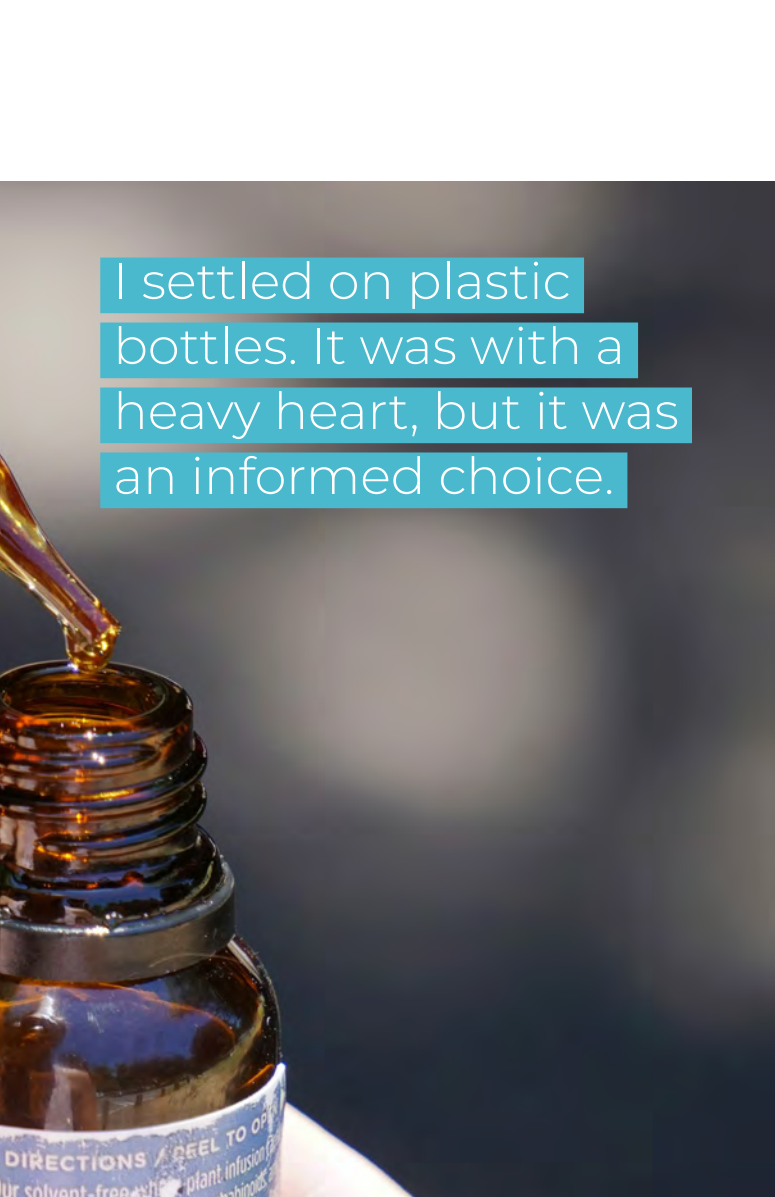
Which hardware to buy is a very easy way to make sustainable choices. Laptops, phones, printers, routers, and tablets all have environmental costs linked to mining, manufacture, transport, and disposal. Choosing refurbished devices, repairing rather than replacing where possible, and extending the life of what I already



own, plays a huge part of my sustainable practice.¹³

Lastly, operations: the day-to-day running of my practice offers many practical sustainable opportunities. I have made climate-friendly renewable choices for heating and electricity with my energy provider. For all administrative work, dispensing and postage, I have permanently shifted to recycled paper and packaging materials. In practice this means that I only use recycled, plastic-free and non-bleached paper bags for dried herbs and small carrier bags and recycled Avery labels for all my prescriptions. To add my logo or return address, I use stamps and plant-based ink. To post prescriptions, I use plastic-free, recycled jiffy bags and recycled tape. My cleaning products are environmentally-friendly and available at my local refillery.

Sometimes these decisions are simple, but sometimes they are not. I had to realise that sustainability can result in settling for an option which is, at first glance, the wrong one. I practice across the UK and the majority of my prescriptions are posted to my patients. This is one of several reasons why I do not offer a bottle-return service. In this context, my tincture bottles become a disposable item. To decide whether to use glass or plastic tincture bottles I looked into reliable packaging lifecycle research, such as the comparative packaging studies published by NABU, the German Nature and Biodiversity Conservation Union.^{14,15}



I settled on plastic bottles. It was with a heavy heart, but it was an informed choice.

Based on their data, which weighs the intensive manufacturing and transport footprints of glass against alternative material, I settled on plastic bottles. It was with a heavy heart, but it was an informed choice.

Sustainability is very important to me and has informed my personal and professional choices for a very long time. I have written this article in the hope to inspire and show that it is possible to make better choices. As herbalists, we always consider the whole terrain of our patients, their history, relationships, diet and lifestyle, rather than purely the affected body system. And we can do the same for our sustainable herbal practice by asking questions beyond the sustainability of our herbs, but also asking: How is my clinic heated? What powers my website? What happens to my packaging? Where is my money invested? What kind of future do these everyday choices support?

These questions are not meant to overwhelm. Quite the opposite. I am co-tutor for the Biophilia module at Heartwood Education and present this information to the third-year students to provide information to inspire and empower them to make informed choices when they set up their practices. Likewise, with this article, I hope to offer encouragement and to remind us that sustainability is not a separate specialism reserved for experts. It is something we can engage with practically, and creatively, each in our own setting. Please see below for websites to help you to make a start. 🌱

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