

Other Plants

Traditionally we have used many other plants that are neither berries nor trees such as shrubs, moss, and wildflowers. They are used for building construction, structures around camps, fishing, food, and medicine.

Shrubs

There are several species of willows found in the area such as Arctic and Beeb. Willows are a very useful shrub. During the summer, they have a lot of structural uses around camps, from use as tent pegs to hangers for teapots when cooking over a campfire.



In the past, willow fibers from the inner bark were used as thread for binding twine for small fish nets, fish traps, and dipnets. (Stokes 1985:301) Willows have also been used to start fires, for medicine, and to mix in with spruce boughs in a tent.

(Kari 1977:5-6; Andre, Fehr 2000:22)

Small Plants

People use many small plants in the area such as grass, moss, wild flowers, and wild foods for subsistence.

In the past grass, was used as an insole for moccasins and winter boots, and is now used for lining dog houses. Moss provided insulation for logs between homes as well as a covering for foods that were stored outside.

(Stokes 1985:302-303)

People make salads from fireweed and dandelions and also dig wild carrots and Indian potatoes for food. They drink Labrador tea.

In addition, they gather various plants for medicinal purposes such as colds, burns, and arthritis.



Credits

Telida Village has developed a series of subsistence brochures to contribute towards keeping the tribal members healthy and the environment clean for future generations, fulfilling the Indian General Assistance Program's objective to reduce the risk to human health and the environment.

Funding

Funding for this brochure has been provided by Telida Village and the Environmental Protection Agency under the 2009 Indian General Assistance Program grant.

Information Credits

“Alaska Department of Fish & Game: Ecosystems”

Andre, Fehr 2000: “Gwich'in Ethnobotany.”

Garibaldi, Ann 1999: “Medicinal Flora of the Alaska Natives.”

Nelson: “Make Prayers to the Raven”

Priscilla Kari: “Dena'ina K'et'una – Tanaina Plantlore”

Stokes, Jeff W 1985 Tech. Paper 86, “Natural Resource Utilization of Four Upper Kuskokwim Communities” ADF + G Tech Paper 86

Sullivan, Robert J., “The Ten'a Food Quest”

Viereck and Little, “Alaska's Trees and Shrubs”

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U.S Fish and Wildlife Image Library



Gathering Plants In the Upper Kuskokwim



Spruce Boughs

Photo courtesy of Phylcia Hanson

“Spruce trees could save your life if you had to make a fire when it's 60 below. When you are traveling in the bush and you need to make a fire, break off a bunch of dry twigs from the tree, light a match to it and place it under your wood to start a fire.”¹

Information Brochure Funded by the Environmental Protection Agency

¹ Nap Norbert in Andre, Alestine and Fehr, Alan Fehr 2000 “Gwich'in Ethnobotany. Plants used by the Gwich'in for Food, Medicine, Shelter and Tools, (Gwich'in Social and Cultural Institute and Aurora Research Institute, Inuvik, Northwest Territories) 2000

Gathering Plants

The Upper Kuskokwim River is located in what is called the “boreal forest” or the (toch’o). Alaska’s boreal forest (sometimes called by the Russian word “*taiga*”) is a mixture of forest types—from sunny aspen groves to spruce bogs-dotted with meadows, marshes, lakes, and rivers, and containing many different types of animals.

(Alaska Department of Fish and Game Ecosystems).

History

Our ancestors have lived in the boreal forest region ever since the glaciers melted and plant life began to thrive. We have subsisted off the boreal forest for just as long. We have trapped, hunted, fished and gathered the plants that we needed to live and have healthy lives.

The plants we gather have been used for a variety of reasons.

They have provided nutrition,

shelter, hunting, transportation, trapping and fishing tools, medicine, and for cooking and warmth. . (Stokes 1985:298)]



Renewable Resources

Plants are renewable resources that grow back year after year if they are taken care of. There are four things to remember when collecting plants:

- 1) Don’t pick out an area, take only what you need;
- 2) Do not take or destroy the whole plant if you do not need it all;
- 3) Collect the plants as far away from your community as possible, they are cleaner;
- 4) Do not strip bark from around the whole tree trunk when collecting inner or outer bark, it will kill the tree.

(Andre, Alan 2000:10)

Traditionally people have learned how to use plants by going with someone who knows how to use them! It is always best to take someone along who really knows because certain plants may not be good for everyone.

(Garibaldi 1999:3)

Berries

Among our people, berries are the most important edible wild plant product. Some years we pick many, some years not so many, depending on things like temperature, rain and snowfall, and animals and birds eating them.

Harvesting

During the summer and fall, women and older girls usually pick the berries. Men sometimes go along with berry picking groups and may pick some berries, but usually they are there to protect the berry pickers from bears. Berry picking trips are usually one day long with most gathering trips lasting two to five hours.

(Stokes 1985:292)



Processing

Back in the old days, just before the snow flies, the women went out in groups of four or five to pick berries. When they got lots of berries, they packed them in baskets and sewed a birch bark covering over them. They were cached in the hills by building a structure like our fish racks, but smaller scale. (Sullivan 1942:35-36)

One traditional way to prepare currants and raspberries in the past was to cook them and mix them with grease, and maybe add fish eggs too. This made a jam and was put in birch bark baskets and kept cool or frozen.

(Kari 1977:32)

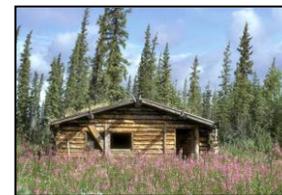
Berries also have non-food uses too. They can be used as a hot pack for aches and pains. They can be boiled and the juice used to dye grass mats, porcupine quills, and other things. (Kari 1977:33)

Trees

Trees are our most widely used plant group. They are used for heating homes, preserving meat and flavoring, building construction, and making other wooden items. (Stokes 1985:298)]

Species

White Spruce (t’sima) is the most sought-after tree species. It is considered ideal for building log structures. White Spruce are often felled, cut to length, and peeled in the late spring and early summer for later use in construction. It is often cut during the winter for firewood. (Stokes 1985:298)



Birch (k’esh) is the hardest and longest lasting wood and is good for carving and making things that last a long time such as toboggans, sleds, and snowshoes. In the past, birch was also used for water buckets, storage containers, baskets for babies to sit in and to start fires.

(Jones and Anderson 1984:14-16)

Alder (k’isr), has very dark bark and is a favorite wood for smoking fish. Poplar is also good for smoking fish; and leaves a good taste. The wood is easier to cut and to keep burning at night. (Kari 1977:21, 17)

Tamarack is an evergreen that loses its needles in the winter. The wood is good for boat ribs and sleds runners. (Stokes 1985:301)

Medicine

The trees also have medicinal value. Spruce cones were made into teas that helped to relieve colds and to maintain good health. The inner bark of the White spruce tree can be put onto a cut, burn or other wound to help heal it.

Birch sap was used as a spring tonic.

(Andre, Fehr 2000:17-18, 20; Kari 1977:1-2)

