

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.

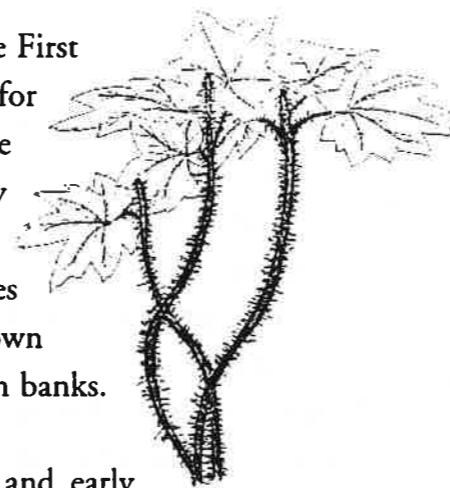
It was used by boiling the bark or wood in a small amount of water, then steeping the article in the solution. Urine can be used as a mordant to make a bright red dye. Boiling the bark with roasted iron pyrites makes a black dye.

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.

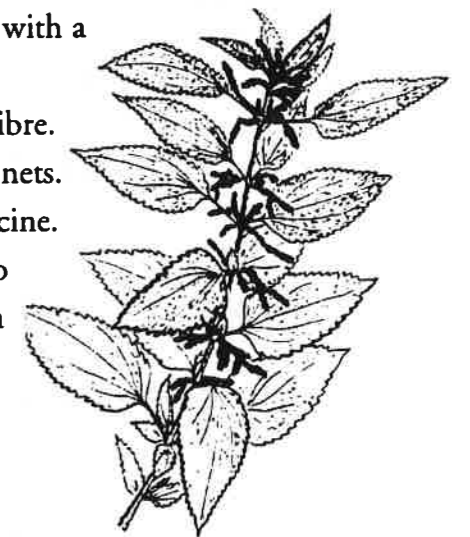
The tea is brewed by putting a small handful of leaves in a pot of boiling water, then simmering for about half an hour. Some people mix in licorice fern root.

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.



song in healing. It is difficult to translate this into English, but shaman is the closest word we have.

The practices of the shaman reflect Ts'msyen beliefs before the time of European contact. Some illness was believed to be the result of spiritual weakness or impurity. Shamans strengthened and purified the spirit of the patient through their rituals. They fell into a trance and called on supernatural powers to cure the sick. They symbolically cleansed a person by sucking or pulling unclean objects or spirits from them and rubbing the patient with clean substances.

Men or women could become shamans, and they could be from any class. Shamans often gained their special powers during a vision

quest. On this journey they would meet their supernatural helper. Some people received these powers even though they did not seek them.

They wore powerful regalia: a fur robe, a crown made of grizzly bear claws, an apron and leggings. They used a round, gourd-shaped rattle and a skin drum. In a bag they kept paraphernalia such as carved animals, puppets, eagle down and amulets.

One important item was a soul-catcher. Carved of bone, it represents a creature with a mouth at each end. Some academics believe that these were made exclusively by Ts'msyen artists, though they were used by all other tribes of the North Coast.

Sometimes a shaman would work for the whole village, if he or she saw the need. Henry Tate wrote this

description of what might happen if a shaman foresaw an illness coming:

When a shaman believes that a disease is going to visit a village, he will sing his song at midnight to warn his or her people of the coming of the disease. Thus they invite in all the people of the village; and when they are in the house, the shaman opens his rattle-bag, takes out a small leather bag filled with red ochre, and passes it around among all the people in the house to paint their faces—men, women and children. After all the people have painted their faces, the shaman takes a dried sea-lion bag filled with eagle down and passes it about among the people to put the down on their heads.

Personal Articles



These pictures show the front and back of a Ts'msyen comb. It is carved from wood, and is 11 cm long. It shows how even every-day articles were richly decorated with symbols of identity. Do you think this comb was for hair care, for personal decoration, or for working on fibres such as mountain goat hair?

Canadian Museum of Civilization no. VII-C-26, photo Harry Foster, nos. S92-4321 and S92-4322.



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Nancy J. Turner photo

Huulens (poison root, false hellebore)

This is a powerful and dangerous plant which should only be used by those with a complete understanding of its properties. It has spiritual as well as medicinal uses. In the past it was used for purification. The medicine can be used externally for sore joints. When there is sickness in a house *huulens* may be kept on or near the stove in the kitchen to help avoid further contagion.



Nancy J. Turner photo

K'wila'maxs (Hudson's Bay tea or Labrador tea)

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Nancy J. Turner photo

Luii, luwi, luuyi (red alder)

This tree provides an important wood for fuel in smokehouses because it doesn't have much pitch. It 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 and also for sore eyes. It can be used fresh, or the inner bark can be dried.

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FNES photo

Maadzu'ka'am, ts'ik'a'am (licorice fern root)

This is a small fern with long roots that grows in moss and on moist rocks and tree trunks. The root tastes like licorice, hence its name. It is made into medicine for coughs and whooping cough. Roots are harvested from early spring until late fall by pulling the fern out of the ground with its roots. To make the medicine, the roots are pounded and boiled in water, then stored in a cool place.



Nancy J. Turner photo

Sahakwdak (western yew)

Long before western science learned of the cancer-healing properties of the yew tree, First Nations people made medicine from this small but strong evergreen. It is relatively rare, and one of the slowest growing trees in the world, so its wood was valuable and often traded with interior people where it doesn't grow.

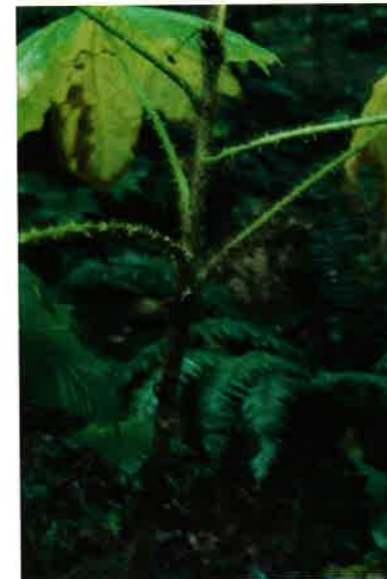
Sahakwdak comes from the Sm'algyax word for bow—*hak-wdak*—so you know it was prized for making bows. In fact, in many other languages around the world, the name of the tree is the word for bow, including the Latin name *Taxus*. The compound found in yew bark which is used in some modern cancer drugs is called taxol after the Latin name.



FNES photo

Steti (stinging nettle)

This plant is used around the world as a fibre and as a tea. Some First Nations people used the young shoots as a vegetable; it has 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 Ts'msyen people also 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.



Nancy J. Turner photo

Wooms (Devil's club)

This 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 be treated with great respect. It should not be used by anyone without complete knowledge and experience.

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