

 **Skill Share – Kate Searcaigh**

Kate: I'm Kate, ehm I'm a crofter ehm in Aberdeenshire, just near Kennethmont, and stay here with my partner and ehm we keep sheep, poultry, some ponies and try and grow medicinal herbs, we're creating a forest garden here. And I'm hoping to get back to some massage therapy this summer as well, so ehm that will be great to do. I'm also a student and working on a Masters in Island Studies at University of Highlands and Islands right now. It's been a really, really interesting course and ehm the other thing I do is run a CBD business, which is called Northern Delights, and ehm I sell handmade organic hemp products like hemp tea and honey and chocolates with CBD extract. And I make balm as well, which has different herbs infused. And I'm always really happy to talk to people about CBD and herbal medicine. If anyone ever has any questions, you can find me on Facebook or Instagram.

I feel that every person has, like, the power to, like, look after their own health and well-being just by being more connected to the environment, that in itself gives you a lot of power because, like, there's nothing- no amount of money can buy your health, you know, and if you have knowledge [chuckles] to look after your health, then you've got power.

I'd helped my dad with a lot of, like, building renovation projects when I was younger and he got to the point where he managed like by an old barn in Cumbria and renovate it and then sell it. And there was a bit of money left over after he'd done what he wanted to do. And ehm he was like, "Right, you need to-." Oh, this was in 2008 when there was a big financial crash, and he said he didn't really, like, trust the banks with money that he'd worked really hard for. So he said, "You need to go in and find some property like a house to do up or a bit of land and go like just do something interesting with it."

And I was like, "wow, that's a really, like, epic request [laughs] to be trusted with somebody's savings when you know how hard they worked for it." And I was like- so I was looking for quite a long time and we didn't-. If you've got over a certain amount you've- you really can like, you've- there's a lot more options open to you, and when you're looking below that, you- you're kind of like more limited. So it was either going to be like a little terraced house and like really bad condition in a city centre or like just we looked at loads of really soggy patches of land in Wales, like no offence to- [laughs]. Wales, it's a really wet place. And if you're looking at cheaper bits of land, you're either like on the side of a really steep hill or it's it's yeah- you're in like a bog, basically. So we kind of gave up looking all around anywhere near the north west of England, which is where I grew up and ehm yeah I spent some time in Scotland and I just I found this little croft for sale on a property website and we came up to see it and we thought, well, we'll try it for a year, and if we don't like it, we'll maybe go to Portugal [laughs].

I just never left, partly because the neighbours are really friendly. We just like it here. You know, the winters can be hard work, but the summertime's sooo amazing in Aberdeenshire. It's like Scotland's, like secret best place [laughs] [inaudible].

[birds chirping]

It's just- it's kind of just like a little community that everyone's got their own space and generally people all help out and help with the resurfacing the track. When we first came to look at this croft... ehm we went up and knocked on a few doors because we thought, well, we're overlooked by a few people. We'd really like to make sure that we're in the right place and we're going to fit in. And we didn't wanna live next door to people that didn't want us around kind of thing. And we went and knocked on the neighbour's door and they were home and they saw that we had a camper van. And like almost the first thing that they asked was like, "Have you seen Garbage Warrior?!" Which is the film about earth ships and we had just watched it the week before, which I thought was really- I thought it was really funny.

So I ended up like, standing, chatting to them for like an hour. And it turns out that we knew some of the same people as well, which was really nice. Ehm mm hmm. But while I was there, the neighbour came down with a dog and dropped it off with them. And I thought, oh, is it your dog or is it his dog like and there went, "Oh neither - it's the neighbours' next door. But while they're at work, we take- we take him and then the neighbour up the hill comes down and picks him up for an hour and takes him for a walk." Ehm so I said, "Wow, you've got a communal dog?" [laughs] They were like, "Yeah!" I thought wow this is definitely the place I want to live [chuckles]. Yeah. And for the most part, everyone's kind of helping each other out and chipping in with stuff so.

It's nice to have your own space, but know, that there's people close by if you need help. But I mean, we lived in [inaudible]- in Eden Valley in Cumbria and and when we first came here we thought oh, it's going to be the same as there. Cause that was like not- people there are a lot more closed. They just weren't that open, weren't that friendly really. And we were quite, you know, relieved to leave after one winter. But uhm, yeah, completely different.

I think it's the harder the weather is, it- there's- like kinder it makes people. That's what I think. You go go down and meet all the lot near Montrose, they're all really soft, because the winter's not as bad nah they're all really lovely [laughs with Jenny]. I'm just joking!

I've been- I've been reading the 'One Straw Revolution' recently, and I think ehh I think there's a lot to be said by taking the kind of permaculture approach and just like not trying to slam your ideas down on top of the landscape or on other people. Just trying to take a step back into yourself and just observe and make the minimal intervention possible for like, best, like minimum input for maximum output. I think just being there at the right time and and help, you know, being able to help when it's when it's needed is worth a lot and your your skills and your wisdom can allow you to contribute in ways that are more... maybe more efficient.

Like you can use your energy in a smart way, instead of just, you know, you don't have to just be like be there all the time, like looking busy, you know, you can appear at the right time with the most helpful information and like when it's really needed. In a- in a- and help people in a way that's that's like easy for them you know. There's ways of helping that are easier for the person being helped as well, instead of just kind of like steaming in so. And that's something that ehm, you kind of like learn when you're doing care work I suppose, is that you have to be really careful not to take over somebody's life and, you know, you really have to do things the way that they would prefer them to be done other than the way that you think is best, even if you think it's going to get done quicker or whatever, you just have to, like, check yourself and not do that so. Ehm [sucks teeth] yeah. But I just think it's something that we don't get taught really very well at school is how to communicate well and how to listen.

Communication in itself can be really healing. You can say like a single sentence to somebody and it can change their life and really like make them feel a lot better than themselves or it can help them just like change their perspective into a way that's more... that's like freeing so. Yeah, cause you- I mean you can really change somebody's mood just with, you know, the first thing that you say to them ehm on a day.

[birds chirping]

Yeah, so we've got ehm- there's eh two two acres here that's uh- that we're working on planting up as forest garden. Ehm so there's a lot of willow here. I think we've got like forty two different species of willow and a lot of different like fruit bushes. Haven't really done much veg gardening for the last like year or two because we've been on the Carnivore diet. So I can't tell you how much of an amazing relief it is to just not have to do any weeding [laughs with Jenny]. We're basically just like gardening chickens more than anything else so it's kind of like when I go out into the garden to harvest, there's some perennial herbs that we can still pick. And then it's mostly just looking for eggs - it's great. So leave the creeping buttercup to do its thing.

[clucking hen]

Ehm yeah we keep sheep. Um, and yeah, we would probably like to keep more animals in future, but we'd just like to get the house renovation finished first, I think. It's easy to collect animals [laughs] more quickly than you you- and they take a lot of time, you know, [inaudible]-. Like a lot of like- it's a steep learning curve for me. Jimmy grew up on cows, so he's got a better understanding of ehm like animal husbandry than I did. But, um, yeah. You know, you want to make sure that you're looking after them as best you can and their health and welfare is like as good as it can be. So, um. Yeah, the main focus for me is I'm just going to try and grow a lot more herbs, I think this year. Medicinal herbs, ehm, so I make tea out of them. So I'd like to have as many of them here as I can grow myself.

Jenny: Yeah.

Kate: So and then a perennial garden again, it's kind of like just less weeding, really, and you end up with a lot of nice pollinators for the bees, that kind of thing. We don't have any beehives here, but there's a lot of solitary bees on the hill cause there's a lot of- a lot of food for them here and uh, not too much- not really any spraying goes on on this hill either, because it's all like sheep- ehm our neighbours farm sheep on like three, three sides around us. We're like, yeah, we've mostly just got Shetlands and Hebs because they're ehm, they're just quite like low maintenance [inaudible]. Island sheep tend to just do- they just lamb themselves you don't have to check on them like every few hours through the night. It's just not my idea of fun. Just leave them to it, just yeah and they're fine [chuckles].

[sheep baaing]

I was like poorly a few years ago, and ehm... it was just not something that the doctors could help with. And ehm [clears throat], I found a book in a... There was a book, kind of radical book library in Edinburgh that was hosted by the Forest Cafe and it was called Old Hat Books. Yeah, and I never rented any hats from the hat library, but I did take this book called ehm 'Hedgerow Medicine' and that's a really, really fantastic book. Definitely recommend it to anybody who is looking for a starting point, looking out for herbs, because it's got really beautiful photographs of the close ups of the plants and the environment that you would find them in typically. They're all plants that are commonly found. So things that hawthorn, nettle, rose, just things that you would find growing in the side of a road or in a hedge. And [clears throat] the recipes for how to use them are clear and easy to follow. So quite often just it'll tell you which part of the plant to pick and and to dry it and use it in tea or it'll say to like infuse it in oil and then just strain it after a month or like just make a simple tincture with some like high high alcohol content vodka or something like that. So there all things that are really easy to do and it just, I mean, they work!

You're like, wow, I can just go in-. So from getting that book, I I started to pick nettles and cleaver's and I just- that just changed my relationship with with nature. Just looking at nettles and noticing for the first time how like amazing and potent and just like resilient as a plant. And I was like, wow, you know, it's just a plant that you look at and you see as a problem and then you realise it's got all these amazing gifts to give you. It's like full of iron, it's blood tonic. It just, it's just got that like [exhales] like pure strength in plant form, you know, it's a gift. It's got a gift to give you if you if you know how to use it and what to do with it. And it's just such simple knowledge. I just think it's amazing how, you know, there's this whole medicine chest right on your doorstep and it's so easy to use it [laughs]. But ehm, I guess people get into a routine or you like work long hours, you don't have time maybe or the energy to go out foraging. Or if you live in an urban area, you might not know where to find plants. But even if you're in an urban or suburban place that you'd still- often the most powerful healing plants grow on wasteland. So you can always find something if you've got your eyes, your eyes open. So, yeah, that book was a great starting point just because it just made it very, um, it made it very accessible.

And then since then I've just been collecting, any time I saw a book on herbs in the charity shop or something like that, I would just buy it. So that's like, the furthest bookshelf, that's just all kind of like health books; aromatherapy; various like books on healing modalities; different like- a lot of different herbal books and I like to just, yeah, peruse them. And, you know, I always just go and look stuff up. I don't- I don't have a really- have like an amazing encyclopaedic memory or anything, like. There's some things that- the more- the more you use herbs the more you have an instinct about what might help with different things but ehm yeah, that's probably the best place to start if you're wanting to learn to use herbs yourself is just to look for some good books and just don't be afraid to look things up. You don't have to know everything. You don't have to remember everything all the time. There are- there are herbs that you have to be careful with, but a lot of the ones that are very easily found and and common to the, you know, com- you know easy easy to use. Whatever, can't think of the right word. Ehm... yeah, not gonna do you any harm. Things like camomile and mint, ehm... just things that people used to drink after their meal to help set- you know. The thing to enjoy is the simple... simple thing to go and pick something out of your garden and make a pot of tea out of it so.

Yeah, I mean- and again, like when you're foraging things for yourself, it's always that kind of safety aspects, which I think it's why it's really nice to teach children from a young age which plants are safe to pick and which ones you should avoid.

Jenny: Mh hmm.

Kate: There's plants like sage that can can like dry- they can like dry breast milk off so you shouldn't drink that if you're breastfeeding and like juniper can affect you during pregnancy. Things like that are why it's good to just have reference books so you can check [clears throat] that you're picking exactly the right thing, that you know, like what you- what you're doing. You're not like-. Certain things that look really similar to other things that you need to be careful with.

But yeah, I mean, I just try and look after as many people as I can, really [chuckles]. Um, so I made a little Facebook group for people to ask questions about if they need help with ehm health stuff. And ehm... I- I just yeah, I just chat chat to people. You can get [exhales]- I don't know peop- I get asked for help with people sometimes and if I ever don't know what I'm like- if I don't have an answer I'll try and find out for them. I'm not like eh- I don't know everything [laughs]. But [laughs] I can at least listen and try and like suggest what might be helpful or, um, or like point them in the right direction of somewhere to look out. And it's kind of a fine- it's a bit of a fine line when you're trying to support people to use alternative medicines like herbal remedies, because there's not as much scientific research into the medicinal properties of herbs as there is into the like, pharmaceutical like drugs that you can get. So I try and tread a fine line of like not- like I don't want to descend into like woo territory. Trying to always, like, find scientific research that backs up ehm... like backs up like what I know to be true from personal experience or like what's generally like agreed on in herbal herbal books.

Ehm and and for me personally, and I know that this is true for many other people as well, it can be kind of like negative experiences with with seeking help from doctors, where their particular areas- area of expertise is so specialised that it's not the first thing they do to look at your health from a holistic point of view. And they might not necessarily connect one issue that you're going to seek help with, with something else that you're experiencing. And ehm I guess the classic, you know, is not matching up your emotional state with eh like physical symptoms that you might have, or like, at least treating the two together because physical pain can cause emotional distress and like vice versa. So there's there's- there's a limit to what Western medicine can can do. I think it can be really amazing in ehm emergency situations... ehm [exhales] but they're kind of- for me, it doesn't really represent a kind of like more like long term, sustainable option of trying to maintain your health and wellness rather than waiting until you get ill and then trying to find a solution for that illness once it's got to like a chronic or emergency stage. So that's- that's the difference. Like, I don't think that, like, alternative health modalities are necessarily better than Western medicine. I just think that they're different approaches and they've got different values.

Jenny: Yeah.

Kate: I was trying to kind of be polite, but it's just like from not getting any help from doctors [laughs] basically! You come out and think, well, you're not able to give me a diagnosis; there's not really any treatment that you can give me; you can't- there's nothing you can prescribe me, there's not, you know, so they can listen, I suppose.

Jenny: Yeah.

Kate: And that's about it. I've only I've been to the doctor about three times in my adult life and like all, you know, all three times, I just thought, well, that's eh... [laughs] OK, I'll just sort myself out then, you know. It's fine, like you- doctors don't always have the answers, it's not their fault. It's not to say that, like, I refuse to engage with the medical system at all, like I've got- I booked my smear test, I've been a good girl! [laughs with Jenny]

Jenny: That's a good one to get in after lockdown! [laughs with Kate]

Kate: Yeah. So, yeah, I got the second letter about I was like 'OK'. I mean I've had friends who avoided a cancer at a young age because of that got picked up. I think it's important.

Jenny: Yeah.

Kate: Ehm to- to just kind of like keep an eye on your health. And that's like something where, you know, diagnostic tools can be useful in Western medicine so. Um, yeah. I mean, you can also find that something that works quickly, can have can have side effects that pop up longer term. That's definitely true of a lot of painkillers can kind of affect your stomach lining or just leave you with like other- other issues and then you end up taking another pill to help with the secondary issues. And then you've got a third pill to help with the second pill. And then it's like, before you know it you're on a lot of tablets a day and that- you know that- people maybe see that as an inevitable result of old age, but it doesn't doesn't have to be like that even. You don't have to, like, lose your health slowly, you can do things differently.

[birds chirping and bees buzzing]

There's just something like much more therapeutic about gardening than there is about being in a- in [chuckles] a hospital environment. Or like going to see the doctor. There's just something really lovely about growing your own plants from scratch or even going for a walk, looking for things that are growing and collecting them and harvesting and drying them. That in itself is a very calming, stress relieving, therapeutic thing to do. And I mean there's studies to show that like, the physical act of getting soil on your hands can can ehm help treat depression. That literally puts you in a good mood, putting your hands in the soil. And watching things grow. That's very therapeutic. Being out in the sunshine; getting your vitamin D; taking that time to slow down; waiting for your seeds to grow; appreciating the harvest and just being more connected with your natural environment. That in itself kind of slows you down, makes you breathe more deeply. You're moving around. You're getting physical exercise; you're opening your lungs; you're getting fresh air; you're just like spending time outside away from screens. There are so many aspects to like growing herbs and using them for yourself that are very healing. And just making the tea is kind of the final like aspect of that you know. It's like you just finally taking all of that it- you know, it's like the- the sum total of everything that you've done beforehand, like taking the plant into your body. I think that just having plants around you can be healing in itself as well. I quite- I- you know, there's a theory that like nat- if you put some energy into nature, it will surround you with the plants that you need. And I remember my dad pulling lots of dandelions out a few years ago and I was like, wow, like, that's that's the plant- that's exactly the thing that you're- like [inaudible]- that your system could could do with right now. It was just like all these dandelions have popped up to be like, "pick me!" [laughs with Jenny]

So, uh, yeah. Dandelions are a funny one, hey? They're kind of like- we're aw- yeah... We're all so, eh like, trained or conditioned to see them as a weed that ruins lawns. That we need to dig them out and get rid of them and they're actually really, um, a really useful food for bees. They've got so many good medicinal properties as well. Like ehm... yeah. I mean people people used to eat a lot more of that, kind of like, bitter green, leafy stuff as well. And it's something that's really good for your digestion. Like good digestive tonic is eating bitter... bitter leaves, but it's a taste that's gone out of our diets now, we all just eat a lot of sugar and that's like the worst. Sugar's the worst thing for your body [laughs] like really. So...

[birds chirping]

Part of the plan here was to kind of like put in different species of ehm- we're gonna plant all around the edges of the fields and plant different ehm trees and like some shrubs and perennials that are- like not just safe for horses and animals to eat, but also medicinal. Ehm and, yeah, definitely, one of our ponies got into the garden one time and like just ate all my whole herb garden in one go [laughter] cause he really liked the sagebrush. It was massive and it was just like eh demolished [chuckles]. So yeah, the more the more domesticated that you make animals, and the same goes for humans, the more they start to lose that- that kind of, ehm like, instinctual knowledge about what's going to do them good or not. Because... yeah there's- there are definitely some people who keep-. It's something I looked into, for like, horse health. There's definitely some people who say that you have to be very careful and watch your horses like and make sure that they're not near any plants that are going to like do them harm and that you should kind of like go out of your way to feed them ones that do and that kind of thing. And... I like to think that ours are kind of like just feral enough that they look- you know like they're not daft enough to be anything that that's bad for them. Um, yeah. I mean, I still pull Ragwort out if I see it because that's like really bad for horses. I'm not like- I really sound like a terrible animal, animal husbandry [laughs] like "I just leave them alone. They'll be fine." But ehm yeah, I do think there's a difference between when you... When you make life too comfortable for yourself, you kind of start to to like lose that ehmm, that like instinctual knowledgeable about what's good for you and what's not I think. But I mean, again, there's that's that safety thing, I just wanna- like... [laughs].

Anno I just- I heard of somebody who who picked a lot of mushrooms for a communal meal like in a kind of like hippy-type setting and somebody said, "Oh, what kind of mushrooms were they?" And they said, "Oh, I just like the hand of Gaea guide me." And picked a lot of mushrooms that made a lot of people really sick and ehm. So I'm not like advocating that you should just like tune in with nature-.

Jenny: [laughs]

Kate: And like pick whatever plants you feel are like good in that moment, like you should- this is my books are important! But [laughs] at the same time, I just think that we used to be a lot closer to that knowledge. It was almost something that was just passed down like at a really young age. And you were just in a very familiar territory when you were in a garden or when you were out in nature you know. You just knew that stuff from a young age. And so, that's it, I think education is the key to ehm... to using plants safely and ehm like in the best way possible, so. I mean, the best- the best way to learn about plants really is just to go out with somebody who knows and can show you.

Jenny: Yeah.

Kate: And then you see a few examples and then you get to a point where you can spot it and say, "Aw is that another one?" And they can say, "Yeah." So that's that's the best way. But it's good to have books as well [laughs with Jenny].

I like books. We don't have enough space for them at the minute. When we get moved into the croft it's just going to be like bookshelves everywhere [laughs].

Jenny: Well, thank you so much. That's, eh, that's just so interesting and like, really generous of you for sharing. Thank you so much.

Kate: Not at all. It's not- you know- it's nice to just have conversations with people again isn't it on a really basic level! [laughs]

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