



The Baker Narrows Trail

For thousands of years, people have inhabited the Great Basin. The earliest group, known as the Desert Archaic, led a nomadic lifestyle, hunting and gathering. A later group, known as the Fremont, lived in the Snake Valley from about 1300 to 800 years ago. They planted crops and built permanent villages. More recently, the nomadic Shoshone and Paiute tribes lived in this area; their descendants are an important part of Great Basin communities today.

The survival and success of all these groups depended on their knowledge and utilization of the local plants. In the foothills of the

Great Basin's mountains, they could find food, medicine, and materials for clothing. Early settlers also benefited from this knowledge. Today, most of us find all that we need at the supermarket, but many wild plants (or domesticated versions) still have important uses. As you walk down this path, take a minute to learn about some of the Great Basin's plants and their uses.

Please remember that you are in a national park. Picking or collecting any part of any plant is prohibited, with the notable exception of pinyon pine nuts (gathering regulations available at the visitor center).



Wax Currant, *Ribes cereum* (Squaw Currant)

Description: A shrub about three feet tall with small, roughly circular leaves. White to pink drooping clusters of tubular flowers bloom in early summer.

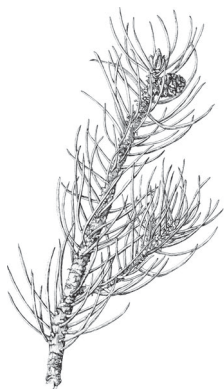
Uses: As a food, berries were eaten raw or dried, or ground with meat to make pemmican. Young spring leaves (cooked in water) and the nectar-bearing flowers are also edible. As a medicine, the inner bark was ground into a poultice to treat dropsy and swelling.



Curleaf Mountain Mahogany, *Cercocarpus ledifolius*

Description: A short tree with small, leathery, waxy leaves that curl under at the edges.

Uses: As a medicine, inner bark was brewed into tea for colds, lung illnesses, and eyewash. Dyes were made both from the roots (red) and from the inner bark (purple). Tradition held that carrying a piece of wood will protect you from thunder and lightning. Miners also found a use for mountain mahogany, burning it to fuel their smelters.



Single-leaf Pinyon Pine, *Pinus monophylla*

Physical Description: A short tree, 8 to 12 feet tall with round, sharp needles that are singly sheathed (all other pines' needles are sheathed in bundles of 2 to 5).

Uses: The highly nutritious seeds of the pinyon pine (pine nuts) were traditionally the most important food in the Great Basin. After being toasted, they were eaten whole or ground to make cakes, nut butter, soups, or beverages. A bumper crop of nuts was cause for celebration, as it guaranteed a winter food supply. Scouts sent out in the summer would locate the year's best crop. In the fall, groups would gather at the designated location for the harvest. This was also a time for marriages, trade, and other festivities. In addition to the nuts, pine needles were boiled for tea and the sap had both medicinal (as an expectorant) and utilitarian (to seal water-bearing baskets) uses.



Mormon Tea, *Ephedra nevadensis* (Joint Fir, Desert Tea, Indian Tea)

Physical Description: A broom-like shrub up to 3 feet tall, with noticeably jointed and fluted stems and almost invisible scale-like structures for leaves.

Uses: Making tea from the stems of the ephedra plant was widely practiced by Great Basin's native people, and was a tradition undoubtedly adopted by early settlers. Ephedra seeds were roasted for a coffee-like beverage. Although they belong to the same family, new world Ephedra species do not contain the drug ephedrine (Asian species do), but do contain pseudoephedrine and tannins, which are stimulants.



Prickly Pear, *Opuntia polyacantha*

Physical Description: A low subshrub with fleshy pads (8" x 6" x 0.5") covered in 3-inch spines. Flowers range from yellow to red, are 2 to 3 inches across, and grow at the tips of the pads. Fruits are 1-2 inches long, tan to red in color, and are spiny and covered with bristles.

Uses: The sweet, gelatinous fruit was eaten raw, made into jelly, and juiced for a beverage. The peeled pads were also eaten, raw or cooked, and provided a good source of fiber. As a medicine, the pads were warmed as heating pads to soothe muscle aches and chest congestion and were also pureed for a laxative. Prickly pear sap was used much like aloe vera gel: spread in minor cuts, burns, or skin irritations. The prickly pear fruit was traditionally eaten to control diabetes and is popular in modern "natural" medicine for the same purpose. Various prickly pear species grow around the world, and in many places are popular in local diets.



Big Sagebrush, *Artemisia tridentata*

Physical Description: A common shrub throughout the Great Basin, dominating the foothills. Varies from several feet to over ten feet tall, with small, fragrant, grey-green leaves.

Uses: As a medicine, the leaves were steeped for tea to treat headaches, colds, worms, and constipation. Inhaling sagebrush steam was used to treat rheumatism. The leaves were chewed to soothe indigestion, cooked to treat bladder infections, and brewed for an eyewash.



Wild Rose, *Rosa woodsii*

Physical Description: Shrub, 3-10 feet tall, with prickly, branched stems. Flowers are pink, have five petals, and are about 2 inches across.

Uses: The fruit of the wild rose, commonly called the rose hip, was eaten raw, dried, mashed, powdered, juiced, or steeped for tea. Rose hips are an excellent source of vitamins A and C, and it is still common practice to make tea with them. The leaves were also steeped for tea. Wild rose also had a medicinal purpose: the galls, which are mutations on the plant caused by insect larvae, were mashed and applied to heal open boils. The inner bark was boiled to make a yellow dye as well as smoked like tobacco.



Utah Juniper, *Juniperus osteosperma*

Physical Description: A short tree often found in association with pinyon pines. Junipers are distinguished by scale-like leaves pressed closely against the stem and small blue-grey cones that resemble berries.

Uses: As a food, the berries (technically the cones) were eaten raw, dried, or cooked, and were ground with meat to make pemmican. They were also roasted for a coffee-like drink. Today, juniper berries are used to flavor gin. Though edible, the inner bark was chewed only to prevent starvation. Medicinally, the juniper's leaves were steeped for a tea to treat rheumatism, and the berries were eaten to cure hiccups, kidney ailments, and bladder infections. The bark of the juniper had many utilitarian uses and was woven into sandals, mats, clothing, and diapers.



Squawbush, *Rhus trilobata* (Skunkbush, Lemonade Sumac)

Physical Description: 3-6 feet tall and wide with smooth brown bark and shiny, bluntly toothed leaves made up of 3 leaflets; clusters of yellow flowers bloom in spring before the leaves appear.

Uses: As a food, berries were eaten raw, dried, or cooked, ground into flour for cakes, or boiled in water to produce pink "lemonade." The plant was also used to make dye: pink from the berries, red-brown from the bark, and black from twigs steeped with pinyon pitch and ochre. The branches and bark were woven into baskets, and the leaves of the squawbush were sometimes smoked like tobacco.



Oregon Grape, *Mahonia repens* (Holly Grape, Creeping Barberry, Mountain Holly)

Physical Description: Low shrub up to 1 foot tall with leathery evergreen leaves and clusters of bright yellow flowers that develop into dark bluish-purple berries.

Uses: As a food, berries were eaten straight off the plant or pressed to make grape juice. As a medicine, the peeled roots were made into tea to treat intestinal ailments.