

Trail Quest: Herb walks with Lanny Kaufer

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With our recent rains, many of our local plants have begun to leaf and sprout, signaling the beginning of spring. The new growth makes this a great time to get out on the trails and learn more about the plants.

One of the resources we have here locally to learn about plants and their uses is Lanny Kaufer. A resident of Ojai, Mr. Kaufer has been offering herb walks and sharing his knowledge in the Ojai Valley since 1976. He is now also offering herb walks in Santa Barbara.

Mr. Kaufer's interest in studying plants and their edible and medicinal properties began in 1967.

"I was visiting a Pueblo Indian reservation, in New Mexico, and got a cold while I was there, and this older man brought me some cedar leaf tea," Mr. Kaufer told the News-Press. "And I thought, 'All right, I'm here, I'll try it.' And my cold went away, and that piqued my interest. So, I started looking into this whole idea of using plants for medicines."

In 1964, Mr. Kaufer moved to Santa Barbara to study at USCB. "I also spent a lot of time in the backcountry, hiking and backpacking, and often depended on the plants to stay out there longer," Mr. Kaufer said. "And I just developed a tremendous love of our wilderness, and made a personal commitment that I was going to do what I could to try to preserve it."

While in Santa Barbara, Mr. Kaufer met and studied with well-known herbalist William LeSassier. It was LeSassier who started the herb walks that Mr. Kaufer now leads.

In the mid-1970s Mr. Kaufer met another of his teachers, Chumash plant expert Juanita Centeno. She was leading field trips for an anthropology class, offered through USCB, in which he participated.

"That experience just really cemented it for me; learning from her the uses of plants that are still available today," Mr. Kaufer recalled. "It wasn't just a history lesson of what native peoples used to do. Here was a living Chumash person using these plants."

The herb walks are typically offered on a Saturday or Sunday, 9-11:30 a.m., and are one to two miles in length. The walks can feature a discussion as many as a dozen or more plants and their uses.

The News-Press recently joined Mr. Kaufer for an herb walk along San Antonio Creek Trail, near Tucker's Grove in Santa Barbara.

On the trail, one of the first plants Mr. Kaufer pointed out was poison oak. Following the recent rains, the plant is more noticeable now with its shiny green leaves in their signature three-leaflet form. It is the urushiol oil on the leaves and stems that can cause irritation. Growing next to the

poison oak was mugwort, which is said to be a natural remedy for poison oak rash.

"One of the things I learned from Juanita Centeno, was respect for the plants," Mr. Kaufer said.

For example, to gather mugwort in the Chumash tradition, Mr. Kaufer explained, "They might come out on this trail, and see this first mugwort plant. They would stop and talk to it, maybe sing a song to thank it for everything it gave to them. And leave some kind of offering, be it tobacco, or some other herb, or some of their hair. Then, they would keep going until they found a nice big patch of mugwort, and that's where they would do their harvesting."

"That's ecology at its most basic — making sure you're not eliminating what could be the one plant that might flower, and make seed, and propagate the species."

To use mugwort as a remedy for poison oak, gather some of the bigger, mature leaves, from several plants so as not to take too many from one plant. Wad the leaves up in one hand and roll them around with the other hand; the leaves will then begin to exude a green juice that can be applied directly to the affected area and allowed to dry. You can also dab that same wad of leaves onto the area.

It was interesting to learn that mugwort is also used in China, and while it's a different species of mugwort, it nonetheless has similar properties and uses. In Chinese herbal medicine, fresh mugwort leaves can be gathered and dried to make a tea, which can be taken as a cold remedy. And the dry leaves gathered directly from the plant can be fashioned into cones that can be burned, called moxa, which is widely used in acupuncture for moxibustion to heat acupuncture needles or by placing it on the patient to heat a particular area.

Mugwort is also said to help stimulate dreaming, either by hanging fresh green leaves over a bed, or by filling a small sachet and putting the leaves under the pillow.

Growing next to the poison oak was wild blackberry. With its similar three-leaflet form, it can sometimes be mistaken for poison oak. However, as Mr. Kaufer pointed out, the stems of blackberry have small thorns on them, a reminder that it's part of the rose family.

Offering insight into how plants can grow and develop together, Mr. Kaufer noted that poison oak, mugwort and blackberry are all colony plants. That is, they propagate by sending out shoots and forming massive root systems, which help keep the topsoil in place. This in turn helps larger trees take hold and establish their roots, which in turn keeps creek and river banks in place, minimizing erosion and sta-

bilizing the habitat they share with other plants.

Another plant along the walk used by other cultures was bay tree. Mediterranean bay laurel has been used for centuries as a seasoning. California bay laurel, which is said to be three times stronger, is in the same family.

California bay laurel, however, has to be dried first before it can be used because it contains the toxin safrole. Safrole oil can also serve as an insect repellent; laurel wreaths were said to be used, in part, to offer relief from insects to Olympic athletes after an event.

The Chumash also knew about these properties, and used California bay laurel to make baskets to store acorns in to keep insects away.

With all these great plants available for use, it's tempting to run out and start gathering some. However, it's important to know that within Los Padres National Forest, while one is allowed to gather plants for personal use, you are required to have a permit to gather sensitive plants or to gather them for commercial purposes.

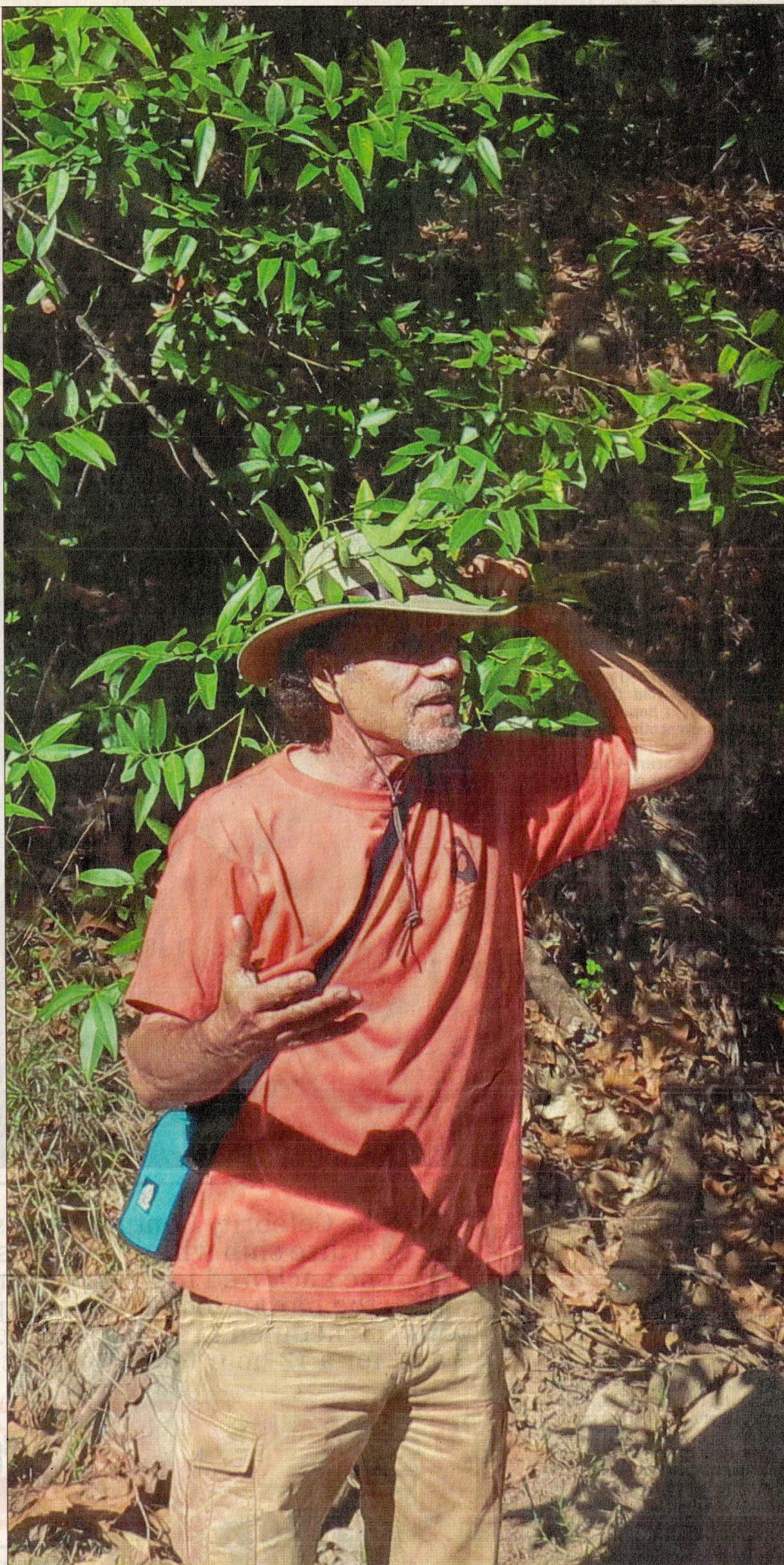
Mr. Kaufer has a botanical collecting permit that allows him to gather plants as an educator. He also has an operating permit for guides and outfitters from the Forest Service to lead large group hikes, such as for schools.

In addition to the shorter herbs walks, several times a year he offers longer day hikes into the backcountry. Mr. Kaufer also enjoys bringing in other teachers to share their knowledge and wisdom about plants. In the past he's been joined by Chumash elder Julie Tumamait-Stenslie.

This spring he will be joined by Dr. James Adams, from the USC School of Pharmacology, for an herb walk along Horn Canyon Trail near Ojai. Dr. Adams is the co-author, with the late Chumash healer Cecilia Garcia, of "Healing with Medicinal Plants of the West: Cultural and Scientific Basis for Their Use."

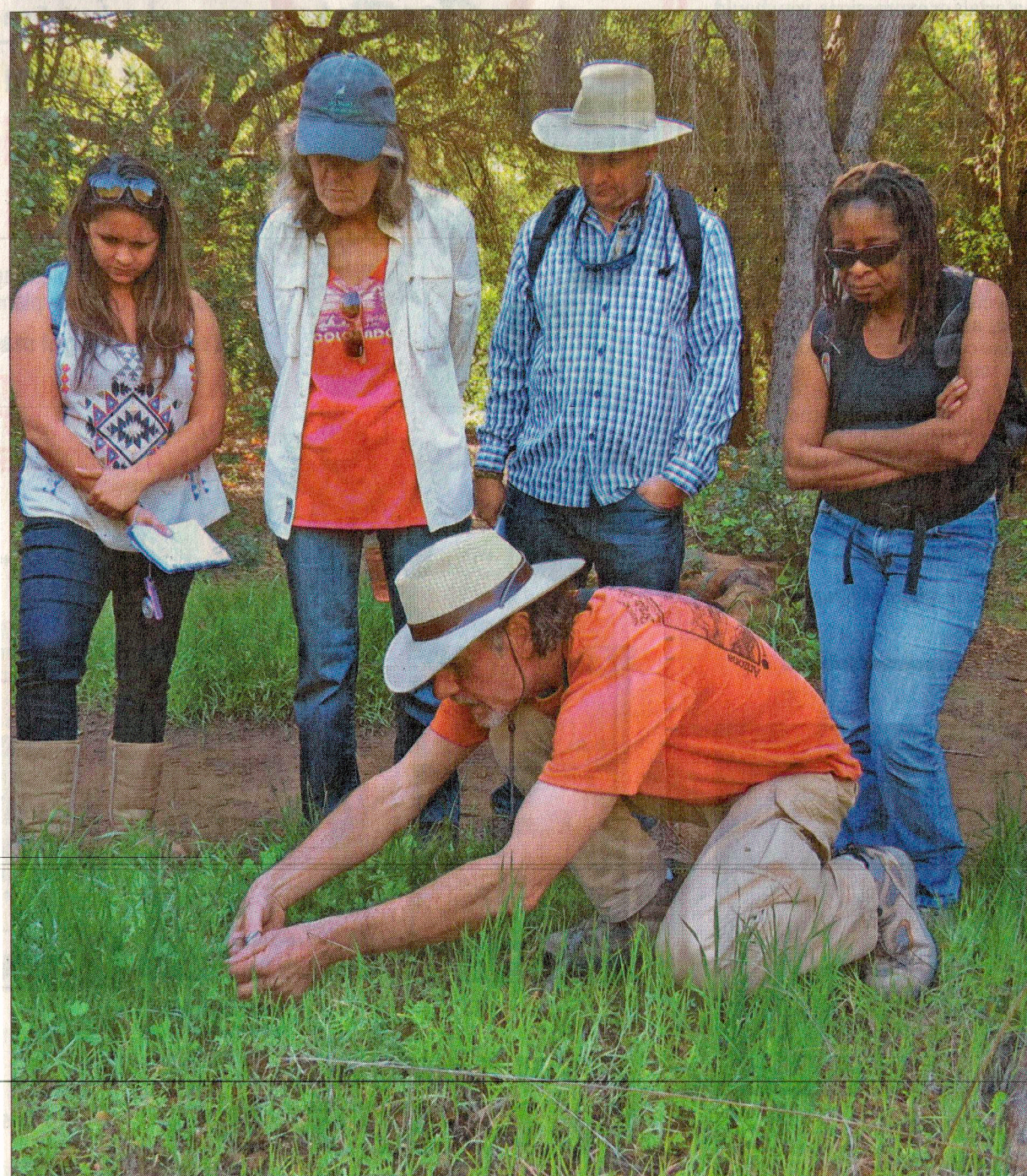
The regular herb walks are \$20 per person and are offered February through November. For more information about upcoming hikes or questions about local plants and herbs, go to <http://herbwalks.com>. The website also has an extensive list of links to other resources and recommended books about plants.

James Wapotich is a volunteer wilderness ranger with the Los Padres National Forest and is working on a book about the Santa Barbara backcountry. If you have a favorite hike, a trail you're curious about or questions about hiking, send them to jwapotich@yahoo.com.



JAMES WAPOTICH PHOTOS

Lanny Kaufer collects a plant sample for discussion along San Antonio Creek Trail.



Lanny Kaufer describes the edible and medicinal uses of plants found along the trail.