

## Edible and Useful Weeds and Wildland Plants of the East Bay

This informal guide 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](mailto:f5creeks@aol.com)!

Information and pictures of the plants can be found on the web. A good place to start is [www.calflora.org](http://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, take only a small fraction 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>).

**Relishes from weeds:** Young seed pods 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*). Invasive wild onion greens or bulb work in salads.

**Spices:** Fennel pollen makes a great spice (check prices and recipes on the web). Wild celery is simply the domestic plant gone wilder and stronger. Bay leaves are great in cooking – stronger than “bought.”

**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 quantities might be poisonous. (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:** In early spring, greens of wild radish and mustard 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.

Native Americans used juicy, water-loving leaves from creek monkeyflower (*Mimulus guttatus*), miners' lettuce (*Claytonia perfoliata*, good in salads), and *Polygonum* spp., as well as, surprisingly, California poppy (*Escholzia californica*).

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 ate 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*, a common weed and excellent green.

**A summer refresher:** Manzanita (*Arctostaphylos* spp.) – the 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?

**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 invasive wild oats (*Avena fatua*) were no doubt welcomed as it 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 also ate roasted berries of oyon or California holly (*Heteromeles arbutifolia*), but they are not likely to appeal to current tastes. Oddly, seed of the plant we call wild buckwheat (*Eriogonum* spp.) doesn'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 (by burial in mud, or shelling, grinding, 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*) were used to make soap.

**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 ground and roasted, and the pollen can be used in 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 sage, *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!

### **How to use rose hips and elderberries:**

**Rose hips** don't have much pectin or flavor. What they have is lots of vitamin C and seeds. Use them for syrup with citrus fruits you'd use in marmalade, or make jelly using about half rose hips and half apples (cut up, but not peeled or cored). A little lemon juice might be nice, or red peppers or jalapenos.

If you have not made jelly before, read several sets of general instructions about jelly making, sterilizing, and determining when jelly has jelled. I don't like pectin, but you can use it.

Assuming you are not using store-bought pectin: Boil the apples and rose hips with water just to cover until everything is soft. Drain the juice through in a jelly bag or an old piece of clean cotton in your colander (I use an old pillowcase), set over a large pot. I am not particular about clarity, so I squeeze to get more juice and pulp.

To make the jelly, use about 2 cups sugar to 3 cups juice, or 3 cups sugar to four cups juice. Boil, stirring occasionally, until this jells. I test in two ways: When it forms two drops or "sheets" from a spoon (two drops will be soft jelly), and when a small quantity on a cold plate in the refrigerator or freezer firms up. The second is more reliable. If all else fails, you will have great syrup.

**Elderberries** have a wonderful earthy, spicy flavor and are less seedy than rose hips. For pies, the biggest effort is removing the stems and leaves. I strip the berries as carefully as I can and then put them in a big pot of water. Remaining leaves and stems, along with green berries, float and can be easily removed.

Once you have the berries, use any recipe for a two-crust berry pie and your favorite thickening (elderberries are quite juicy so don't skimp on thickening). I like brown sugar, which seems to go with the spiciness of the berries. Elderberries work fine in custard pies, too. I don't increase the sugar in pie recipes, but elderberries are not very sweet, so you might want to. I have sometimes added a little cinnamon or similar spice for variety.

Jelly making needs some apples – you can easily go halves, because elderberries are so flavorful. My favorite is equal quantities of elderberries and blackberries, with a few apples for pectin. Boil all until soft (you don't need added water, but mash some berries to have liquid at the start so things don't burn) and strain as above. Then make jelly as above.

Although jelly making is a two-step process, I find it easier and better because you don't need to be picky about removing leaves and stems, and you wind up without seeds. But jam works fine.

## Neat facts about Cerrito Creek:

- The Ohlone Greenway (today's BART) is old Santa Fe Railroad (1903-1970s). Before that, it was narrow-gauge California and Nevada RR from 1888 (aimed at Colorado mines but got only to Orinda – that's why we have an Orinda, which started as a summer resort).
- Cerrito Creek divided Rancho San Antonio (Peralta grant) and Rancho San Pablo (Castro grant). The California State Legislature separated Alameda and Contra Costa Counties in 1853, making the creek the county line. Thus it is also the boundary between Berkeley & Albany and El Cerrito & Richmond.
- Victor Castro, son of the grantee, built adobe north of creek, east of San Pablo, at today's El Cerrito Plaza. San Pablo Ave. was the road to Rancho San Pablo and beyond to the mines. William Rust, a German, opened his blacksmith shop just west of San Pablo at present Pastime Hardware. This area grew with saloons and other activities just beyond the "law" in Alameda County.
- The Creekside Park neighborhood is old tidal marsh (Bay shore was just west of the railroad tracks.) A fan of small creeks flowed into it near Adams Street – the pipes show they still do. A slaughterhouse and Berkeley dumping filled the marsh. In 1908, a Plague scare closed the dump, which moved to foot of Buchanan. Albany housewives turned out with guns to protest, leading to incorporation of Albany.
- Middle Creek, flowing into Cerrito Creek over a rocky "fish ladder" of old sewer line, was the same as Blackberry Creek in Berkeley's John Hinkel Park. Most flow now goes into Marin Creek storm drain. The willow marsh at the mouth of Middle Creek is on our oldest maps. Grinding rocks, shells show Native Americans used this area.
- Albany Hill is Jurassic sandstone (from age of dinosaurs), part of the same range of hills as Fleming Point, Point Isabel, Brooks Island, the Potrero San Pablo of West Richmond, and the hills of the China Camp area across San Pablo Strait. The hill is a refuge for many native plants, some not found for hundreds of miles. The summit welcomes hawks, monarch butterflies in winter, wildflowers in spring, views. The west slope and land south of the cross are privately owned. Albany wants to buy the land, but it's still shown as dense housing on Albany's housing plan.
- Dynamite manufacturers, driven out of Fleming Point, moved to Albany Hill in the 1890s. They planted eucalyptus on the hill to muffle explosions. They were driven out 1905 after a big explosion.
- Lower Cerrito Creek's restoration and creekside trail is a multi-year effort by Friends of Five Creeks, improving habitat, reducing flood risk, and welcoming people to enjoy nature. Note Girl Scouts' mini-mural, steps and fences built by Boy Scouts, interpretive signs on creek life and history.



Left, US Coastal Survey map, 1851. Right, 1905 explosion dynamite factory on Albany Hill.