

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 or perfect; 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, 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 and flowers of wild radish and flowers of wild mustard are hard to beat for a tiny firecracker of taste. Try them on a spring walk, or in salads. Fennel seeds give a hint of anise (make sure you can distinguish them from poison hemlock), and of course kids love yellow flowered "sour grass" – Bermuda buttercup (*Oxalis pes-caprae*). Invasive wild onion greens or bulbs work in salads. I find it easiest to crush bulbs in a garlic press (after washing).

Spices, flavorings: Fennel pollen makes a great spice – a richer anise with more overtones. Put flowers on any flat surface, shake them or brush them together, or just leave for several days. You can use this fresh or dry for several days more (try warming the oven, turning it off, and leaving the pollen there for a few hours). Use a teaspoon to a tablespoon – a little at first, to see how you like it. Try on fish, chicken, rice, eggplant, potatoes; mix with Herbes de Provence, curries, spice-cake type mixes in sweets.

Fennel fronds are great for steaming; some use them in dips. 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 fancy restaurants. Take all you want of invasive *Salsola*, a feathery-looking relative of tumbleweed (salty, crunchy);. Common purslane, *Portulaca olerace*, is crunchy, salty, a bit sour; high in nutrients and omega-3 fatty acids; can be cooked or used in soups, also medicinal uses).

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*, or domestic) are seedy and not very flavorful, 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! Great alone, or mix half-half with wild blackberries (use a couple of apples for pectin)! Native Americans valued the soft pith for starting fires, and the easily hollowed stems for flutes and clappers.

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Wild greens: In early spring, greens of wild radish and mustard are worth gathering and steaming. Both native and European stinging nettles (*Urtica dioica*) make delicious greens (or beer) – handle them with rubber gloves until cooking makes the sting disappear.

Cook tender green leaves of New Zealand spinach (*Tetragonia tetragonioides* only very briefly; it loses flavor. It can be eaten raw.

Malva (cheeseweed) tender leaves and green seed pods are edible, but boring. Many common weeds can be eaten as greens early in spring – the familiar dandelion, curly dock (*Rumex crispus*), prickly lettuce (*Lactuca spp.*), sow thistle (*Sonchus spp.*), and the native “false dandelions” (*Agoseris spp.*).

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.

Bracken-fern fiddleheads are delicious when very young – steam them like asparagus. Large quantities are carcinogenic, but you’re not likely to eat that many.

Native Americans ate goosefoot (*Chenopodium californicum*) leaves, flowers, and seeds. You are more likely to find non-native members of this big family with triangular leaves (amaranth and quinoa are relatives). Lambs quarters, *Chenopodium album*, is an excellent green, and others are worth trying.

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

Do your own experimenting with infusions (“teas”), making sure of identification and using only small quantities at first. Yerba Buena is excellent. Try the many escaped domestic mints – just plunge into hot water. Wild ginger (*Asarum caudatum*) is fabulous, but carcinogenic – and too rare to gather.

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 wild buckwheat (*Eriogonum spp.*) umbrella sedge (*Cyperus spp.*), rush (*Juncus spp.*), knotweed (*Polygonum spp.*) dock (*Rumex spp.*), sage (*Salvia* and *Artimisia 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 toyon or California holly (*Heteromeles arbutifolia*), but they are not likely to appeal to current tastes.

Flour: 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 (*Amole* spp.) was 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*) or California goosefoot (*Chenopodium californicum*) 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. They gave Napier the idea for logarithms.

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. Mormon tea (*Ephedra viridis*), had many medicinal uses including against syphilis; it was standard in houses of ill repute. (Be cautious about all Ephedrines.)

Fragrant yarrow (*Achillea millefolium*) 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! Gum plant (*Grindelia* spp.) was and is used as a remedy for poison oak.