

Ethnobotany of the Middle Rockies



Wind River/Bighorn Basin District

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Ethnobotany of the Middle Rockies
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This document contains a list of native flora found in Wyoming, mainly the Wind River Basin, that was used by Native Americans and early explorers for medicinal and everyday purposes. Each plant species listed has a brief description, story and/or fun fact about how it was used by the early people of our area.

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***Achillea millefolium*, yarrow**

Native Americans picked and the dried the whole plant. Then they put handfuls in boiling water and drank it as a tea. The mixture was used as a stomach tonic for indigestion, to stimulate sweating in dry fevers, to decrease menstruation, and to shrinks mild hemorrhoids. Yarrow leaves were used to stimulate clotting in cuts and abrasions along with helping to heal rashes (Collins, 1989).



***Achillea millefolium*; SOS- Rawlins 2010**

***Achnatherum hymenoides*, Indian rice grass**

This grass was a common food of Native Americans. The seeds were parched before they were ground into a meal (Francis, 1989).



***Achnatherum hymenoides*; SOS- Worland 2009**

Actaea rubra, red baneberry

Cheyenne cultural hero and prophet, “Sweet Medicine”, named this plant after himself stating that it would help bring up children. A new mother would drink a tea made from the boiled root to increase milk flow for her baby. Cheyennes believed that their children who took sweet medicine would grow up to be wise, strong, and patient. When the children of their tribe started drinking cow’s milk, a tradition brought by the pioneers, they believed their children began losing some of these qualities and were becoming more like cows.

Sweet Medicine, the prophet, supposedly lived with the Cheyenne for 445 years. Upon his death, he transformed his powers into this plant. The Cheyenne people performed the “throwing it at him” rite in most ritualistic acts in the Sun Dance, Sacred Arrow, and Sacred Hat ceremonies, in which the priest bit tiny fragments from the root and spit it into the boys hands thus throwing Sweet Medicine’s power and blessing in their hands for sacred tasks (Collins, 1989).



Actaea rubra; R.A. Howard. ©Smithsonian Institution. Courtesy of Smithsonian Institution, Richard A. Howard Photograph Collection. United Kingdom, England, Kew, Royal Botanic Gardens. @ USDA-NRCS PLANTS Database.

***Allium* spp., wild onion**

Wild onion was an important food source for Native Americans. *Allium sibiricum* and *Allium nuttallii* bulbs were often boiled with meat. General George Crook, who led the “Starvation March” in Yellowstone 1876, said that wild onions formed a welcoming addition to the food supply. The “Starvation March” or “Horsemeat March” was a military expedition in pursuit of a band of Sioux fleeing Custer’s defeat at the Battle of Little Big Horn. The Calvary had little provisions and eventually had to shoot and eat their horses to keep from starving.

Medicinal uses of wild onion included insect repellent and a treatment for an unopened carbuncle. The roots and stems of *Allium brevistylum* were finely ground and applied to make an infusion poured over the area to clean out the infection (Collins, 1989).



***Allium textile*; SOS- Kemmerer 2011**

***Apocynum cannabinum*, Indian hemp**

Indian hemp can be used as a chewing gum and to make twine cords. The milky juice of this plant hardens into a rubbery substance that has been used as chewing gum. The stems produce silky fibers in the late season. These fibers were soaked in water to separate the bark. The cleaned fibers were then rolled into a twine cord and used to make snares or fishing line. The cleaned fibers were also used to make lighter, more flexible baskets (Collins, 1989).



© Thomas G. Barnes

Apocynum cannabinum; ©Thomas G. Barnes. Barnes, T.G., and S.W. Francis. 2004. Wildflowers and ferns of Kentucky. University Press of Kentucky @ USDA-NRCS PLANTS Database.

***Artemisia spp.*, sagebrush, wormwoods**

Artemisia species were used for medicinal, household and spiritual purposes. Nearly all species of *Artemisia* are intensely bitter and aromatic, making them useful either to stimulate sweating in dry fevers or for indigestion and stomach acidity. Various decoctions of *frigida* were used by Natives and early explorers to treat colds, as a diuretic, mild cathartic, and for bathing. Hot tea made from *Artemisia* species has a stimulating effect on uterine circulation and will help suppress cramps during menstruations. It can also be used to expel roundworm and pinworm infections. The Shoshone used the plant to de-worm their horses, feeding them the leaves of the plant three times a day. Santonin, artemisinin, and lactone glycosides are found in varying quantities in nearly all of the sagebrush species and account for their anthelmintic properties.

Brooms were made for sweeping by binding together a bundle of the tops. The leaves were burned as incense to drive away bad spirits and to purify implements, utensils, or people.

The chewed root was put on clothes as a love/hunting charm in the Winnebago tribe. The purpose is to waft the odor of the herb towards the desired object by standing windward of it.

Artemisia frigida was called “woman’s sage” because of its use in the Sun Dance in connection with the sacred woman (Collins, 1989, & Stewart, 1998).



***Artemisia tridentata*; SOS- Kemmerer 2012**

Carex spp., sedges

The stems of these species were stripped of their leaves and used for food. The tissues in the stems are filled with a sugary juice. The tuberous bases of the stems were also eaten (Smith, 1989).



Carex utriculata; SOS- Kemmerer 2012



Carex pellita; SOS- Newcastle 2012

***Chenopodium spp.*, lamb's quarters, goosefoot**

This ancient food plant of the prairies was cultivated by Native Americans for its tender spring greens and fall seeds. Early explorers and travelers of the prairie often mentioned this plant in diaries and other records. Its use as food can be traced back since prehistoric times.

The Hopi Indians lined their earth ovens with these species when baking yucca shoots and fruits to create a steaming effect. Goosefoot contains a high amount of water (Collins, 1989 & Francis, 1989).



Chenopodium album -- Bill Summers. USDA SCS. 1989. Midwest wetland flora: Field office illustrated guide to plant species. Midwest National Technical Center, Lincoln. Courtesy of USDA NRCS Wetland Science Institute.

***Clematis ligusticifolia*, western clematis**

Spanish Americans called *Clematis ligusticifolia* “yerba de chivato”, herb of the goat. It has been used for many purposes. The Spanish Americans used a decoction from the plant to wash wounds. Native Americans used the leaves and barks as shampoo. They also steeped the white portion of the bark for fever and chewed the foliage to cure colds and sore throats. Fibers from the plant were used for snares and carrying nets (Collins, 1989).



***Clematis ligusticifolia*; Photo by Rose Grinnan**

Chrysothamnus spp., rabbitbrush

A solution from *Chrysothamnus* species was used to heal sores and eruptions. The leaves and stems were boiled together to make a solution to wash the infected area on the body.

The roots were chewed like chewing gum (Smith, 1989).



***Chrysothamnus viscidiflorus*; SOS- Kemmerer 2010**

Delphinium spp., larkspur

In the old western world, it was used to kill body lice. It is poisonous. (Collins, 1989)



***Delphinium spp.*; Photo by Rebecca Stern**



***Delphinium nuttallianum*; SOS-Rock Springs 2010**

***Descurainia pinnata*, hedge mustard, western tansy mustard**

Native Americans gathered this plant's seeds. The seeds were stirred over an open fire in a pan then ground to make into a mush or stirred into a soup. Pono Indians mixed the seeds with their corn meal for better taste (Collins, 1989).



Descurainia pinnata; Gary A. Monroe @ USDA-NRCS PLANTS Database.
Al Schneider @ USDA-NRCS PLANTS Database.

***Dodecatheon pulchellum*, shooting star**

This plant is edible. It has a fresh, sweet taste. However humans are not the only ones who eat it, elk and deer feast on shooting star in the early spring when other green forage is still scarce (Collins, 1989).



***Dodecatheon pulchellum*; SOS - Kemmerer 2012**

Eleocharis spp., spike rush

All parts of this plant were used, the bulbs of this rush were eaten while the leaves and stems were woven into mats and baskets. It could also be used to induce vomiting. The Native Americans would place the plant into a bison skull used during the Sun Dance ceremony (Francis, 1989).



***Eleocharis paulstris*; SOS-Kemmerer 2012**

***Equisetum spp.*, horsetails, scouring rush**

Native Americans ate peeled stems of *Equisetum arvense*. They would eat the roots and tubers of the base of the plant either raw or cooked. It could also be used for polishing, just as we use sandpaper today (Collins, 1989).



© Elaine Haug
Equisetum arvense; Elaine Haug @ USDA-NRCS PLANTS Database.

Erigeron spp., daisy fleabane

When tanning a hide, Native Americans would use the blossoms mixed with the brains, gall, and spleen of an animal to bleach the hide.

The Lakota tribe used a tea made from the entire plant to treat the sore mouths of children (Collins, 1989).



***Erigeron spp.* ; Newcastle- 2012**



***Erigeron concinnus var. concinnu*; Pinedale 2011**

***Eriogonum* spp., buckwheat**

Native Americans used a decoction from the leaves for headache and stomach pain. A tea from the flowers was used as an eyewash, for high blood pressure and bronchial ailments. The stems and leaves were boiled for a tea to treat bladder trouble.

Eriogonum species are also important for insect pollinators in the sagebrush ecosystem. Bees make high quality honey from it (Collins, 1989).



***Eriogonum caespitosum*; Pinedale 2011**



***Eriogonum caespitosum*; Pinedale 2011**



Eriogonum umbellatum; Photo by Rebecca Stern

***Fragaria ssp.*, wild strawberry**

The Native Americans cultivated varieties of strawberries bred from these wild species. We can thank them for the delicious berries we buy from the market today (Collins, 1989).



Fragaria vesca; ©Lindsey Koepke. United States, WA, Lewis Co., Mount Rainier National Park, East Side Trail. June 24, 2005@ USDA-NRCS PLANTS Databas.

***Gentiana calycosa*, mountain gentian**

The gentians are the best stomach tonics in the plant kingdom. They contain glycoside gentiopicrin and gentistic acid. Gentiopicrin is used to cure malaria victims. Gentistic acid is used for rheumatic inflammations. Their extracts are still used in pharmaceuticals today (Collins, 1989).



© Nevada Native Plant Society

Gentiana calycosa; Margaret Williams. ©Nevada Native Plant Society. Courtesy of Nevada Native Plant Society. United States, CA, @ USDA-NRCS PLANTS Database.

***Grindelia* spp., gumweed**

Gumweed is notable for the sticky fluid on the flower heads. The sticky fluid relieved itches and pain from poison ivy and poison oak. The dried flower buds were also used by Native Americans to alleviate symptoms of small pox. Different parts of the Gumweed plants were boiled to make remedies for a variety of medicinal purposes. The Spanish Americans boiled the buds and flowers and drank the decoction for kidney trouble. A remedy from boiled gumweed flowers could also be applied externally on the skin to help heal scabs and sores. The Native Americans boiled the root and drank a tea for the liver. A small quantity of a decoction held in the mouth, helped to cure tooth aches. A decoction of the leaves was made for running sores, to relieve throat and for lung trouble (Collins, 1989).



***Grindelia squarrosa*; Cody 2012**



***Grindelia squarrosa*; photo by Rose Grinnan**

***Helianthus spp.*, sunflower**

We can thank the Native Americans for their role in cultivating the sunflower. These species were a food favorite of Native Americans (and many Americans today). During the last 3,000 years, Natives increased the seed size approximately 1,000% its original size. They gradually changed the genetic components by repeatedly selecting the largest seeds.

The oil from the seed was used to cook with and to put in their hair.

The Teton Dakota tribe had a saying “When the sunflowers were tall and in full bloom, the buffaloes were fat and good meat”. They also boiled sunflower heads to use as a remedy for pulmonary troubles (Collins, 1989).



***Helianthus spp.*; photo by Rebecca Stern**



***Helianthus spp.*; Newcastle 2012**

***Heracleum maximum*, cow parsnip**

The tops of this plant were used in the smoke treatment for fainting and convulsions. The root was boiled and used for intestinal pain. The cooked roots were eaten and the base of the plant was used as a substitute for salt (Collins, 1989).



Heracleum maximum; ©Gary A. Monroe. United States, CA, Marin Co., Point Reyes National Seashore. May 20, 2006. @ USDA-NRCS PLANTS Database.

***Heuchera* spp., alumroot**

The root of this plant was dried and powdered to be used as a medicine and tea. It was applied to skin for relief of poison ivy and other skin rashes. A small amount of a tea was drunk to stop diarrhea. Native Americans ate the boiled leaves in the spring and dried them for future use (Collins, 1989).



Heuchera americana; ©Thomas G. Barnes. Barnes, T.G., and S.W. Francis. 2004. Wildflowers and ferns of Kentucky. University Press of Kentucky. @ USDA-NRCS PLANTS Database.

***Iris missouriensis*, wild iris**

This plant is poisonous. Natives ground the roots of this plant, mixed it with animal bile, and stuffed the mixture in the gall bladder of an animal and warmed it near a fire for several days. When ready, the Natives would dip their arrows in the mixture to make poison arrows. It is reported that many warriors only slightly wounded by such arrows died within three to seven days of being struck (Collins, 1989).



***Iris missouriensis*- Newcastle 2012**

***Juncus balticus*, Baltic rush**

Native Americans used the roots from this plant to as ornaments for robes. The stems were used to make baskets (Smith, 1989).



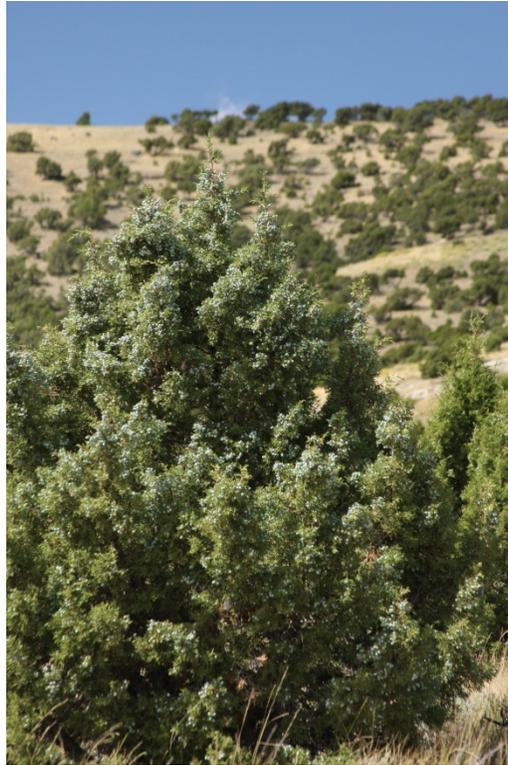
***Juncus balticus*; Rock Springs 2010**

Juniperus spp., juniper

The fruit from this tree was eaten fresh or cooked. The fruit and young shoots were also made into a tea (Smith, 1989).



***Juniperus osteosperma*; Kemmerer 2010**



***Juniperus osteosperma*; Kemmerer 2010**

***Koeleria macrantha*, prairie June grass**

The seeds from this grass were ground and made into bread or mush (Smith, 1989).



***Koeleria macrantha*; Rawlins 2010**

***Lewisia rediviva*, bitter root**

The roots of this plant were highly prized by Natives. A bag of roots was worth as much as a horse. The root was boiled or baked to decrease bitterness. The dry root was chewed for a sore throat (Collins, 1989).



***Lewisia rediviva*; ©Mark W. Skinner. United States, CA, Tuolumne Co., Red Hills. April 17, 1990. @ USDA-NRCS Plants Database.**

***Linum lewisii*, wild flax, Lewis flax**

The seeds of this plant were gathered and used to cook because of their high nutritious value and good taste. The stems were used by Natives for making cordage for ropes and fishing lines. Linseed oil, obtained from flax seed, is used in paints, oilcloth, printer's ink, linoleum and varnishes (Collins, 1989).



Linum lewisii; Photo by Rebecca Stern



Linum lewisii – Newcastle 2012

Linum lewisii; WY BLM.

***Lomatium* spp., biscuit root, desert parsley**

This plant was the first vegetal food to be gathered in the spring. It was eaten raw or made into a meal for biscuits or cakes. The seeds are nutritious. A tea was made from the leaves, stems and flowers (Collins, 1989).



***Lomatium foeniculaceum*; Rawlins 2010**



***Lomatium foeniculaceum*; Rawlins 2010**

Lupinus spp., lupine

Lupine has dangerous alkaloids and is lethal in large doses. It was not a popular food plant among most Native Americans because of the bad flavor. A tea was made from the seeds to help urination. The poor ate the seeds, boiling them first to remove the toxins and bitter taste (Collins, 1989).



***Lupinus argenteus*; Photo by Rose Grinnan**

***Mentha arvensis*, wild mint**

Native Americans made a tea from the finely ground leaves and stems to strengthen heart muscles and stimulate vital organs. The plant was also used as a perfume or deodorizer in houses. Some believed the plant improved one's love life. The oils from the plant were used in one's hair. The leaves were used to flavor meat.

During the Sun Dance ceremony, (fire) dancers stood upon a bed of wild mint for its cooling effect (Collins, 1989).



***Mentha arvensis*; Newcastle 2012**

***Opuntia polyacantha*, pricklypear**

Pricklypear was an important food plant for Natives. They ate the young joints and red fruits. The joints were boiled to remove the skin and spines. The fruits were collected in large quantities and eaten raw or dried for winter use. The dried fruits were cooked with meat or ground into gruel, flour, or meal (Smith, 1989).



***Opuntia polyacantha*; Photo by Rebecca Stern**



***Opuntia polyacantha*; Newcastle 2012**

***Osmorhiza berteroi*, sweet cicely**

This plant was an ingredient in all medicines. Natives would drink a tea or chew the leaves to cure a cold. If too much peyote was ingested during a meeting, chewing the root would “bring one around” (Collins, 1989).



Osmorhiza berteroi; Britton, N.L., and A. Brown. 1913. An illustrated flora of the northern United States, Canada and the British Possessions. 3 vols. Charles Scribner's Sons, New York. Vol. 2: 628. Courtesy of Kentucky Native Plant Society.

***Oxytropis* spp., crazyweed, locoweed**

Native Americans used these species to increase milk flow in nursing mothers and to make a mother's milk more agreeable to her infant. The leaves were chewed and the liquid was swallowed to alleviate a sore throat (Collins, 1989).



Oxytropis deflexa; ©Al Schneider. Southwest Colorado Wildflowers. United States, CO, NM, AZ, UT, Four Corners vicinity, within 150 miles of the corners. @ USDA-NRCS PLANTS Database.

***Penstemon* spp., beardstongue**

Native Americans made a wash and a poultice for running sores with species of beardstongue. Some species were boiled and the solution was used as a wash for burns. It was said to stop the pain and help new skin grow (Collins, 1989).



***Penstemon* sp.; Newcastle 2012**

***Perideridia gairdneri*, yampah, wild caraway**

This was a favorite root among the Native Americans. They would gather the roots and place them in baskets under running water.

In journals by John Fremont and from the Lewis and Clark expedition, the value of this plant is sited along with other plants the men learned of from the Natives. (Collins, 1989).



***Perideridia gairdneri* var. *borealis*; Worland 2009**



***Perideridia gairdneri* var. *borealis*; Worland 2009**

Phlox spp., phlox

A warm infusion of the pulverized leaves and flowers of phlox was used as a stimulant. The fluid was rubbed over the body of the patient and some was drunk, reputedly restoring a light and natural feeling (Collins, 1989).



Phlox hoodii; Photo by Rose Grinnan



Phlox hoodia; Rawlins 2009

***Plantago major*, common plantain**

The leaves from this plant were used as a poultice for abraded skin and insect bites. It is conveniently found near water where mosquitoes live. The leaves were chewed and put on the bites. The leaves were also used as a dressing for blisters, ulcers, or sores.

A mixture of plantain with rush was given to infants when they were learning to walk to give them strength (Collins, 1989 & Stewart, 1998).



Plantago major; ©James H. Miller. James H. Miller and Karl V. Miller. 2005. Forest plants of the southeast and their wildlife uses. University of Georgia Press., Athens. Courtesy of University of Georgia Press @ USDA-NRCS PLANTS Database.

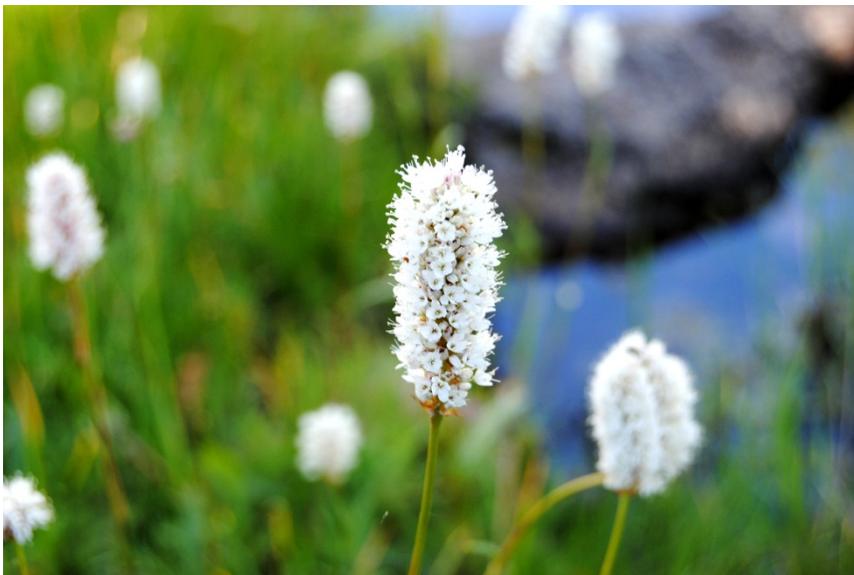
***Polygonum bistortoides*, American bistort, western bistort**

Native Americans used this plant as a first-aid dressing and for antiseptic powder for cuts and scrapes. When mixed with clay or comfrey root it forms a good drawing poultice for abscesses, sprained joints, and even inured tendons or broken fingers (Collins, 1989).



Polygonum bistortoides;

Pinedale 2010



Polygonum bistortoides;

Pinedale 2010

***Populus angustifolia*, narrowleaf cottonwood**

The inner bark of this tree was a good anti-scorbutic food (Smith, 1989).

This tree was sacred to Native Americans. It was used as the center pole in the Sun Dance ceremony. The ceremonial cutting of the tree was done by a man who had struck an enemy with a hatchet.

Populus was also used as the pole placed in the center of the Massaum lodge, where it was the object to which Cheyennes prayed for all living things.

A dye was made from the brown gummy leaf buds in the spring- red, green, purple, and white (Collins, 1989).



Populus angustifolia; Photo by Rose Grinnan



Populus angustifolia; Lander 2012

***Prunus virginiana*, chokecherry**

The fruits of chokecherry were eaten raw or dried. The ripe fruit was often ground up, with the pits, and sundried into cakes and stored for later use. The dried fruit was sometimes mixed with dried meat and fat to make pemmican, a nutritious food very common in Native cultures. The leaves were used as tobacco and the bark was often used to make baskets (Stewart, 1998).



Prunus Virginia- Newcastle 2012

***Pulsatilla patens*, pasque flower**

The Dakota Nation calls this plant by a name in their language which means “twin-flower” because usually each plant bears just two flowering scapes. One story goes, that when an elder of the Dakota firsts finds one of these flowers in the spring, it reminds him of his childhood. He sits near the flower and smokes his pipe while meditating on all the changes of his lifetime. He would then pick the flower, take it home to his children/grandchildren and sing this song:

“I wish to encourage the children of other flower nations now appearing all over the face of the earth. I am standing here old and gray-headed” (Collins, 1989).



Pulsatilla patens; Photo by Rebecca Stern

Salix sp., willows

This plant was used for ceremonial purposes. It was also used when making arrows and baskets.

Shoshones steeped willow twigs with salt and then drank as a laxative (Smith, 1989).

“The white willow bark was used to reduce fevers, relieve headache. Unlike the synthetic drug, acetyl salicylic acid, called aspirin which can cause stomach irritation, white willow bark contains tannins, which are actually good for the digestion” (DeVries, 1996-2010).



Salix melanopsis; Photo by Rose Grinnan

Solidago spp., goldenrod

Native Americans boiled the leaves and used the decoction to wash wounds and ulcers. They then would sprinkle powdered leaves on the wounds to help protect and heal it. It was also used for saddle sores of horses (Collins, 1989).



Solidago speciosa – Newcastle 2012

***Sphaeralcea coccinea*, globemallow**

A Cheyenne warrior society known as the Clown Society used this plant in ceremonies. The society is composed primarily of Cheyenne elders. They taught the Cheyenne cultural “dos” and “don’ts” through humor, sarcasm and satire.

During the Clown Dance, an animal was boiled and the medicine man would put his arms into the pot to retrieve meat without burning his skin. Before doing this, the medicine man would chew globemallow into a paste and use the paste to coat his hands and arms. The coating protected the skin from the scalding effects of boiling water and enabled the medicine man to “magically” pull a piece of meat from the pot(Collins, 1989).



Sphaeralcea coccinea; Rawlins 2009

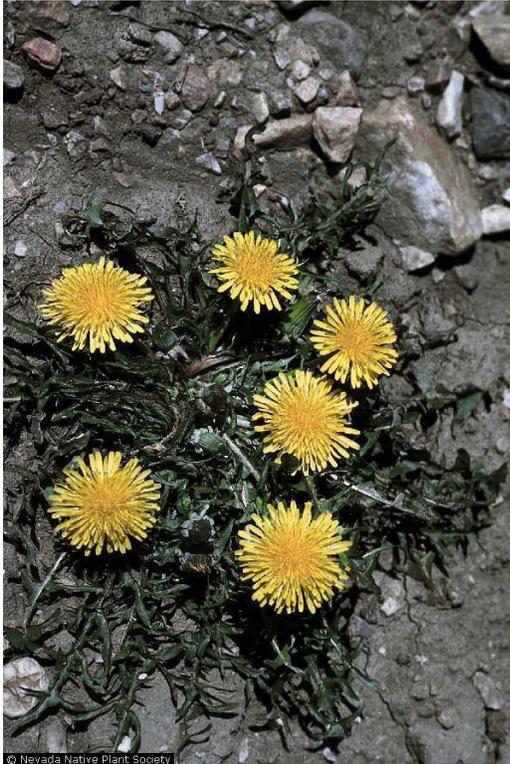


Sphaeralcea coccinea; Cody

2012

***Taraxacum spp.*, dandelion**

There is virtually no toxic potential in dandelions and it can be drunk as a tea in large quantities for such illness as kidney stones. In fact, you can buy dandelion tea in some stores today. The constituents in this plant include taraxasterol, taraxerol, fructose, insulin, choline, pectin, and mannite. The leaves also contain inositol. These compounds make the leaves and the root of this plant a safe diuretic. It increases both the water and waste products in urine. (Collins, 1989).



Taraxacum officinale: Margaret Williams. Courtesy of Nevada Native Plant Society. ©Nevada Native Plant Society. @ USDA-NRCS PLANTS Database.

***Thermopsis divaricarpa*, golden banner**

The flowers of this plant were dried and used in fumigation. A smoke treatment for rheumatism was made by mixing dried flowers with hair and burning the mixture under the affected part. It is said the treatment reduces swelling at once and relieves the pain (Collins, 1989).



Thermopsis divaricarpa; ©G.A. Cooper. Courtesy of Smithsonian Institution, Department of Systematic Biology-Botany. United States, NM, La Cueva. @ USDA-NRCS PLANTS Database.

***Valeriana edulis*, tobacco root**

This plant was used as a sedative. It has a strong and “sure of oneself” effect. Native Americans used it a great deal. They baked the roots in fireless cookers. These were pits dug in the ground and lined with stones. A fire was made in the pit and then raked out. It was lined with fresh grass on all four sides and the roots of the plant were put in the center. The roots were baked for two days to release toxins (Collins, 1989).



Valeriana edulis; J.S. Peterson @ USDA-NRCS PLANTS Database

***Yucca glauca*, small soapweed**

The stems and flowers of this plant were eaten raw or cooked. The seed pods were boiled. The roots were used for soap. The fibrous parts of the plant were used to make baskets (Smith, 1989).



Yucca glauca; Lander 2012

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