

Edible and Useful Weeds and Wildland Plants of the East Bay

This informal guide was written for a 2009 walk on Cerrito Creek, on the Albany-Contra Costa County border, just east of San Francisco Bay, California, USA. It is meant to encourage you to get to know and enjoy the nature around you. The list isn't complete and some details may be wrong -- Additions and corrections welcome at f5creeks@aol.com.

Information and pictures of the plants can be found on the web – a good place to start is www.calflora.org, an excellent database of California plants with links to photos. If you are going to gather, please obey laws and use judgment. Stick to common, abundant plants. Unless your target is a weed, don't take large proportions of seeds or leaves. Be sure you can identify the target plant and similar toxic ones (list at <http://www.plantsciences.ucdavis.edu/ce/king/PoisPlant/Tox-SCI.htm>).

A summer refresher: Manzanita (*Arctostaphylos* spp.) names mean “little apple” and “bear grape.” Cooked, crushed berries in water (soaked or strained) make a lemonade-like cider. They also can be ground and cooked into mush, but where's the fun in that?

Relishes from weeds: Young seedpods of wild radish and flowers of wild mustard are hard to beat for a tiny firecracker of taste. Try them on a spring walk! Fennel seeds give a hint of anise, and of course kids love yellow flowered “sour grass” – Bermuda buttercup (*Oxalis pes-caprae*). By the way, fennel pollen is supposed to make a great spice, rather like curry powder.

Salty zest for salads: Crunchy native pickleweed (*Salicornia* spp.) was a favorite with settlers and is showing up in some fancy restaurants. Invasive *Salsola*, a feathery-looking relative of tumbleweed, gives almost the same effect. If you're gathering on the Bay shore, also feel free pick and cook greens of New Zealand spinach (*Tetragonia tetragoniodes*), which is naturalizing abundantly.

Nuts: Wild hazelnuts (*Corylus cornuta*) are delicious, but squirrels usually beat you to them. Bay laurel (*Umbellularia californica*) is a relative of avocado. The oily seed is edible raw (oily green tip only) or roasted (delicious). Leaves are used for seasoning – they are stronger than European varieties, so don't use much. Native Americans used them to get rid of lice and fleas and keep insects out of graineries.

Berries: Native Americans and settlers gathered currants and gooseberries (*Ribes* spp.); strawberries (*Fragaria vesca*); and wild blackberries, salmonberries, and thimbleberries (*Rubus ursinus*, *spectabilis*, *parviflorus*). Oregon grape (*Mahonia* spp.) has tart berries that make delicious jelly. Native Americans used the roots and inner bark to make yellow dye. Wild grapes (*Vitis californica*) of course were eaten and stems were valuable in basketry. They also make great jelly, and leaves work fine in Dolmas and similar dishes. Rose hips (*Rosa californica* & *nuttalli*) are seedy but loaded with vitamin C – try them in apple jelly or syrup.

Blue elderberry (*Sambucus mexicana* or *callicarpa*) is not tasty raw, and green ones are toxic. (Don't eat red elderberries at all.) Cooked, though, blue elderberries make wonderfully spicy jellies and pies! Native Americans valued the soft pith for starting fires, and the easily hollowed stems for flutes and clappers.

Wild greens: Native Americans used juicy, water-loving leaves from creek monkeyflower (*Mimulus guttatus*), miners' lettuce (*Claytonia perfoliata*), and *Polygonum* spp., as well as, surprisingly, California poppy (*Escholzia californica*). (Please don't start ripping up the leaves of our beautiful state flower!)

Watercress (*Rorippa nasturtium-aquaticum*) is the same peppery leaf you buy in the market. Watercress also has uses in herbal medicine. If you collect it, be sure the water is clean and don't mistake it for native *Cicuta* or *Oenanthe*, both toxic.

Native Americans at goosefoot (*Chenopodium californicum*) leaves, flowers, and seeds. You are more likely to find non-native members of this big family and genus (amaranth and quinoa are relatives) such as lambs quarters, *Chenopodium album*, is a common weed and excellent green. Spring greens of wild radish and mustard also are worth gathering and steaming.

Many of our common weeds can be eaten as greens – not just the familiar dandelion, but also prickly lettuce (*Lactuca* spp.) and sow thistle (*Sonchus* spp.), and the native “false dandelions” (*Agoseris* spp.). Both native and European stinging nettles (*Urtica dioica*) make delicious greens (or beer) – handle them with rubber gloves until cooking makes the sting disappear.

Seed: Native American women gathered grassland seeds with flails and baskets. They parched and ground them into nutritious, storable cakes called pinole. Among the seeds used were those of native grasses like blue wild rye (*Elymus* spp.), bromes (*Bromus* spp.), wild barley (*Hordeum* spp.), and *Leymus triticoides*. The large seeds of wild oats (*Avena fatua*) were no doubt welcomed as this invader took over California grasslands.

Also used in pinole: Seeds of umbrella sedge (*Cyperus* spp.), rush (*Juncus* spp.), knotweed (*Polygonum* spp.) dock (*Rumex* spp.), sage (*Salvia* and *Artemisia* spp.) and many flowers such as fiddleneck, redmaids, paintbrush, Clarkia, Gilia, goldfields, tarweed, and buttercup. Seeds of *Ceanothus*, golden yarrow or lizard tail (*Eriophyllum* spp.) and California evening primrose (*Oenothera* spp.) were used; *Oenothera* roots and shoots also may have been eaten. Native Americans ate roasted berries of Toyon or California holly (*Heteromeles arbutifolia*), but they are not likely to appeal to current tastes. Oddly, seeds of the plant we call wild buckwheat (*Eriogonum* spp.) don't seem to have been eaten.

Flour for porridge, cakes, etc.: Acorns were a staple for cakes and porridge, after the tannin was leached out (usually by shelling and grinding the acorns and pouring warm water through the flour). The big seeds of buckeye (*Aeschylus californica*) are poisonous – they were mashed and put into streams or ponds to stun fish for easy harvesting. But in famine years, they could be buried and mud to leach out poison, and then ground and eaten. Numerous other seeds were ground into flour.

Soap: Soap plant of course, (*Amole* spp.), but it's a whole general store: Roasted bulb edible, gives off sticky glue in roasting. Fibers around bulb bound into brushes, e.g. for cleaning acorn meal out of baskets. Bulbs in water make shampoo, or stun fish the way buckeye does. Leaf base and bud stem can be eaten raw. Bulb juice helps poison oak itch. Also California lilac (*Ceanothus* spp.) flowers and roots of deerweed (*Lotus scoparius*).

Abrasives: Horsetails (*Equisetum* spp.) were favorites with Native Americans and settlers for sanding and scrubbing. Still great on a camping trip, and the hollow stems make fun beads for kids! This ancient plant, dating from the age of Dinosaurs, stiffens its stems with silica.

Basketry: Willow (*Salix* spp.) was used in basketry, as well as medicinally for all kinds of pain relief. (Aspirin comes from willow.) Redbud (*Cercis occidentalis*) was coppiced -- cut back hard -- to encourage long shoots for use in basketry. Sedge (*Carex* spp.) roots and fibers were vital. Also red dogwood (*Cornus sericea*; roots of tules (*Scirpus* spp.); grapevines, hazelnut shoots, fern stems – many more.

The marsh general store: Tules (*Scirpus* spp.) were used for boats, roofs, duck decoys, baskets, string, and more. Tubers were eaten raw or ground to flour, seeds eaten raw or in mush. Roots were split and

dyed black in mud for basketry. Cattails (*Typha* spp.) are delicious green – steam them and eat them like corn on the cob. The white leaf base can be eaten raw. Root cores can be roasted, ground. Pollen used for baking. Leaves made mats.

Medicine: Far too many plants even to begin, and reports are highly unreliable. Be sure to check out possible toxicity. Among the herbs that have been used medicinally: The aromatic sages (locally mugwort, *Artemisia douglasiana* and California sag, *Artemisia californica*, used for rheumatism, colds, to prevent menstrual cramps and to ease childbirth, among others; California sage was also used for smoking and in sweat houses. Fragrant yarrow (*Achillea millefolia*) and wild mints (*Mentha*, *Monardella*, *Stachys* spp.) had many medicinal uses and still do. The Spanish adopted Native American uses, as shown by the common names of Yerba mansa (*Anemopsis*), Yerba buena (*Satureja douglasii*), and Yerba santa (*Eriodictyon* spp.) Yerba buena tea is delicious!