



Indigenous Plant Guide





Important Note:

These are just some of the practices by a few Métis and First Nations families. There are many more ways various First Nations, Inuit and Métis people used and continue to use plants. Please contact your local Indigenous community for local information, stories, and learnings of the land around you, as well as the language.

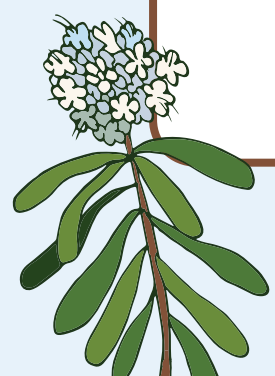


Plant Safety:

Please note, do not pick or ingest any of the plants in any form (tea or whole) without adult supervision. If you are unsure, please invite an Elder or Knowledge Keeper to join you.

When Harvesting:


Ensure you are not on private property and that you have permission to harvest plants.

- Harvest only what you need.
 - Do not damage the remaining plant (leaving roots, etc. for it to re-grow).
 - Remember to say thank you for the plant, and have gratitude for the gift.
 - Traditionally the protocol for many nations would be to sprinkle tobacco as a thank you to Earth for this gift.
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Asking an Elder:

Often when plants were harvested, stories were told while harvesting, drying and/or processing the plants. You may even find the plant teachings embroidered into clothes and other everyday items. Invite an Elder to join you to hear some of these stories.

We offer elders tobacco when we ask them for information or their help. With an adult, here are the steps to create a tobacco offering:

- Place a small amount of loose tobacco in a cotton square cloth.
 - Tie the corners together into a little bundle.
 - While preparing the offering, have a mind and heart full of gratitude and positive thoughts.
 - When asking for guidance, hold it out in your left hand.
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Labrador Tea



Michif: *Muskego*

DESCRIPTION:

Found: near lakes or swamps

Looks like: leaves are long, thin, curl under, smooth and green.

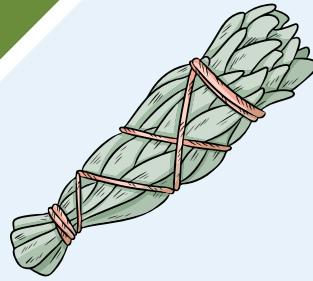
Key identifier: white fuzz underneath the leaf. When that white fuzz turns orange, they are ready to pick.

Grows in large groups and low to the ground

PLANT USES IN INDIGENOUS CULTURE:

This is a favourite to pick when on a fishing or camping trip. Pick it one leaf at a time, wash well and let it air dry. Once dry, store and use as needed under adult supervision. Steep the leaves like you would any tea. You can steep it fresh, but it is not as strong. It is often used for respiratory needs, like asthma or a cough. Used to reduce swelling, bloating, and constipation.

Sage



Michif: *L'aarbr a saent*

DESCRIPTION:

Found: in fields of grass

Looks like: straight stems with light green at the top of the leaf and grey at the base.

Key identifier: a very strong odor that stays even after it is dried.

Pick right before fall.

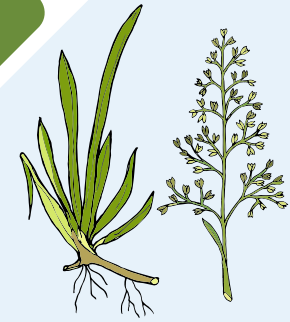
PLANT USES IN INDIGENOUS CULTURE:

White sage is a key component to our daily smudge. It is used in ceremonies for many Indigenous cultures and as sacred medicine. Sage clears away any negative energy from our homes, objects, or self. Some families hang it above their door for decoration and good luck.

You can also make a nice tea with sage to help with digestion.

When fishing fresh sage is great to add to your foil with onions and butter to cook your fish on the fire. Sage is also great in a big pot of stew or ground in bannock as an extra flavor.

Sweetgrass



Michif: *Fwayn seukrii / Fwayn di bufflo*

DESCRIPTION:

Found: near rivers and lakes

Looks like: untamed green grass, except purple at the base of the stem. The roots are pure white. Leaves grow from the bottom and are rough to the touch.

Key identifier: a strong sweet, vanilla-like smell. Shine a light on the leaf and a red tinge will appear.

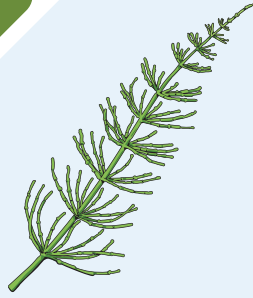
Can be difficult to find. One belief is that you will find it when your soul is ready to find it.

PLANT USES IN INDIGENOUS CULTURE:

Sweetgrass is braided and used to smudge in many Indigenous ceremonies as well as smudge to clear away any negative energy from our homes, self or objects. Braided sweetgrass is also sometimes hung above doorways to bring peace and wellness. It is one of the sacred medicines. Because this is a sacred medicine, it is wise to identify and look at it, but do not pick without an Elder present.

It is commonly braided while green, then hung to dry. Another name for sweetgrass is "hair of Mother Earth". Sweetgrass tea can be brewed when you have a cold.

Horsetail & Cattail



Michif: *La krayaen̄ and Lii konouille*

DESCRIPTION:

Horsetail

Found: near water

Looks like: very tall with no flowers or leaves. Pointy, small green shoots stick out of the stem. In the spring, it is ash grey-brown.

Key identifier: if your fish hook gets caught in those weeds it is difficult to remove, as it is a very strong weed.

Cattail

Found: near water

Looks like: leaves are long, thin, spongy, and grey/green in colour.

Key identifier: large brown, tail-like cone on top that is soft to the touch.

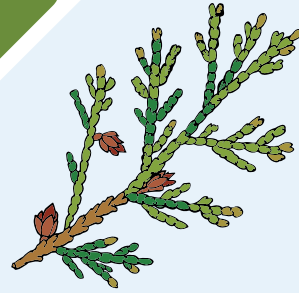
PLANT USES IN INDIGENOUS CULTURE:

Dried horsetail makes a great tea that helps your nails and hair get stronger, as well as cleanse your kidney and liver. (Horsetail can be poisonous if you ingest too much.)

The ashes of the burned plant can be used on cuts on your skin. When camping if you have sticky pots to wash, do as the ancestors and weave the horsetail weed to use as a scrubber.

Cattails are beautiful and make great decor such as wreaths, dolls, and baskets. (We invite you to try and make a cattail doll!) Ancestors used the plant's brown fluffy seeds to stuff blankets and jackets for the cold winter months.

Red Cedar



Michif: *Li sayd*

DESCRIPTION:

Found: in humid climates

Looks like: flat leaves that fan out. The branches curve up at the ends.

Key identifier: distinct smell from other trees.

PLANT USES IN INDIGENOUS CULTURE:

Red Cedar is sought after for traditional ceremonies as a smudge.

All types of cedars were used for calming baths and seen as a powerful way to remove trauma. Boil the cedar leaves and add it to the bath.

Today it is often used for a relaxing bath and can be purchased in many stores that sell spa products. Cedar tea can be used for flus and colds.

Dandelion Leaves



Michif: *Li pisaanlii*

DESCRIPTION:

Found: in fields, and ditches

Looks like: broad long green leaves grow approximately 12 inches tall. Leaves are close to the ground and they have a singular tube like stem that produces a yellow flower.

Key identifier: commonly misunderstood garden weed introduced from Europe.

PLANT USES IN INDIGENOUS CULTURE:

These were often eaten. They contain many vitamins, iron, calcium and potassium.

Dry leaves from the youngest plants possible for best taste mixing this with other berries for a good tea is often the best. The tea is great for helping balance blood sugar. The roots are harvested, dried and used in tea for treating inflammation.

Chokecherries



Michif: *Takwahiminana / Lii grenn*

DESCRIPTION:

Found: rural areas, near edges of roads

Looks like: tree bark is brown/black as it gets older. The branches have grooves and pores. Dark green leaves with a pale green underside. Small round dark red-purple berries that grow in groups.

Key identifier: pick the berries when they change from red to a dark blue/black color, between mid-August to mid-September.

The berries contain many seeds and are very bitter.

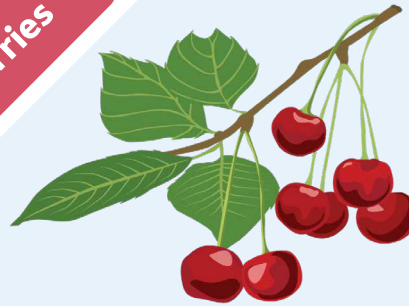
PLANT USES IN INDIGENOUS CULTURE:

Chokecherries have been used for a long time in Métis homes. These berries are dry and bitter but our grandmothers had a trick to make them more enjoyable. If frozen, they become less dry and very sweet. Some families would eat as you would popcorn for special visits or watching TV.

Chokecherries make a great deep color for painting. It is much like a watercolor effect of paint.

Families always picked chokecherries to make syrup for French toast and pancakes.

Pin Cherries



Michif: *Lii miriiz*

DESCRIPTION:

Found: southern climates, in sunny areas

Looks like: the tree has smooth bark that is red/brown. The leaves have jagged, teeth-like edges. In the spring, they have small white 5-petal flowers. Fruit grow on long stems in groups. Each cherry contains one large stone.

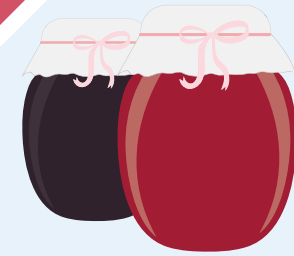
Key identifier: pin cherries are red and have a very sour taste.

PLANT USES IN INDIGENOUS CULTURE:

Like chokecherries, they can be used to make syrup or jelly for the winter. Pin cherries are not as easy to pick but they make a very unique tasting syrup and/or jellies. It was often kept for special occasions.

These berries can also be used for painting. Pin cherries are a very juicy berry and they make a reddish water-colour paint.

SYROP



Note: This recipe can be used for chokecherry and pin cherry syrup.

- Gather 16 cups of picked berries.
- Cover berries with water in large pot.
- Boil until berries are tender, roughly 45 minutes.
- Strain in strainer and squeeze it in cheesecloth, much like you do for any fruit jelly recipe.
- Return juice to the stove and for every cup of berry juice, add 1 cup of sugar. Let boil until thick. Depending on pectin level that year, could be 1 to 3 hours.
- Jar while piping hot, *et voilà*: the best pancake syrup.

All the berries listed here can be picked and used for two things:

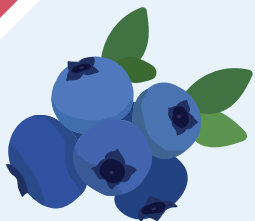
Tea: Steep the dried berries to make a lovely sweet tea.

Painting: Fresh berries can be ground into a paste to paint with. To store, put in the fridge with a pinch of salt and a dash of vinegar.



Berries

Saskatoons & Blueberries



Michif for Blueberries: *Lii blooy*
Michif for Saskatoons: *Lii pwayr*

DESCRIPTION:

Saskatoons

Found: in bushes, in ditches on the side of roads.

Looks like: grey coloured branches, with oval shaped, toothy, leaves.

Key identifier: round, purple/black berries that have a small crown. Very seedy.

Blueberries

Found: in bushes, in ditches on the side of roads.

Looks like: the leaves are egg shaped and blue/green in colour. Thornless bushes.

Key identifier: round, purple/blue berries that have a small crown.

PLANT USES IN INDIGENOUS CULTURE:

Both of these berries were mostly picked to preserve for the winter and dry for tea. Once dried, the berries can be crushed into a powder to add flavour to food. Saskatoons can be used to help upset stomachs.

For painting juicy Saskatoon berries can give you a beautiful lavender color.

Bearberries



DESCRIPTION:

Found: on an evergreen shrub with very bendy branches, in sandy soil.

Looks like: leaves are very thick and feel like leather.

Key identifier: white/pinkish flowers on the tree. The berry itself is red, small and round.

PLANT USES IN INDIGENOUS CULTURE:

Bearberries were used as a meat smoking mixture when combined with other plants.

Elderberries



DESCRIPTION:

Found: in a shrub in moist area wet areas but sunny.

Looks Like: small purple berries that droop off the plant. Pointy, oval, toothy leaves.

Key identifiers: cluster of small white flowers.

PLANT USES IN INDIGENOUS CULTURE:

Elderberry tea is a favourite wildberry tea. Pick, dry and store for later use, as you would any tea. Other than tasty tea, it is great to build immunity and if consumed regularly it can help balance blood sugar. Elderberries have a beautiful bluish purple that can be used for painting; much like the tea.

Wild Raspberries



Michif: *Lii fraanbwayz*

DESCRIPTION:

Found: in a small shrub.

Looks like: in June and July, white/pink flowers can be found on the shrub. Light green leaves with jagged edges that are silver underneath.

Key identifier: the berry is very seedy; little red balls.

PLANT USES IN INDIGENOUS CULTURE:

For painting, wild raspberries have a pale pinkish red and it takes a lot as these fruits tend to be small but the patience pays off.

Birch Tree



Michif: *Li boloo*

DESCRIPTION:

Found: in cooler climates across the boreal forest.

Looks like: thin, paper-like bark that is silver, red, grey/green and yellow in colour. Egg-shaped, toothy leaves. Medium size. Branches grow at the top. The tree grows in clusters.

Key identifier: bark peeling off the trunk naturally.

PLANT USES IN INDIGENOUS CULTURE:

The bark of this tree is used for many things within Indigenous communities, including art!

Birch bark biting was first used to experiment with patterns for beading or quill designs but later developed its own beautiful art work that was often used in storytelling.

Birch bark biting is one of the oldest First Nations art forms. It originated with the Woodland Ojibwe and the Cree nations. A thin piece of birch bark is needed. The bark is folded the same way one would fold paper when making a snowflake. Instead of cutting, you would bite the design, being careful not to bite right through the bark. You would visualize what you wanted to create and would bite gently as you rotated the bark with your hand.

Birch bark canoes were first used by Algonquin Nations as this bark does not shrink like most barks. It was later used by the Voyageurs who worked for the North West Company to help them transport furs and goods from fort to fort.

Birch bark baskets were common for picking berries and other plants. Birch bark bowls and pots were also common in Nations such as the Mi'kmaq.

Black Spruce



Michif: *Aen nipinet*

DESCRIPTION:

Found: across Canada in more northern regions

Looks like: short needles with tiny red hair-like fibers on the ends. Dark green needles with a blue tint. The branches spiral downwards. It is an evergreen.

Key identifier: black pine cones.

PLANT USES IN INDIGENOUS CULTURE:

This tree was one of the most versatile for medicinal use. The needles were used as topical treatment to help itchy skin. The needles were harvested and chewed or boiled to help with sore throats. Teas can be made by boiling the needles as it is high in vitamin C.



Left: [Birch bark biting artwork](#) by Angelique Merasty.

Photo: Western Development Museum Collection, WDM-1973-S-8214

Right: [Researching birch-bark basketry](#)



Michif: *Li sool*

DESCRIPTION:

Found: across Canada.

Looks like: the bark is red/brownish in colour. The leaves are green with a grey colour underneath. They are pointy and in the shape of a spear.

White willow has long shiny green leaves, with soft fur underneath.

Diamond willows trunks have little diamond shapes imprinted in them that alternate colours. This is caused by a fungus.

Key identifier: flexible branches that can only be snapped at the base of the branch.

PLANT USES IN INDIGENOUS CULTURE:

Willow was often used because the branches are easy to bend. The branches are used for creating lodges, bows, baskets, nets, and art. The bark and roots can be used on cuts/burns/poison ivy rash to help with the pain. Under adult supervision it is a great source for pain relief.

White Willow Bark was harvested for tea that reduces muscle pain (the original Aspirin). It is important not to pick more than you will use, as a small branch will make a lot of bark. To make tea, the bark was shaved off in very thin strips and left to dry for months.

Diamond Willow Fungus is a fungus that grows only on the diamond willow. Some uses include using the fungus that grows on the trunk for smudging ceremonies and it has a specific aroma that is sweet and very enjoyable. It can be used on its own or mixed with cedar, sweetgrass or sage for a smudge.

Red Willow has many uses. Two main uses are for drying meat and for creating dream catchers. It gets picked and dried. It is then used to smoke meat and fish in the fall. Dried red willow gives a very gentle smoke in the smoke house for sausage but especially marinated pike (Jack) fish.

We also collected red willow branches as they are very pliable for making dream catchers. It is important to soak them in water and bend while fresh and wet for a crack free dream catcher. Do not sell dream catchers. Create them as a craft. You are encouraged to invite an Elder in to tell stories of the dream catchers.

Traditionally, dream catchers were used to encourage positive dreams. The good dreams would slip through the holes and slide down the feathers into the sleepers head. The bad dreams would get caught in the web. The Ojibway Nation tells the story of the Spider Woman when learning about dream catchers.



Dream catcher
Photo courtesy of Jenel Hrenyk



Willow basket