

ound the Bend Farm Center for Restorative Community in Dartmouth, Massachusetts, is a living laboratory that cultivates, educates, and empowers people of all ages. Nilsa Garcia-Rey used to visit as a volunteer. One day she brought us the most beautiful handmade crock shaped like a mushroom. It was perfect for small batches of specialty ferments – daikon spears, hot peppers, and chickweed kimchi. Over the next few seasons, Nilsa spent more and more time on the farm, helping in the gardens, and eventually as a work-share with our organic vegetable grower Ashley "The Beast" Brister. This led to Nilsa starting her own business growing and selling fresh dried herbs and herbal products. which she prefers to describe as a "small batch craft enterprise."

The idea for Nilsa's business started when she noticed an overgrown herb garden near the front of the Round the Bend Farm property. She fantasized about restoring it into a diversified, no-till perennial and annual herb garden. That winter she submitted a proposal to the farm, complete with drawings and plant lists, that detailed how she would revive and enlarge the herb bed. In exchange for expanding and stewarding the spot, she would be able to use and sell the herbs she grew.

Round the Bend Farm is an educational non-profit working farm that collaborates with agripreneurs entrepreneurs with land-based businesses embodying principles of regenerative living - to produce a wide array of products and services that serve the larger community. Nilsa's business, born from a combination of engagement with the land, an artistic vision, and experience with organic farming and permaculture design, became one of Round the Bend's agripreneur partnerships.

Nilsa started by digging out years of overgrown mugwort and horseradish, and planting beds



Nilsa Garcia-Rey tends her nettles at Round the Bend Farm.

## **BASIC SKIN SALVE RECIPE**

Salves are made in two steps: first infusing oil with dried herbs, and then combining the infused oil with beeswax and essential oils. Nilsa uses a combination of many plants in her salves, including comfrey, plantain, and rosemary. She adapted her recipes from the Mountain Rose Herbs website.

The following recipe is for a basic chickweed (Stellaria media) salve. Chickweed is a common garden "weed" that happens to be very useful for soothing dry or itchy skin, light abrasions, and psoriasis. It can also be useful for bug bites, hot rashes, and diaper rash.

Step 1: Chickweed Infused Oil

Ingredients and Tools: Chickweed, dried and chopped Olive oil A glass jar with cover A cloth or bag to cover the jar A strainer

Wash and sterilize the glass jar. Fill with dried chickweed. Cover the plant material entirely with olive oil, and cap tightly. Put the jar inside a bag or cloth so it isn't directly exposed to sunlight, and set in a warm, sunny place. You want the heat of the sun to warm the mixture, and allow the herbs to gently infuse into the oil. Leave the jar in place for 2-3 weeks, shaking one to two times a day. Check periodically to make sure the herbs are completely submerged in the oil, and if not, top off with more oil. The infusion is ready when the oil takes on the color and aroma of the chickweed, about 2-3 weeks. At this point, strain all the solids out of the jar. What you are left with is infused chickweed oil.

Step 2: Chickweed Salve

Ingredients and Tools:

8 oz chickweed infused oil 1 oz beeswax 10 drops lavender essential oil 10 drops tea tree essential oil Glass iars or tins

Puttheinfusedoilandbeeswaxinadouble boiler, and heat slowly, stirring constantly, until the beeswax melts. Remove from the heat and immediately stir in the essential oils. Pour into the tins or jars and let cool. Store the salve in a cool, dry place. Use externally to soothe dry skin.



Top: Nilsa's bountiful garden provides ingredients for many herbal products. Right: Herbs drying in a shed at Round the Bend Farm

of perennial herbs and flowering species for pollinators. She started drying the herbs for the the Round the Bend kitchen, gave them to friends, and sold them at the farm's monthly Open Farm Day. She studied herbal remedies, and trialed different blends and recipes. As interest grew, she expanded her drying operation to include a small greenhouse, began producing more types of products like infused oils, salves, and tinctures, and started selling at other farmers markets in the area. She now grows or wild harvests over thirty herbs for her products, including peppermint, calendula, nettle, rosemary, yarrow, fennel, and many more. Most of her products are packaged simply, with compostable materials, that keep her products affordable and communicate their small batch, craft quality.

Before starting her herb business, Nilsa spent over four decades as a working artist, first as a painter, and then making ARTILES - hand-built ceramic relief tiles based on historical art works. She also managed a nonprofit art cooperative called Gallery X. Now, Nilsa considers her herb business to be her art. "Essentially I've replaced the art studio with gardening," she told me recently while moving chickweed. She also shared, "Preparing the soil for planting is like preparing a canvas or wedging clay. The garden has a basic design which is continually changing as plants grow and spread."

One of the great advantages of the agripreneur model, is that we can provide resources for entrepreneurs to develop unique, value based businesses that might otherwise never have launched. In Nilsa's case, Round the Bend farm provided a philosophical backdrop, physical space, and supportive environment for her to engage with the land and her interests. Over time, this led to the development of a unique small business that now provides affordable and high quality medicinal herbs to a larger community. Meanwhile, Round the Bend Farm benefits from the use of many perennial herbs and Nilsa's attentive stewardship of the herb garden.

I asked her for suggestions for people who want to grow their own herbs for culinary and medicinal use. She recommended beginning with a familiar perennial, like peppermint or lemon balm. These plants are generally easy to grow, come back each year, and can be harvested throughout the season.

Her trick for drying small batches? Just fill a brown paper shopping bag about half full with cut herbs. Store the bag in a cool, dark corner of a room where there is air circulation. Shake the bag gently every day until the leaves dry. When fully dried, the leaves should still retain color and fragrance, and be easy to break apart in your fingers. Store the dried herbs in tightly sealed glass jars, and use for medicinal tea or as culinary additions to meal preparation.



Laura Killingbeck is a Food Systems Consultant for Round the Bend Farm Center for Restorative Community, the Director of Food Systems and Fermentation at Rancho Mastatal Sustainability Education Center, and a semi-professional explorer. Follow her on instagram @LauraKillingbeck.

Check out RoundTheBendFarm.org for more information about the agriprenuer model. Nilsa's fresh dried herbs and herb products are available at Round the Bend's Open Farm Days. Or connect with her on facebook @NilsasHerbalTeas.