

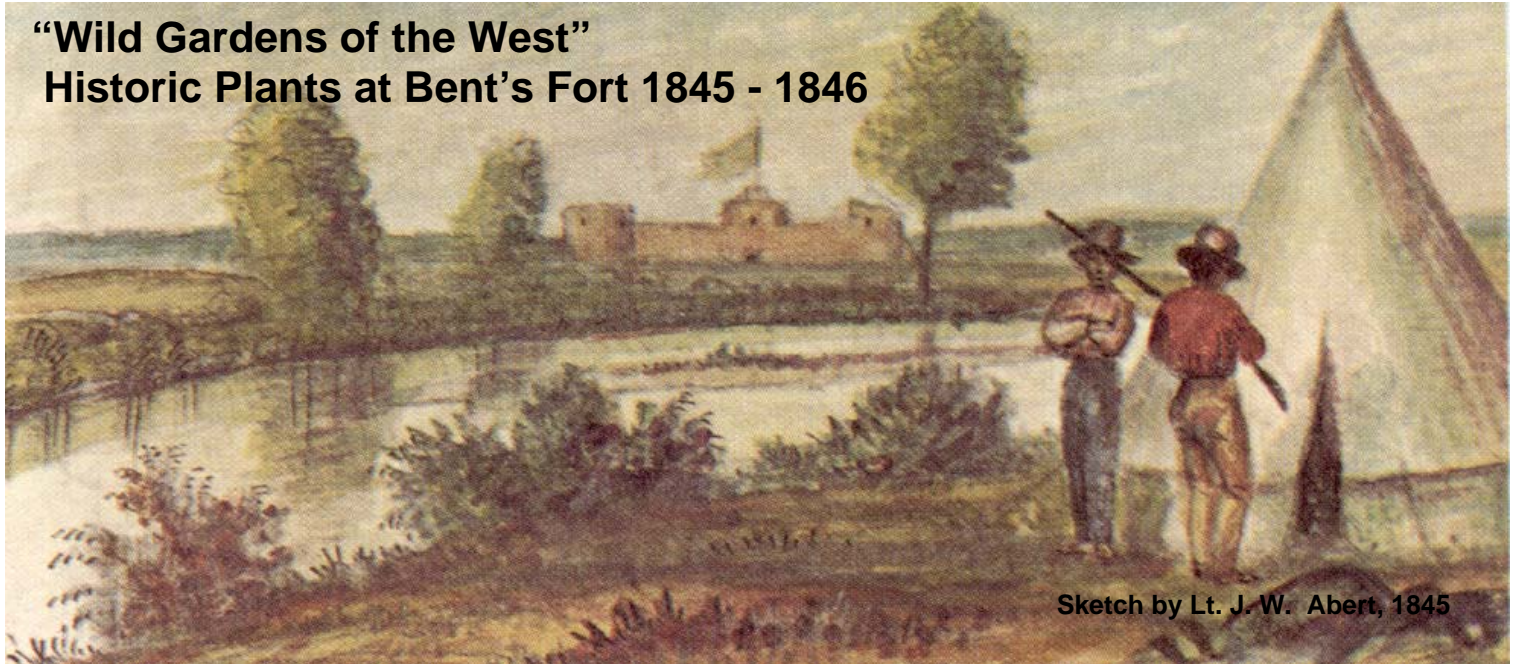
Bent's Old Fort

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



National Historic Site
La Junta, Colorado

“Wild Gardens of the West” Historic Plants at Bent's Fort 1845 - 1846



Sketch by Lt. J. W. Abert, 1845

Many travelers along the Santa Fe Trail wrote about the plants they saw along the way. They noted particularly the grasses which were important as forage. Trees were not present on the open prairies but were often scattered along the streams. Cottonwood, willow and black locust were the usual species.

Wildflowers were less frequently mentioned. However, we are fortunate that some of the early military expeditions had a trained naturalist whose duty it was to list the plants and animals of the regions through which they passed. The flowers pictured here were listed by Lt. J. W. Abert, of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, and others as growing in the vicinity of the Fort in the 1840's.



Prickly Pear (*Opuntia sp.*)

“On the west side (of Bent's Fort) is the cattle yard, which is surrounded by a wall so high as to shelter them. The coping of the wall is planted with cacti which bear red and white flowers.”

Lt. James Abert, August 2, 1845

Native Uses: Stems were eaten fresh. The fruit was eaten fresh, dried and cooked into jelly. The seeds were dried and stored. They were parched and ground into meal. The segments can be roasted and boiled and the peel separated.

These plants bloom in May and June along the trail and around the top of the corral on the southwest side of the fort.

Small Soapweed, *Yucca* (*Yucca glauca*)

“A plant called ‘Adams needle’ was very abundant. The remarkable beauty of its conspicuous spike of campanulate flowers has procured it the name of the ‘prairie lighthouse’, the Spanish call it palmilla.”

Lt. Abert, 1845

Native uses: The fiber was used for sandals and baskets. The seeds and flowers were eaten. The roots made a fine soap. The leaf tips made needles for sewing. These plants bloom from May to July

“(The) . . . country around the fort was sandy and gravelly, and the surrounding prairie was bounded by the hills even more barren and rocky. Near the post the grass was not more than 2 or 2 ½ inches high, but the banks of the Arkansas River, 400 yards to the south were lined with tall grass and weeds and checkered with a few cottonwood trees. The arid location was a distinct advantage as it prevented hostile parties from approaching unobserved.”

Alexander Barclay, 1840



Milkweed (*Asclepias sp.*)

“ . . . and in the prairie dog villages, a species of asclepias, with truncated leaves.”

Lt. Wm. H. Emory, 1848



Native uses: The young shoots were cooked like asparagus. The flowers, buds and immature fruits were all cooked and eaten. Note that all parts of this plant are poisonous and should not be eaten without learning the proper cooking methods. These plants can be seen growing between the wetland and the trail from May until September.

“Few have traveled these Western deserts, and those who have are not likely to trouble pen and paper about their journeyings. The green plains, the wild flowers, the nameless buds and blossoms that for untold centuries have scented the desert breeze, still wait the pen of poet and historian . . . when cities rise where now the advancing plough has not yet disturbed the sunflower of the tall green blade – then may we listen with interest to the history of early pioneers, and our grand children will yet wonder why their fathers and grandfathers spoke not more fluently about the glorious inheritance left to the uncultured children of the West.”

Matt Field, 1840

Buffalo gourd, Coyote Melon (*Cucurbita foetidissima*)

“Cacti were numerous and a species of Cucurbitaceae, *C. aurantia* bearing a small spherical gourd, orange coloured”

Lt. James Abert, 1845

Native uses: Fruit was eaten cooked or dried, the seeds were pounded into mush. This was considered a distinctly inferior food.

These plants can be seen along the trail from June through September.



Native uses: The seeds were eaten raw, cooked, roasted or dried and ground into flour. The sunflower was domesticated by the Indians, and is currently an important agricultural crop. These plants can be seen blooming from June through August along the trail and throughout the park.

Sunflower (*Helianthus annuus L.*)

“This evening I went down to the river to bathe and on the route passed through a perfect flower garden. There was the goldenrod, sunflower, purple flower, silver edge, and pink Cruciferae mingled together in thick masses and all growing most luxuriantly. I noticed the *Cucurbita* which we saw first at Pawnee Fork, and our old friends the cowbirds were flying about in great numbers.”

Lt. Abert, August 1846

The National Park Service works aggressively to restore native species and the processes and conditions that support those native species. The NPS goal is to do ecosystem restoration, to not only replace parts of a system, such as native plants, but restore conditions that support those native plants, such as soil organisms, controlling exotic species, and determining the appropriate frequency of fire.