



Natural Beauty

Basalt's Julie Williams converts local plants and herbs into an all-natural line of skin products. By Michael Miracle

Aspen's Hunter Creek trail would seem a strange place to look for spa-level skin care products. Yet, in a way, that's precisely what Julie Williams does. The mullein, arnica, horsetail and assorted other plants that the 12-year Roaring Fork Valley resident harvests over the course of a half-day hike all make their way into the serums, balms and toners that are among Williams' Leaf People line of skin and bath products.

In addition to what she gathers from the Aspen-area wilds, Williams also uses flora from locations around the world to create her all-natural, plant-based line. It makes perfect sense, then, that she peddles her products among the organic peaches and tomatoes at the Aspen Farmers' Market. (They're also available at a handful of spas throughout the country.)

Williams' interest in making chemical- and synthetics-free products was born of a desire to be her healthiest—and of the fact that many products marketing themselves as “organic” were far from it. “Your skin is the largest organ in your body,” she explains, “but people slather known toxins all over themselves every day.” She points to studies showing that whole undamaged paraben molecules have been found in breast cancer tumors and that parabens, which

appear in many lotions and creams as a preservative, are a known endocrine disruptor.

To learn to create a healthier skin care line, Williams studied herbal medicine at the Yarmony Mountain Herbal College in Eagle, Colorado, and continues to work with regional master herbalists and ayurvedic practitioners to this day. She has been making her products since 2003, and has been selling the Leaf People line—almost 30 products in all—since 2004. Everything is handmade.

Leaf People's best-seller, the Transform Age Reversing Serum, is made up of 31 different oils and extracts that Williams says work wonders on brown spots, sunburns, wrinkles and scars. From the time Williams has collected all of the appropriate plants, which include the mullein and horsetail from Aspen, the serum takes six weeks to create. (However, if Williams already has extracts on hand, which she typically does after a few big harvests, she can make a batch of Transform in three to four days.)

Clockwise from top left: Julie Williams at a Saturday Aspen Farmers' Market; product bottles from the Leaf People line. Photos from top left: Mark Pearson; courtesy of Leaf People

Williams won't go into too much detail about her proprietary extraction techniques, but she will say that she uses low temperatures to keep the plants in their raw states, which better preserves their nutrients, enzymes and medicinal qualities. She also uses locally made organic alcohol from Paonia to create the plant extractions. Because it's made from peaches, apples, apricots, cherries and pears—and because she removes most of the alcohol, which leaves behind just the fruit essences—Williams says it's good for the skin. All of her skin products are in the form of serums, mists, oils and balms; there is not a single lotion in the line.

It would be safe to say that Williams' serum-making process is fairly atypical when compared to how, say, Johnson & Johnson develops its skin care line. In a large part, this is because Williams is a practicing Buddhist. She starts her day with 45 minutes of yoga, followed by 45 minutes of meditation and a 15-minute purification ritual. She aligns her plant-collecting forays with lunar events she believes imbue the various products with the appropriate energies. By snipping only portions of plants, Williams harvests in a way that doesn't harm them, and she offers a blessing and a few strands of her own hair or other herbs to the plants, believing that she shouldn't take something without first giving.

The result is a line of products that has developed a near cultlike following among an increasing number of Roaring Fork Valley residents. Nikki Dodge, an aesthetician and former Aspenite who now runs her own spa service, Skin by Nikki, in Sonoma County, California, uses Leaf People products almost exclusively. She has particular kudos for combining the Helichrysum Mask (a product Williams has released only to spas) with the Transform Age Reversing Serum.

“Those two products work better in combination than anything I've ever used before,” Dodge says. “In four weeks, it'll take three to four years off someone's face.”

Dodge attributes the products' effectiveness—and her clients' consequent love of them—to Williams' vigilance in keeping the line truly all natural. “I go to skin care trade shows, I have tried everything on the market, and the purity of these products is unlike anything out there,” she says. “And I credit her for making me look fabulous. I'm turning 40 this year and I compare how I look to how my older sister looks, and it's a miracle.”