

Gathering Pinon Pine Nuts

The size and taste of the pinon pine seed made it a seasonal staple for man and animal in the Great Basin. Native Americans ground the seeds to make soup or mush and roasted the seeds to eat like a nut. The large seed is so nut-like it is commonly called pinon nut or pine nut. It is still common for many of the Great Basin Indians to supplement their diet with pine nuts by gathering them in the time-honored methods passed from generation to generation.

Wildlife, particularly birds and rodents, eat pine nuts in season and store them for later use. Pinon seed sprouting from caches made by wildlife is an important way to spread pinon woodlands.

Permits

Thousands of pounds of pine nuts are picked commercially for sale in supermarkets, health food stores and produce outlets. A permit is required to gather and sell pine nuts from the public lands. A permit is not required for those who gather nuts as a recreational pursuit. The reasonable amount considered to be for recreational or personal use is 25 pounds.



Permits to pick more than 25 pounds of pine nuts may be obtained from BLM offices. In areas where there is known competition for commercial harvest, competitive bidding sets the fair market value per pound.

Where to Gather Pine Nuts

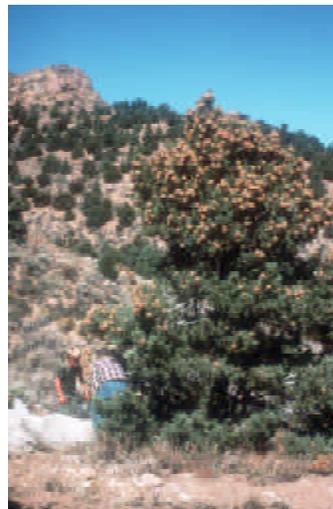
Pinon pines may be found throughout the Great Basin. They cover slopes above the valley floor and below higher elevations. The abundance of the nuts varies by year and geographical location. The pinon seed crop is unreliable; typically a good crop is produced every three to seven years. Successful pickers scout areas during mid-summer to find where the best crops will be, then return in September and October to harvest the nuts.

Inquire at local BLM offices to find the best places to find pinon pines and to pick pine nuts.

Picking the Nuts

The pinon pine has a lot of sticky pitch or sap. To gather unopened cones from the tree, wear work gloves to keep the pitch off your hands and a hat or scarf to keep the pitch out of your hair. Place a ladder against the tree, climb and pick only the cones from the tree. Breaking limbs is unnecessary and destroys the capacity of the tree to be productive.

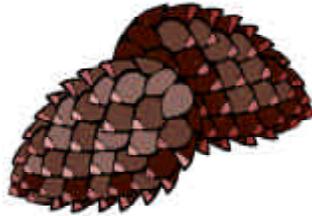
Another method is to knock the nuts from cones that have ripened on the tree. To do this, place a tarp under the tree, place a ladder against the tree and knock against the cones to shake the nuts loose. The nuts can then be gathered from the tarp on the ground.



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TIP: Remove the sticky pinon pitch from hands with cooking oil.

Cones picked before they open may be left in burlap sacks and placed in the sun for several days. Turn the sacks daily to evenly heat the cones. When the cones are dried and opened, shake the sacks, dislodging the nuts from the cones. Another method is to lay the cones on canvas in the sun and use a shovel to turn the cones until dried.



To clean pine nuts, the Indians used wicker trays to toss the nuts into the air and let the wind carry away the broken cone scale and bracts. You may do the same, or use a screen or wire mesh of one-half inch spacing to separate the nuts from the chaff.

The Final Product

Gathering, drying, shaking and cleaning pine nuts makes them ready to eat. Pine nuts are nutritious to eat as is without further enhancement. Their flavor may be improved by soaking the nuts in salted water, then toasting them in an open pan in the oven at a moderate temperature. Another method is to wash the pine nuts in cold water, salt them and put them in a covered roasting pan. Steam the pine nuts in a moderate oven for 15 to 20 minutes, remove the cover and stir until completely dry. Most people crack the outer shell with their teeth and eat the inner nut like eating sunflower seeds.

Native Americans ground the nuts into a paste that could be eaten either cold or warmed. This was done after the outer shells were removed by rolling them over a metate with a hulling stone.

Precautions

Pine nuts ripen about the same time as hunting season is in progress. For your own safety, it is best to wear bright clothing in and around pinon trees so a hunter can distinguish you from a deer.

Woodlands may be extremely dry during the harvest season. Fire restrictions, or other site specific closures, may be in effect - call the BLM to inquire about



restrictions and closures before leaving home. Exercise care with warming and cooking fires; never leave a fire unattended. Always be sure your campfire is out cold when breaking camp. Leave the harvest and camping area clean; pack out what you pack in. Enjoy a tradition that has been in the Great Basin for thousands of years.