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Ethnobotany

## Devil's club

Hul'q'umi'num': qwa'pulhp

Genus: *Oplopanax horridus*

Family: Araliaceae

This is the plant known in Hul'q'umi'num' as *qwa'pulhp*. The word is composed of a root √qwa'p, that is of unknown meaning, and also the suffix for shrubs and trees =*ulhp*. (Gerdts et al. 1997, Hukari & Peter 1995).

It is also known as Alaskan ginseng, even though it is not actually ginseng, maybe because its roots are used for medicinal purposes like ginseng is.

### **My adventures with Devil's club**

Growing up and learning from my parents, grandparents and aunt who is also a Medicine Woman in the Kwa'mutsun village that I am from. Now and then I am honored to drive my Aunt Della Rice-Sylvester to one of her many traditional walks with nature. One memory I always remember is when we had a visit with the devil's club. The class gathered around the beautiful fragrant plant in a circle and listened to Della as she shared with us. She instructed us to very carefully put our hands close to the plant without touching the plant and we can feel this very light energy of the power coming from the plant, then she asked us to move back and she held her hand over the plant and we all linked like a chain, but not touching, felt the power of devil's club power transfer between us, like a warm fuzzy feeling. This is an amazing plant indeed, and when we had to pick a plant to report on for Ethnobotany, I was happy to choose this one.

### **Ecology**

Devil's club generally grows to 1 to 1.5 metres (3 ft 3 in to 4 ft 11 in) tall. Some stands located in rainforest gullies or moist, undisturbed areas can reach heights of 3 metres (9.8 ft) to 5 metres (16 ft) or more. Moist woods, especially in wet but well-drained seepage sites and along streams, also in avalanche tracks; low to middle elevations (sometimes in subalpine forest, and to timberline in the north. This species usually grows in moist, dense forest habitats, Devil's club is abundant in the Pacific Northwest, especially in the old-growth conifer forests (Pojar & MacKinnon, 2016, p. 82) It is found from Alaska down to Oregon, and also westward to Alberta and Oregon. Within British Columbia it is a common coastal plant but also in the interior web belt as far north as the Fort Nelson River (Turner, 1998, p. 140). I found it interesting that there were also native populations of devil's club over 1,500 kilometres away in Michigan and Ontario <[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Devil%27s\\_club](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Devil%27s_club)> and it makes you wonder how it got there.

### **Morphology**

Devil's club generally grows to 1 to 1.5 metres (3 ft 3 in to 4 ft 11 in) tall, growing as a low, sprawling shrub (Turner, 1998, p. 140). It has flowers, which are small and whitish and also bright red, shiny, flat berries. But is is most recognizable from its large and maple like.



But when you turn the leaves over, you will see spiny stickers along the veins.



You also see sharp spikes along the veins, I guess this is its protection. Donna Gerds (personal communication) tell me that Snuneymuxw elder Bill Seward said that he once saw a bear eating a devil's club. but that's got to be the exception rather than the rule.



The woody stems are where the odor I described above comes from. They break off easy. You can also dig up the root. Ellen White (1977) laid down her thoughts on audio recording on Hul'q'umi'num' language and culture about this plant. She says: "They are very difficult to get a hold of if you don't have any protective for your hands, or else you will get a lot of slivers. You can dig right down to the roots and grab it by the roots and they come away quite easily. Sometimes in a clump and you can pack it by the roots." You peel this down to its inner bark and use it for many things.

This is a very useful plant and I will tell you about various ways it is used by First Nations' people next.

### **Devil's Club: Traditional medicinal uses**

Numerous ailments, including arthritis, ulcers and digestive tract ailments and diabetes, were treated with devil's club. (The plant is harvested and used in a variety of ways, most commonly as an oral tea in traditional settings, and also ointments. At least on the B.C. coast, it is one of the most important of all medicinal plants. The roots, and especially the greenish inner bark, were the major part used for medicine.

Numerous ailments, including arthritis, ulcers and digestive tract ailments and diabetes, were treated with devil's club.

Native Americans also dried and powdered the bark for use as a deodorant.

Ellen White gives the following description of how to use it as an emetic:

And the roots are also used; you can wash them and mash them after you take the little thorns off the stalk. And you can mash these and use to cleanse oneself inside and out. If it was used to cleanse inside, you have to be very careful. It should be administered by a knowledgeable person. It was brewed and you drink quite a bit of this, I suppose a quart or more in a very diluted state. It is used to cleanse inside you. You can vomit. This is for preparing a person for running or to canoe pull, like in the fall, or perhaps after a bout of drinking. I suppose this was used to cleanse oneself. It has to be administered by a person that knows how much you should take. A lot of people have died by overdose of this. And it should not be taken if you are not knowledgeable enough about it. After taking it, after you've thrown up and cleansed the inside with it, take the same amount of clear, warm water to cleanse, and perhaps even drink some more after that. But if you take the same water, throw up again. And some of this stuff, the juices from this would have been washed out. But you still have to do it again, just to be on the safe side. It was also used to take as a medicine, but this too has to be done by a professional person.

### **Devil's Club: Technological uses**

Many groups made fish lures and hooks from the devil's club (Turner p. 140). Klallam people as well as Nuu-chah-nulth made fish lures by peeling the sticks and cutting them into small pieces. They also carved them into small fish that they use as spinners underneath the water to attract the

fish to the hook. They also used them on cod lures for the spinners (Pojar & MacKinnon, 2016, p. 82). The Devil's club stems (light colored, light weight wood) were used by the Haida to hook octopus and back cod (Pojar & MacKinnon, 2016, p. 82).

The charcoal residue when it is burned is black and this was used as a paint (Turner, 1998, p. 140). Or to imbricate other things like baskets and totem poles. Pojar & MacKinnon list several groups that made dyes: the Dena'ina mixed the burnt ashes with water to make black dye, The Hesquiat boiled the spines, scraped from the bark, with berries to make red dye, the Ditidaht used the charcoal from the burne root with bear grease and inserted it under the skin to make tattoos. (Pojar & MacKinnon, 2016, p. 82)

### **Devil's Club: Spiritual uses**

Devil's club is thought to ward off evil spirits and so it is used in many different rituals. The plant is burned and the charcoal is used for ceremonial purpose. The dye made from the Devil's club charcoal also was used for face paint for winter ceremonial dances. Some Coast Salish people still use it this way. Hul'q'umi'num' elder Ellen White says, "For painting faces it was burnt and burnt right down to crisp and this was used, with oil of course. With a little bit of oil or if it was soft enough by itself... as long as they wear it, it would ward off evil things that go on a lot in the bighouse." According to Turner, Erna Gunther (1945) mentioned use of vaseline for this.

Devil's club was used to bathe perhaps a dancer before a dance, or perhaps before a canoe race. It kept evil things away from a person. This was used for young people.

Ellen White said, "Young girls and boys if they're at puberty, perhaps before and after. It kept evil words away. And if you know or find out about someone doing evil words on you, bathe in this and it would return the evil words to that person that sends it or says it on others. It would also in a sense seem to poke the person in the mouth. And it would hurt that particular person saying the evil things to another person. So this was automatically being used all the time by parents and grandparents, like aunties or uncles of young people."

Not just Hul'q'umi'num' but many groups think that Devil's club wards off evil (Turner 1998). Some groups would take a piece of Devil's club and hang it over a doorway. In Pojar and MacKinnon it says, "Possibly because of its diabolic spines, it is considered a highly powerful protective plant that can protect one against evil influences of many kinds." What ever the reason behind this, us Coast Salish people really do believe in the power of the Devil's club and we are taught to give this plant much respect.

When I was at the SFU feast for convocation for receiving my Certificate, one lady was there from the Talhtan, Linda, and she was receiving her MA degree. For the occasion she had harvested Devil's club root and dried it and cut it into little round pieces, and even carved little objects out of it. And she was going around the room gifting it along with her words of support and thanks for the work we were all doing on our languages.

I know that for this course we were told to read about sweetgrass because many tribes in the east use this plant for many important reasons, but here no. Maybe Devil's club is sort of like that for us. But actually it is just one of many, many plants that are important to us Coast Salish people.

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Photos from Courtney Clark, made at the UBC botanical gardens.