



Everett Newswanger, Lancaster Farming's editor, left, and Mike Harris, Heritage House representative, look through the hundreds of photos submitted by readers to be considered for publication in the book, *A Century of Farming*. The book is at the printers and scheduled to be delivered by November 15, in time for Christmas giving and the turn of the century. Deadline to save with pre-publication prices is October 10, 1999.

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Caution On Herbal Usage

UNIVERSITY PARK (Centre Co.) — If you are thinking about taking botanicals—or herbal supplements—to help alleviate a medical problem or to improve your health, proceed with caution, says a registered dietitian in Penn State's College of Agricultural Sciences.

"You should treat botanicals as you would a drug," says Mary Alice Gettings, Penn State Cooperative Extension nutrition and health agent based in Beaver County. "Because 'herbals' can behave like drugs in your body, they may cause harmful interactions with other medications if they're not used properly."

For example, one popular herbal supplement is ginkgo biloba, which some people believe can enhance memory and improve circulation. It also has been studied for its possible positive effects on Alzheimer's disease. "But ginkgo biloba thins blood," says Gettings. "If you're already taking vitamin E, Coumadin (warfarin), aspirin or other blood thinners, ginkgo biloba could cause hemorrhaging."

"St. Johns Wort has received attention for its reputed ability to relieve depression," she adds. "But if you're taking an antidepressant medication, you may have to reduce the dosage of the drug as you increase the dosage of the herb."

Gettings advises working with your health care provider to be sure that what you're taking is safe. "Inform your doctor, nurse, dietitian or other health care professional about every herbal supplement, vitamin and medication you're taking so he or she can help you to avoid harmful interactions or overdoses."

Although botanicals often act like drugs, they are regulated as dietary supplements, not as drugs. Gettings says that means herbals usually have not been fully tested to prove their effectiveness.

"Pharmaceutical companies on average spend about \$231 million on research to get FDA approval for a drug, but drugs can be patented to protect that investment," she says. "Botanicals are not patentable, so manufacturers prefer not to spend that kind of money to prove health claims or safety. The FDA only investigates the safety of an herb if there have been complaints."

If you're going to use botanicals, Gettings recommends first doing your homework. "You should research the herb and learn its possible effects, active ingredient, potency and recommended dosage." She says such information is available from health care practitioners, reputable health-related Web sites and books. "Useful books on herbals are 'The Honest Herbal' and 'Herbs of Choice' by V.E. Tyler, and 'Physicians Desk Reference for Herbal Medicines,'" Gettings says.

When purchasing a botanical, check the label for a statement of standardization.