

Pioneer Days – Wild Foods

By Kimberly Burkard

Food in Pioneer Days

- ☞ There were no Wegmans, Walmart, or CVS on the frontier! As a pioneer you did not go to the corner store to buy what you needed. You ate the foods that you grew, hunted, fished, and gathered. You also made medicine from the plants and materials around you.
- ☞ Wild foods were necessary to supplement the food supply - winter is very long when there is no supermarket around the corner! Cupboards would get especially bare late winter into spring. It is no wonder why plants like dandelion were so valued – they were early spring food when little else was available.
- ☞ Wild foods also added variety and nutrition to the diet. Some foods, like berries for example, had vitamin C and other vitamins and minerals that may have been missing from the pioneer’s normal diet.
- ☞ The first European settlers learned from the Native American peoples what wild foods were available and also what plants could be used for medicinal purposes.
- ☞ Kids learned young how to gather wild foods – everyone needed to contribute for the family to survive!

Foraging and Wildcrafting

- ☞ Foraging – to live off of food that was hunted or gathered. This is the equivalent of the social studies term of “hunting and gathering.”
- ☞ Wildcrafting – to harvest wild plants for food, medicine, or other purposes.
- ☞ Most important thing to know about foraging and wildcrafting –

**NEVER EAT OR USE ANY WILD PLANT THAT HAS NOT BEEN
POSITIVELY IDENTIFIED BY A KNOWLEDGEABLE PERSON!**

Plants are a great source of food and medicine but there are many toxic plants. Great care and respect must be exercised always! You can die or become very sick by eating or using toxic plants.

- ☞ In pioneer days, the wild plants were common and many. Unfortunately, there are wild plants have been over harvested (through greed or ignorance) or have lost too much of their natural habit and now have become rare or uncommon in many places. American ginseng and goldenseal are two prime examples of overharvested plants. Today people that are

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herbalists, foragers, and wildcrafters try to follow “ethical harvesting” practices and “stewardship.” This means they try to protect and foster wild plants and encourage survival of the plant communities. We are relearning sustainable harvesting practices that the Native American peoples here followed for generations.

- ☞ While the pioneers didn’t have to worry about this overly much, make sure you never collect food or herbs from contaminated areas (manure, chemicals, etc.) and always have permission from the landowners first.

For More Wild Food & Medicine Information

☞ **Books:**

- *Peterson Field Guides – Edible Wild Plants* by Lee Allen Peterson
- *Peterson Field Guides – Eastern/Central Medicinal Plants & Herbs* by Steven Foster & James A. Duke
- *A Handbook of Native American Herbs* by Alma R. Hutchens
- *Identifying and Harvesting Edible and Medicinal Plants* by “Wildman” Steve Brill and Evelyn Dean
- *Stalking the Wild Asparagus* by Euell Gibbons
- *Native Harvests* by E. Barrie Kavasch
- *Billy Joe Tatum’s Wild Foods Field Guide and Cookbook* ed. By Helen Witty
- *The Foxfire Book of Appalachian Cookery* ed. by Linda Page & Eliot Wigginton
- Other field guides will assist in identification.

☞ **Internet:**

- There are many Internet sources for information on these topics. Look for “wildcrafting” and “foraging” topics via your favorite search engine.
- **Foraging with the “Wildman” Steve Brill** - <http://www.wildmanstevebrill.com/> - A ton of information on wild food plants
- **Wildcrafting for the Practicing Herbalist** by 7Song, Director of the Northeast School of Botanical Medicine, Ithaca, NY - <http://www.7song.com/files/Wildcrafting%20for%20the%20Practicing%20Herbalist.pdf> – This covers all the basic information of wildcrafting
- **Wild Foods Slideshow** by Kimberly Burkard - <http://www.ganondagan.org/gallery.html> - A slideshow of wild food plants and this document. Other wild food resources are <http://www.ganondagan.org/about/wildfoods.html>

☞ **Classes:**

- Various organizations and individuals teach classes on plant identification, herbal medicine, foraging, outdoor survival, and more. Books and internet articles cannot replace hands-on training!

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“Show & Tell” Items

Note: The abbreviation “spp.” means multiple species. For example, *Acer saccharum* is the botanical name for Sugar Maple and *Acer rubrum* is the name for the Red Maple. *Acer spp.* means all maples or multiple maple species.

☞ **American Beech (*Fagus grandifolia*)**

Tree with smooth gray bark and toothed oval leaves. Nuts have sweet kernels that were roasted and eaten whole or used as flour. Could also make oil and a coffee substitute from the nuts.

☞ **Blackwalnut & Butternut (*Juglans nigra* & *Juglans cinerea*)**

Trees with compound leaves. Tasty, edible, and nutritious nuts. Nuts used to make oil and flour. Prolific nut producers. Hulls used medicinally & for dye. Sap used to make syrup (similar to maple). Shells are incredibly hard and special nut crackers exist just for these nuts!

☞ **Blueberry (*Vaccinium spp.*)**

A shrub with oval leaves, white flowers, and dark blue berries. Highly prized berries good fresh, cooked, and dried. Berries contain manganese, vitamin B6, vitamin C, vitamin K, dietary fiber, and other healthful substances. Leaf used medicinally.

☞ **Burdock (*Articum spp.*)**

A plant with large leaves, purple flowers in its second year of growth and distinctive thistle-like burs. The leaves, stalks, and roots eaten as food. The roots used medicinally. The roots are very long and brittle and are a challenge to dig!

☞ **Cattail (*Typha spp.*)**

A plant growing in wetlands with sword-like leaves and distinctive cigar-shaped seed heads. The cattail is one of the most important and common wild foods, with a variety of uses at different times of the year. The cattail is like a wild supermarket. The shoots can be peeled and eaten and has beta carotene, niacin, riboflavin, thiamin, potassium, phosphorus, and vitamin C. Immature flower heads can be eaten - one of the best wild vegetarian sources of protein, unsaturated fat, calories, beta-carotene and minerals. Pollen can be used as flour. During fall, winter, and early spring, the cattail rhizomes store food and can be dug for starch. Leaf mucilage used medicinally. Dried leaves were used much like cornhusks – dolls, thatch roofs, baskets, backs of chairs, and to make mats. The brown flower heads can be burned for a slow flame with a smoke that drives insects away. The fluffy, white seeds were once used for stuffing blankets, pillows and toy, put them inside moccasins and around cradles for additional warmth. Cattails are also a sure sign of water.

☞ **Cherry (*Prunus spp.*)**

Tree with oval leaves, white flowers, and fruits with a central pit. Fruits used fresh and cooked. Inner bark of the black cherry used medicinally - once so popular an herbal remedy that is why many cough syrups still retain a cherry flavor. Note: wilted leaves and fresh pits contain cyanide and should not be eaten. Cooking destroys the toxin.

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☞ **Chickweed (*Stellaria spp.*)**

Small low-growing plant with white flowers. Early spring green that is very nutritious - vitamins A, D, B complex, C, iron, calcium, potassium, phosphorus, zinc, manganese, sodium, copper, and silica. Medical use as well.

☞ **Coltsfoot (*Tussilago farfara*)**

Low-growing plant with hoof-shaped leaves and yellow dandelion-like flowers. Used medicinally. Used also by Native Americans as a salt-like seasoning. The leaves were burned and the ashes made a substitute for salt.

☞ **Common Mullein (*Verbascum thapsus*)**

A fuzzy, grey-green plant that has a tall flower spike in its second year of growth. A common plant used medicinally for coughs, colds, and bronchitis. The seeds of this plant can sprout after 70 years!

☞ **Dandelion (*Taraxacum officinale*)**

Plant with “lion tooth” leaves, yellow flowers, and blow ball seed heads. Leaves are eaten raw or cooked and are highly nutritious - beta-carotene, iron, calcium, vitamins B-1, B-2, B-5, B-6, B-12, C, E, P, and D, biotin, inositol, potassium, phosphorus, magnesium, and zinc. The roots roasted as a coffee substitute. Flowers are edible and used to make wine. Leaves & roots used medicinally.

☞ **Elderberry (*Sambucus canadensis*)**

Shrub with compound leaves, white lacy flower clusters, and purple-black berries in umbrellalike clusters. Like many wild foods, not all parts of this plant are edible – only very particular parts. Flowers used for tea, food, and wine. Fruits (ripe only) used cooked. Berries contain vitamins C, A and calcium, iron, and potassium. Note: roots, stems, leaves and unripe berries are toxic. Bark, leaves, and flowers used medicinally.

☞ **Field Garlic (*Allium vineale*) and other wild onions (*Allium spp.*)**

Widespread familiar plants with grass-like leaves, 6-petaled flowers and the odor of onions. Leaves, underground bulb, and bulbets used as cooked vegetables, pickles, salad ingredients, and seasoning. Bulbs can be eaten year round. Onions & garlic used medicinally.

☞ **Field Horsetail (*Equisetum arvense*) and Greater Horsetail/Scouring Rush (*Equisetum hyemale*)**

Prehistoric looking plants. Medicinal use for both plants. The greater horsetail was used like sandpaper to give a fine finish to wood and used to scour pans.

☞ **Hawthorn (*Crataegus spp.*)**

Small trees or shrubs with long thorns and white or pink flowers and red fruit. Fruit good for jams, jellies, and tea. Flowers and fruits used medicinally.

☞ **Highbush Cranberry (*Viburnum trilobum*)**

A shrub with 3-lobed leaves, white flowers, and bright red berries. The berries are edible and usually sweetened and cooked. The berries are high in Vitamin C.

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☞ **Honey & Beeswax (*Honey Bee*)**

Honey bees are not native to North America. In 1622 European colonists brought them since some crops depend upon honey bee pollination. Bees escaped into the wild to form wild colonies, often preceding settlers. The honey bee did not cross the Rocky Mountains and was brought to California by ship. Native Americans called the bee “the white man’s fly.” Honey is an excellent sweetener used since ancient times. Honey also has antimicrobial and antibacterial properties which is useful in food and medicine. Beeswax was used for candles, lubricants, waterproofing, and polishes.

☞ **Jerusalem Artichoke (*Helianthus tuberosus*)**

A perennial sunflower with broad, rough leaves, hairy stems, and yellow flowers. Tubers used like potatoes. Tubers can be eaten raw, cooked, or pickled. Tubers available year-round when the ground isn’t frozen. Roasted tubers are a coffee substitute. Tubers have iron, potassium, calcium, magnesium, selenium, copper, protein, vitamin C, thiamine, niacin. A spreading and prolific plant.

☞ **Juneberry/Serviceberry/Shadbush/Saskatoon (*Amelanchier spp.*)**

Shrubs with white flowers and blueberry like fruits. Fruits similar tasting to blueberries and can be used similarly. Can be used fresh, cooked, and dried. Relative of apple and has a lot of pectin so thickens well, as in jams and pies. Used by the Native Americans in pemmican.

☞ **Maple (*Acer spp.*)**

Widespread trees with winged seeds and lobed leaves. The sap was prized as a source of syrup, sugar, and water (in contaminated areas it provides pure cooking or drinking water). The trees are tapped early spring by driving a spigot or “spile” into a hole bored into the tree. The sap runs through the spigot into a collection pail. Excellent spiles could be made from elderberry branches. The sap was then boiled down to syrup or sugar. While quality and quantity of sap varies, all maples make excellent syrup. Other trees – walnuts, hickories, birches, and sycamore can also be used for syrups, sugar, and water. One of the yearly ceremonies for the Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) people.

☞ **Milkweed (*Asclepias syriaca*)**

Plant with gray-green downy leaves and purple flower clusters. Shoots can be cooked in several changes of water and eaten like asparagus. Top leaves, flower buds, and immature seed pods can also be cooked like the shoots and eaten. Flowers can be cooked and eaten. Note: young shoots can have some toxic look a-likes. Root and sap used medically. Seed tassels used as pillow filler.

☞ **Mint – Mountain Mint (*Pycnanthemum virginianum*), Spearmint (*Mentha spicata*), Peppermint (*Mentha piperita*)**

Widespread, vigorous, aromatic plants. Used for tea & flavoring in foods. Medicinal use as well = popular “tummy” herb. Many mints, these included, have square stems.

☞ **Morel (*Morchella esculenta*)**

A choice edible wild mushroom collected in the spring. Mushrooms are often difficult for trained experts to tell apart so all wild mushrooms and fungi should not be picked unless you are properly trained. There are many toxic and even fatally poisonous varieties. The morel, however, is one of a couple of wild mushrooms that even beginners will harvest.

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☞ **Mulberry (*Morus rubra & Morus alba*)**

Tree with mitten-shaped leaves and purple (nearly black) fruits. Prolific fruits on a single tree. Can harvest by laying out a cloth and shaking the branch. Good fresh, cooked, and dried. High in Vitamin C, Vitamin K, Iron, Dietary Fiber, Riboflavin, Magnesium and Potassium.

☞ **New Jersey Tea (*Ceanothus americanus*)**

Low-growing shrub with toothed leaves and flower clusters. Leaves make excellent tea and used during the American Revolution as a substitute for black tea. Root and root bark used medicinally.

☞ **Pawpaw (*Asimina triloba*)**

Tree with large “tropical-looking” leaves, purple-red flowers, and stubby banana-shaped fruits. The fruit has sweet, creamy-textured fruit and is good raw or cooked. It custardy, banana like flavor. Fruits are picked green and allowed to ripen.

☞ **Pecan (*Carya illinoensis*)**

Tree with compound leaves and dark bark with vertical ridges. Pecan is a type of hickory. Nuts used in the same way as walnuts. Sap used like you would use maple sap.

☞ **Persimmon (*Diospyros virginiana*)**

Tree with yellow flowers and orange fruits. Excellent tasting fruits that are eaten only when very ripe. Used fresh and cooked. High pectin content made it a good thickener. Fruit contains glucose, protein, vitamins A and C, calcium, potassium, phosphorus, iron, copper, and manganese. Fruit also made into vinegar and seeds roasted and used as a coffee substitute. Good keeper as dried fruit. Inner bark and unripe fruit used medicinally. Wood used for strong flexible uses textile shuttles.

☞ **Pineapple Weed (*Matricaria discoidea*)**

A small aromatic plant with lacy leaves and petal-less flowers. Medicinally used for teas for stomach aches.

☞ **Plantain (*Plantago major*)**

Broad-leafed plant found today in any untreated lawn. Although the young leaves can be eaten it is better as “nature’s band-aid.” A mashed leaf can be put on insect bites, rashes, and scrapes for relief. Called “White Man’s Foot” by Native Peoples since it seemed to spread with the settlers. Medicinal use. Seed heads can be used as food for chickens.

☞ **Ramps (*Allium tricoccum*)**

Also called “wild leeks.” This is a member of the same family (lily) as garlic and onions. This is a favorite spring food – leaves and roots eaten. The leaves quickly wither and die leaving a flower spike to appear after the leaves have died.

☞ **Raspberries & Blackberries (*Rubus spp.*)**

Thorny plants with flowers followed by berries. Berries extremely tasty and eaten fresh, cooked, and preserved. Berries have vitamin C and manganese. Easy to identify and pick. Raspberry leaves used for tea. Leaves (raspberry) & root (blackberry) used medicinally.

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☞ **Rose (*Rosa spp.*)**

A woody perennial plant with thorns, showy, fragrant flowers, and red fruits. Well known as a flower garden favorite, it has also been a source of food and herbal use. The fruits or “hips” can be used for jam, syrup, and tea. Since hips are held on the bush through the winter and are very rich in vitamin C, they make excellent survival food. Flower petals used for fragrance and teas. Some varieties of rose have been grown for 1000 years!

☞ **Sassafras (*Sassafras albidum*)**

Tree with a “root-beer” scent and mitten-like leaves. Leaves used for tea & filé (gumbo thickener). Roots used for tea & original “root beer” flavoring. Roots & leaves used medicinally. Some say that Columbus found the New World by the smell of Sassafras trees. Sassafras was one of the earliest important exports from the American colonies. Medicinal use as well.

☞ **Shagbark Hickory (*Carya ovata*)**

Tree with compound leaves and distinctive shaggy bark. Nuts used in the same way as walnuts. Sap used like you would use maple sap. Hard strong wood used for lumber. Fresh bark could be used for lashings.

☞ **Spicebush (*Lindera benzoin*)**

Bush with fragrant leaves and twigs. Small yellow flowers and red berries (female bush only). Leaves, twigs, or bark used for tea. Berries used as a substitute for allspice. Leaves, twigs, bark & berries used medicinally.

☞ **Staghorn Sumac (*Rhus typhina*), Smooth Sumac (*Rhus glabra*) and some other Sumac varieties (*Rhus spp.*)**

Small trees or shrubs with feather-compound leaves and hairy red fruit. Use fruits to make “pink lemonade.” Bark, leaves, and berries used medicinally. Different color dyes and inks can be made from various parts of the sumacs.

☞ **Stinging Nettle (*Urtica dioica*)**

A little noticed plant until touched. The brittle hairs on the plant break and exclude an acid which irritates the skin. Nettle is a very nutritious plant that when cooked or dried loses its sting. Nettle is a plant used for a wide-range of medicinal uses one of the most popular is for allergies. Interesting fact – the stinging part of nettle is formic acid. Formic acid is used by ants in their bite/sting and anthills are often found very near to where nettle is growing.

☞ **Sweet Goldenrod (*Solidago odora*)**

Common long-lived and hardy perennial with yellow fall-blooming flowers. Leaf and flowers make an excellent anise-flavored tea. Leaves used medicinally.

☞ **Violet (*Viola spp.*)**

Low-growing plant with 5-petaled flowers and heart-shaped leaves. The young leaves and flower buds were eaten fresh or cooked and as a tea. Leaves used to thicken soup. Leaves can be found year round. Flowers can be eaten raw, made into jelly, or crystallized with sugar. Note: yellow violet and African violets (which aren’t true violets!) are not edible. Plant used medicinally.

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☞ **White Oak (*Quercus alba*) plus other Oaks (*Quercus spp.*)**

Large tree with lobed leaves. Nuts used as nuts, flour, meal, and candy. A few oaks have sweet acorns that can be eaten raw or roasted. Most are bitter but that can be leached out by water. Whole kernels can be boiled in water changes or can be put in a bag left in a stream of running water. Nuts are rich in protein and fat. Inner bark used medicinally. Wood was a prized lumber.

☞ **Wild Ginger (*Asarum canadense*)**

Low-growing plant with heart-shaped leaves and purple-brown flowers. Roots have flavor like tropical ginger from Asia. The roots used for candy and seasoning. Roots also used medicinally.

☞ **Wild Plum (*Prunus spp.*)**

A small tree with white flowers, occasionally thorns, and fruits with a single seed. Fruits used cooked, eaten fresh, and dried.

☞ **Wild Rice (*Zizania aquatica*)**

Aquatic grass with broom-like branches and slender seeds encased in papery bristle-tipped husks. Seeds used like brown rice or ground into flour. A staple food of Native Americans. Wild rice is a very rich source of riboflavin and is also rich in niacin.

☞ **Wild Strawberry (*Fragaria virginiana*)**

Small 3-leafed plant with white flowers. Terrific tasting, tiny red fruits. Berries contain magnesium, potassium, beta carotene, iron, malic acid, and citric acid. Strawberry leaves contain vitamins C and K. First fruit to ripen in the year. Berries used fresh, cooked, and dried. Leaves and root used medicinally. Incredibly important to the Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) peoples and is featured in one of the festivals of traditional Haudenosaunee.

☞ **Willow (*Salix spp.*)**

Widespread trees with lance-shaped leaves. Bark used medicinally for reducing pain, fever, and inflammation. Salicylic acid, made from the bark, was the precursor to aspirin. Willow also used to make baskets and “willow whistles” which are musical instruments made from a fresh willow twig.

☞ **Wintergreen (*Gaultheria procumbens*)**

Low growing, evergreen plant. Leaves & berries are edible but leaves make an excellent tea. Can be collected year round.

☞ **Yarrow (*Achillea millefolium*)**

A lacy leafed plant with flat clusters of white flowers. A common herb to treat wounds. Said to have been carried by the ancient Greek warrior Achilles for this purpose and its botanical name reflects this.

☞ **Yellow Dock (*Rumex crispus*)**

A plant with large lance shaped leaves and long yellow roots. Dock leaves eaten as food and the root was used medicinally to treat blood ailments including anemia.