

Uses of Plants among Indigenous Peoples in Canada

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Indigenous peoples in what is now Canada collectively used over a thousand different plants for food, medicine, materials, and in cultural rituals and mythology. Many of these species, ranging from algae to conifers and flowering plants, remain important in today's indigenous communities. This knowledge of plants and their uses has allowed Aboriginal peoples to thrive in Canada's diverse environments. Many traditional uses of plants have evolved to be used in modern life by indigenous and non-indigenous peoples alike.

Food Plants

Before the arrival of Europeans to what is now Canada, Aboriginal peoples practised the cultivation of food crops in a variety of fertile areas. In terms of scale it was at its most elaborate in southern Ontario and the St Lawrence lowland. Crops included the "Three Sisters" — corn, beans and squash — as well as sunflowers, tobacco and, possibly sunchokes (the tuber of a species of sunflower). The Three Sisters were often planted together, in what is known as companion planting, where each plant supported the growth and nutrition of the others.

Over 500 species of wild plants provided food for Aboriginal peoples in Canada. Some of these foods are like those eaten today: root and green vegetables, fruits, nuts, berries, seeds and mushrooms. Traditional foods like maple syrup, wild rice and wild fruit are now enjoyed in Canada by indigenous and non-indigenous peoples alike.

Other wild foods — some types of lichens, marine algae, and the inner bark tissues of some trees — are not normally part of the modern diet. Plants were also used as sweeteners, flavourings and beverages; many wild plants provided more than one type of food.

Medicinal Plants

Plants were, and still are, an important component of indigenous medicine. Herbal specialists were usually responsible for curing disease and maintaining health. Although administering herbal medicines was sometimes associated with ritual and in many cultures herbal curing and magical curing were virtually inseparable, these specialists were not necessarily shamans who invoked supernatural powers in healing. Sometimes, special curative and spiritual organizations existed, like the Ojibwa Midewiwin (grand medicine society) in which initiates passed through stages, eventually learning the ritual and herbalism for curing disease.

More than 500 plants were used in indigenous medicine. Specialists could administer such medicines as herbal teas, preparations to be chewed and swallowed, poultices, inhaled vapours, or a variety of other applications. Specialists could prescribe any part of a plant, either alone or in combination with other herbs.

Aboriginal practitioners were skilled in selection, preparation and dosage of herbal medicines, and traditional treatments were effective in treating a host of ailments, including wounds, skin sores, gastrointestinal disorders, coughs, colds, fevers and rheumatism. A famous example is the curing of

Cartier's men of scurvy in the winter of 1535-36. They were treated by the St. Lawrence Iroquoians of Stadacona with a conifer tea of high vitamin C content (probably eastern white pine).

Utility Plants

Woods were of prime importance as fuels, and as major components of utilitarian items: buildings, dugout canoes, boxes, totem poles and implements like paddles, digging sticks, spear shafts, bows, arrows, and snowshoe frames. Sheets of bark, especially birch, were made into containers and canoes. Bark was also used to cover roofs and line storage pits.

Fibrous tissues from stems, roots, bark and leaves served for twine, rope and weaving materials for baskets, mats and clothing. Tree resin was used as glue and waterproofing. Plants provided dyes and pigments, scents, absorbent materials, abrasives, linings and wrappings, insect repellents, toys and recreational items, and personal adornment.

Spiritual Importance

By representing a spiritual connection with the earth, many plants provide more than just corporeal or utilitarian benefits. For example, the Haudenosaunee hold several ceremonies — like the Sap, Seed, Strawberry, Bean, and Green Corn ceremonies — that honour the interconnectivity of plant and human life.

Tobacco is of major importance to many peoples, figuring prominently in ceremonies, everyday life, and creation stories. Tobacco, sage, sweet grass and cedar are used for various spiritual purposes in smudging ceremonies, where smoke is fanned over the face and head.

Make your own muscle strengthener tea

Wyss says the leaves of raspberries, blackberries, salmon berries, and thimbleberries are traditionally used to make a muscle strengthener tea for women.

Gather two or three leaves from a plant you have permission to harvest from.

Steep in 1 cup (250 mL) boiling water.

Let sit for 10 minutes.

Enjoy

Remember to consult your health care practitioner before trying any of these plants.