

TRADITIONAL USES OF NATIVE PLANTS

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Alumroot – the root of this plant was steeped in boiling water to make an eyewash or a solution to relieve sores or swelling. It was used as a mordant, which is a substance used to treat cloth prior to dyeing. The mordant helps the dye to “take”.

Aster – a mixture made from the roots of aster was used as a cure for diarrhea.

Bedstraw – the dried plant was valued for its pleasant fragrance and was used by early settlers as mattress stuffing. Large quantities of its fine roots were gathered by the Great Plains Indian tribes because they were one of the few sources of true red dye.

Bergamot – flowers and leaves of this plant were steeped to make a tea that was drunk in small amounts to cure abdominal pain. Boiled bergamot leaves were placed warm on the skin to treat blemishes or other skin disorders – old fashioned acne medicine!

Canada Anemone – the root was used to soothe sores.

Cordgrass – this tough, fibrous grass was dried and tied into bundles to use as fuel or for roof-thatching material. Its leaves are very rough with sharp edges. It is also known as saw grass.

Goldenrod – southern Indians used the blooming of the late goldenrods as a cue to return from the buffalo hunt to harvest their corn.

Ground Plum (Indian Rattle, Buffalo Bean) – the formation of fruit by this plant was an indication to Plains tribes that the time had come for their corn to be planted. In fact, ground plum fruit was gathered and placed with the seed corn prior to planting as part of seed preparation each year. The reddish fruit was a favourite food of the bison. Later in the season, when the pods had dried and hardened, they were used as ceremonial rattles.

Indian Breadroot – the tuberous root was an important food source for the Plains tribes and early settlers. It was peeled and eaten raw, cooked fresh, or dried and pounded to make flour for biscuits and bread or for thickening soups or stews. It was gathered in large quantities and dried for the winter food supply.

Licorice Root – the root was chewed and held in the mouth to lessen the pain of a toothache; this would also work as a cough remedy. The licorice flavour of this root is only apparent after it is peeled, dried and steeped in boiling water; otherwise it has a slightly bitter, astringent taste. The steeped leaves were applied to the ears for earache.

Lily – the root of the prairie lily was harvested and eaten like a potato.

Meadow Rue – the ripe seeds were stored for their pleasant fragrance, then rubbed and scattered over clothing. Children made toy flutes from the hollow stems. Unmarried men rubbed the tops of the plant with their palms in hopes of capturing the affection of a desired female by shaking hands with her. The plant was often dried and crumbled for a stimulant for their horses. The animals sniffed the coarse powder which was believed to increase their speed and endurance for a number of days.

Milkweed – flower buds were boiled to make sweet syrup; they were also added to dishes while cooking to sweeten them, or cooked with meat as a tenderizer. Roots were steeped in boiling water as a temporary contraceptive or to relieve coughs or fever. The milky juice which exudes from cut plant parts was applied to warts, corns or callouses to soften them. Fibre from the fluffy seed heads was twisted and tied to make fishing nets. NOTE: milkweed can be poisonous if consumed in large quantities; certain chemicals in the sap are mildly toxic but become concentrated when metabolised in quantity. Monarch butterflies, who live on milkweeds exclusively, rely on this toxic chemical as a built-in anti-predator device. Once a predator has sampled one Monarch butterfly, the bitter taste is sure to keep it from eating a second one.

Porcupine Grass (Spear Grass) - the long stiff awns of this grass were bound tightly together into a bundle, from which the sharp seeds were burned off to make a hairbrush.

Prairie Clover – tea was made from the leaves of white prairie clover to cure the fever that often accompanies measles. The roots of both purple and white prairie clover were chewed for their pleasant taste. Brooms were made from the tough resilient stems.

Prairie Crocus – the leaves and petals of this early blooming plant are acidic and will cause a blister if left on the skin long enough. Prairie Crocus was used by natives as a counter-irritant to reduce the pain associated with rheumatism.

Prairie Onion – the bulb and leaves of this pink flowered onion were used in much the same way as we use domestic varieties today to flavour soups, stews or vegetable dishes. The skin of the onion bulb produces a yellow/orange dye when boiled or steeped in hot water.

Rose – the fruit of the rose, the rose hip, contains lots of vitamin C and is still used today to make jam, jelly, syrup for pancakes or a fragrant tea. A steeped rosehip solution was used by natives and by settlers as an eyewash. Rose petals were eaten fresh in salads, or candied by glazing with sugar syrup and eaten as a snack or dessert. Fresh rose petals can be used to scent your bath; dried, they add fragrance to clothing in the form of a sachet.

Sage – the silvery wild sages were, and still are, very important in the ceremonies of the Plains tribes. It was burned at the beginning of ceremonies to drive away evil influences, and steeped in water to cleanse any person who had broken a taboo or touched a sacred object. The leaves and stems of sage, dried and crumbled, were added to soups and stews and used in poultry dressing to add flavour. The fine leaves of pasture sage were given to regulate irregular menstruation.

Smooth Camas – the bulb-like root of this plant was a favourite food of many Plains tribes, who roasted large numbers of them underground in grass lined pits. The bulb exuded a sweet, sticky syrup when cooked and was considered a delicacy. NOTE: Smooth Camas has a poisonous look-alike, Death Camas, which grows near the Western edge of the Tall Grass Prairie. It has a tightly clustered head of flowers, whereas the Smooth Camas has a more elongated spike.

Sweetgrass – this pleasant scented grass was used for perfume, and is still widely used by Plains tribes in ceremonies to induce the presence of good spirits. The grass is braided and burned as incense, which is looked on as a cleansing agent.

Yarrow – the leaves of this plant contain a mild anaesthetic. They were rubbed on insect bites to stop itching, steeped in boiling water which was later used to bathe swellings and dried for use in tea. Wads of the leaves were moistened and put in the ear to treat earache.

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