Native Uses of Native Plants

IN THE SIERRA NEVADA MOUNTAINS AND FOOTHILLS OF CALIFORNIA AND NEVADA

USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service
California and Nevada
Native Uses of Native Plants is published by the Natural Resources Conservation Service in California and Nevada with information from the National Plant Data Center and the PLANTS database. The culturally significant plants featured in this book help us understand how some tribes utilized their natural resources and preserve their history. For detailed information please visit http://plants.usda.gov and select the link for culturally significant plants.
Basket Grass or Sedge

*Carex sp.*

**Ethnobotanic Uses**

The leaves and roots of basket grass are used for both wrapping and twining of “grass” baskets. Patterns are woven with dyed strands of sedge or sedge roots.
Beargrass
*Xerophyllum tenax*

**Ethnobotanic Uses**
Beargrass is used for baskets and jewelry.
Blue Dicks, Brodiaea
*Dichelostemma capitatum*

**Ethnobotanic Uses**

Native Americans dig large quantities of brodiaea corms before flowering, during flowering, or after seeding, depending on the taste of the tribe and individual family. These corms form an important starch source in the diet of many native people who annually visit gathering sites to restock their supply.
California Black Oak
*Quercus kelloggii*

**Ethnobotanic Uses**
California black oaks provide a fountain of resources to Native Americans including food, medicine, dyes, utensils, games, toys, and construction materials. Acorns form a staple food — eaten in the form of soup, mush, and bread.
California Buckeye
or Horse Chestnut
*Aesculus californica*

**Ethnobotanic Uses**
Buckeye seeds are used for medicine, to stupefy or kill fish, and for spindles in fire making kits.

*Warning:* Buckeye seeds are poisonous to humans in their raw state. Do not plant buckeyes near apiaries as the flowers are poisonous to honey bees.
Camassia quamash

Ethnobotanic Uses

Camas continues to be one of the most important “root” foods of western Native Americans. It is also used for medicine.

Warning: Death camas (Zigadenus venenosus) can be confused with edible camas bulbs and is toxic. Be sure of your identification of camas bulbs before eating them!
Chokecherry

Prunus virginiana

**Ethnobotanic Uses**

Fruits are eaten raw or cooked into jellies, jams, syrup, or pudding. Inner bark is medicinal. Seeds are used for jewelry. Small twigs and branches are used for arrow shafts, cradle boards, and other household items.
Deergrass
*Muhlenbergia rigens*

**Ethnobotanic Uses**

Deergrass is a very significant basketry material used by many native people. The flower stalks are used in the foundations of coiled baskets.
Dogwood
Cornus sp.

Ethnobotanic Uses

Dogwood is commonly used for medicinal purposes, also for tobacco, sacred bows and arrows, stakes, and other tools.
Douglas-Fir
*Pseudotsuga menziesii*

**Ethnobotanic Uses**

Douglas-Fir is used for jewelry, basketry materials, building materials, and as medicine.
Native Americans consider all parts of the elderberry plant to be valuable. Berries, leaves and flowers are used for food, medicine, and dyes. Twigs and wood are used for medicine, arrow shafts, and musical instruments.

**Warning:** New growth of elderberry contains a glucoside than can be fatal to livestock.
Fremont Cottonwood or Poplar

*Populus fremontii*

**Ethnobotanic Uses**

The cottonwood tree has many medicinal uses. It is also used for musical instruments, basketry, clothing and various household items.
Golden Currant
*Ribes aureum*

**Ethnobotanic Uses**

Golden currant is used for food, fresh and dried for winter use.
Gray Pine

*Pinus sabiniana*

**ETHNOBOTANIC USES**

The seeds of the gray pine are eaten or used in jewelry by many Native Americans. Gray pine is also used in construction materials.
Mariposa Lily
*Calochortus sp.*

**E thnobotanic Uses**

Many native people in California and Nevada enjoy the sweet bulbs of this plant. Bulbs are generally used fresh as they do not store well.
Milkweed

Asclepias syriaca

Ethnobotanic Uses

Many native peoples have used and continue to use milkweed for fiber, food, and medicine. Milkweed supplies tough fibers for making string, ropes, and coarse cloth.

Warning: Milkweed may be toxic when taken internally, without sufficient preparation.
Narrowleaf Cattail

*Typha angustifolia*

**Ethnobotanic Uses**

All parts of the cattail are edible when gathered at the appropriate stage of growth. The young shoots, rhizomes, and pollen are mainly used. Cattails are also used for matting, bedding material, ceremonial bundles, and housing materials such as thatchings, roofing materials, clothing, diapers, and where other absorbent materials are needed.
Onion  
*Allium sp.*  
**Ethnobotanic Uses**

Bulbs and leaves of onion are used for food. The leaves can also be eaten as a snack by rolling them into balls and sprinkling with salt.
Red Alder or Western Alder

*Alnus sp.*

**Ethnobotanic Uses**

Native American people have long recognized the value of alder and found use for its bark layers, roots, leaves, twigs, cones, and sap. It is used for basketry dyes, medicine, wood, fiber, and food.
Redbud
*Cercis orbiculata*

**Ethnobotanic Uses**

Redbud is highly valued by Native American basket weavers for their wine red branches. Stems are used in the warp, weft, and designs of baskets.
Native Americans use this tree for fuel wood, the pine nuts for food, and melt pinyon pitch as a watertight application for baskets and pottery vessels.
Strawberry
*Fragaria vesca*

**Ethnobotanic Uses**

Native Americans in California and Nevada gather and eat fresh strawberries.
Tanoak

*Notholithocarpus densiflorus*

**Ethnobotanic Uses**

Tanoak acorns are the preferred acorns for many native peoples. This acorn species is a food staple.
Tarweed
*Madia elegans*

**Ethnobotanic Uses**

Tarweed seeds are gathered to make a very fine meal. The roots are stored and eaten as well.
Tule
*Schoenoplectus sp.*

**ETHNObOTANIC USES**

Tule stems and stalks are used in baskets, boats, decoys, rope, bedding, clothing and housing materials. The pith of young tule stems were eaten by stripping away the outer bark.
Wavyleaf Soaproot
*Chlorogalum pomeridianum*

**Ethnobotanic Uses**

The bulbs of the wavyleaf soaproot are used as soap, a durable adhesive, and fish poison. Fibers are used to make brushes. The bulb can also be eaten with sufficient preparation.
White Brodiaea
Triteleia hyacinthina

**Ethnobotanic Uses**

Native Americans dig large quantities of brodiaea corms before flowering, during flowering, or after seeding, depending on the taste of the tribe and individual family. These corms form an important starch source in the diet of many native people who annually visit gathering sites to restock their supply.
Wild Rose
*Rosa woodsii*

**Ethnobotanic Uses**
Native Americans use the roots, stems, leaves, flowers, and fruits of rose for food and as a therapeutic agent. The inner bark and roots are also used medicinally.
Willow
*Salix sp.*

**Ethnobotanic Uses**

The willow’s value for the manufacturing of native peoples’ household family goods cannot be overstated. Cradle boards for newborn infants, hats, cooking vessels, serving bowls, trays, seed beaters, storage baskets, water jugs, willow-frame houses, rooftops, weaving sticks, arrow shafts, bows, pot rests, and prayer sticks are all made from willow. Equally significant is the willow’s medicinal value.
Yerba Santa
*Eriodictyon californicum*

**Ethnobotanic Uses**
Yerba santa is highly valued by many. The leaves, stems, and flowers are used for medicine.
Yarrow
*Achillea millefolium*

**Ethnobotanic Uses**
Many native peoples use yarrow medicinally.
In accordance with Federal civil rights law and U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) civil rights regulations and policies, the USDA, its Agencies, offices, and employees, and institutions participating in or administering USDA programs are prohibited from discriminating based on race, color, national origin, religion, sex, gender identity (including gender expression), sexual orientation, disability, age, marital status, family/parental status, income derived from a public assistance program, political beliefs, or reprisal or retaliation for prior civil rights activity, in any program or activity conducted or funded by USDA (not all bases apply to all programs). Remedies and complaint filing deadlines vary by program or incident.

Persons with disabilities who require alternative means of communication for program information (e.g., Braille, large print, audiotape, American Sign Language, etc.) should contact the responsible Agency or USDA’s TARGET Center at (202) 720-2600 (voice and TTY) or contact USDA through the Federal Relay Service at (800) 877-8339. Additionally, program information may be made available in languages other than English.

To file a program discrimination complaint, complete the USDA Program Discrimination Complaint Form, AD-3027, found online at How to File a Program Discrimination Complaint and at any USDA office or write a letter addressed to USDA and provide in the letter all of the information requested in the form. To request a copy of the complaint form, call (866) 632-9992. Submit your completed form or letter to USDA by: (1) mail: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights, 1400 Independence Avenue, SW, Washington, D.C. 20250-9410; (2) fax: (202) 690-7442; or (3) email: program.intake@usda.gov.

USDA is an equal opportunity provider, employer, and lender.

Reprinted 2018