

Medicinal Plants

Dozens of plants that grow on the Northwest Coast were used by the Tsimshian and their neighbours, the Gitksan, Nisga'a, Haida and Haisla. They were used for food and also for medicine. Here are just a few of the plants that can be used to make medicine.

Alder (luwi)

Alder, which is an important wood for fuel in smokehouses, can also be used as medicine. The wood is chopped into small pieces and soaked in water to brew a drink that was traditionally used by people with stomach problems. It can be used fresh, or the inner bark can be dried.

The bark can be used in weak solution to help eye problems. A compress is soaked in the weak solution which has been heated and held on the eye.

Alder was widely used as a dye. Depending on the way it was prepared, it produced colours ranging from almost black to dark brown to a bright orange-red. Many things were dyed with alder, including cedar bark, fishing nets and lines, wood, mountain goat wool and hair. It could also be used for tattooing.

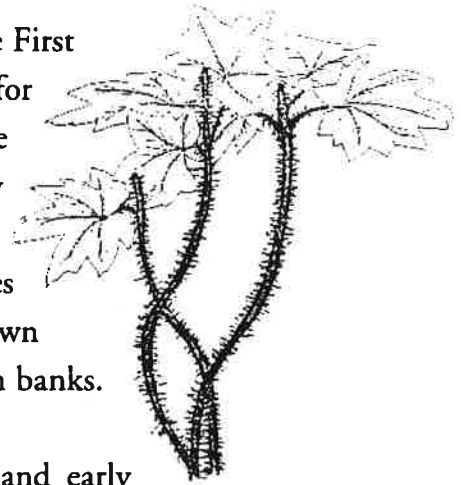
It was used by boiling the bark or wood in a small amount of water, then steeping the article in the solution. Urine can be used as a mordant to make a bright red dye. Boiling the bark with roasted iron pyrites makes a black dye.

Devils Club (wooms)

Devil's club is one of the most important plants to the First Nations of the coast. It is used not only for medicine, but for ceremonial and supernatural uses. However, teas made from devil's club are very potent and should not be used by anyone without complete knowledge and experience.

Devil's club is a low sprawling shrub with prickly spines on the veins of the broad leaves and along the greyish-brown woody stems. It is found in the woods, often along stream banks. It is part of the ginseng family.

Tsimshian people harvest devil's club in the spring and early summer. Only the prickly, woody stems are cut down and brought home. The medicine is prepared by first shaving off the prickly outer bark. Then thin shavings



of the greenish inner bark are soaked in water for six to eight hours. The bark is removed, the water is strained into jars.

There are a number of uses for devil's club medicine. It can be used as a hair shampoo which prevents lice and dandruff. In the past the men would rub the bark on their bodies to camouflage their smell and ensure good luck before a hunting or fishing trip. It can be used as an emetic and purifier, or as a medicine to cure many illness.



Hudson Bay Tea (k'wila'maxs)

This evergreen plant grows waist high and is found on muskeg. It has narrow, dark green leaves lined underneath with rust-coloured woolly hairs. It is found across northern Canada, and is also known as Labrador Tea.

It is picked in the spring, summer and fall, but mostly in the summer. Tea can be made with the fresh leaves, or they can be dried. When they are dried they turn brown. They should be stored in a cool dry place for the winter.

Hudson's Bay tea was used as a beverage and also as a medicine. It is said to be useful for coughs, colds and sore throats.

The tea is brewed by putting a small handful of leaves in a pot of boiling water, then simmering for about half an hour. Some people mix in licorice fern root.

Stinging Nettle (steti)

Stinging nettle is used around the world as a fibre and as a tea. Some First Nations people used the young shoots as a vegetable with a taste similar to spinach.

Nettle stems can be processed to yield a very strong fibre. It has been used for centuries to make rope, clothing and nets.

Some Tsimshian people used the roots to make a medicine. The roots are boiled until it looks like tea. It was used to help children with measles. Others used the leaves for a medicinal tea.

