

NEZ PERCE PLANT USES



Bitterroot (*Lewisia rediviva* Pursh)

THE FOOD GATHERING CYCLE

The Nez Perce have lived in north-central Idaho and nearby parts of Washington and Oregon for thousands of

years. This is an area of low elevation river valleys, fertile prairies, and forested mountains. Fish were abundant in the many rivers. Elk, deer, moose, mountain sheep, and smaller animals were plentiful. Various roots, berries, and other plants provided food, medicine, and materials used in daily Nez Perce life. Usually, men did the hunting and fishing, while women gathered roots and berries, prepared the food, and took care of camp life.

Food was gathered in different areas as the year progressed. Plants were gathered at lower elevations in the spring, then in mountains as the snow melted. Much of the food was dried for use during the winter. Food was always shared with others. There would usually be a "first foods" feast at the first salmon catch or root or berry harvest of the year, to give thanks and ensure a continued abundance.

ROOT FOODS



Roots were a mainstay of the Nez Perce diet. One of the first roots to be gathered on hillsides in late March and early April was wild potato (*Lomatium canbyi*). It was boiled with the skin on, then peeled and eaten fresh. In spring and summer, kouse (*Lomatium cous*), one of the more important roots, was gathered. It was eaten raw, dried whole, or cooked. It was also ground into a meal and made into small finger cakes or larger bricks, then dried. When dry, it tasted similar to stale biscuits and was also known as biscuit-root.

Wild carrot (*Daucus pusillus*) was also an important root. It was dug during June and July. It was eaten raw or dried, or ground and made into a porridge or finger cakes. Yampa (*Perideridia gairdneri*) was dug from late June through August. Its smooth brown-skinned bulbs have a sweet carrotty flavor. They were eaten raw or cooked. After boiling or steaming, bulbs were seasoned with fat and eaten. Cooked bulbs were also ground into a mash and shaped into shell-like cups, then sun-dried. They were eaten dried or cooked as a cereal.

Bitterroot (*Lewisia rediviva*) was often obtained through trade, as it grows mostly in the mountains of Montana and Oregon. It was dug in May during the flowering season, when the black outer covering of the white roots was easiest to remove. It was sun-dried for storage. After boiling 15-30 minutes, which was supposed to remove the bitter taste, it was served plain or seasoned with fat and berries.

Probably the most important root was the blue-flowered camas (*Camassia quamash*).

This member of the lily family was dug from late July through September in mountain meadows and prairies. A digging stick ("tookas") of fire hardened wood with an antler handle was used to pry up this deep-growing bulb from the ground. The black outer covering of the bulb was removed. Then the white bulb was washed and baked in an earthen pit for two or three days. When baked, the bulb turned brown and tasted similar to sweet potatoes. The baked bulb could then be dried whole or ground into a meal for porridge or for shaping into loaves.



Camas (*Camassia quamash* [Pursh] Greene)

BERRIES



Amelanchier alnifolia
Service Berry

Probably the most important berry was the serviceberry (*Amelanchier alnifolia*) which was eaten fresh, dried, mixed with roots, or made into small cakes and sun-dried. The purple to black berries were gathered in July from shrubs along river banks or on the prairies. If serviceberries were scarce, black hawthorn (*Crataegus douglasii*) or red hawthorn (*Crataegus columbiana*) were gathered in May and June and used in the same way.

Blue huckleberries (*Vaccinium membranaceum*) were also very popular and were gathered in the mountains in late July to September. They were eaten fresh, or dried and later boiled.

Blackberries (*Rubus ursinus*), blackcap raspberries (*Rubus nivalis*), and red raspberries (*Rubus idaeus*) were eaten fresh, or dried when abundant. The shiny red to black fruits of the chokecherry (*Prunus virginiana* L. var. *demissa*) were gathered in late September. They were eaten fresh, dried, or ground and then shaped into cakes or balls which were then dried. Blue elderberries (*Sambucus cerulea*) were gathered in late August and early September in moist areas throughout the region.

Berries that were eaten fresh or dried included the red berry of the fireberry (*Vaccinium scoparium*) that was found in the mountains in

open areas, golden currant (*Ribes aureum*) and other currants that were gathered in August and September, red sweet gooseberries (*Ribes oxycanthoides*) and purple sour gooseberries (*Ribes inerme*) which were gathered in August.

Berries that were only eaten fresh included strawberries (*Fragaria* sp.), salmonberries (*Rubus spectabilis*), and thimbleberries (*Rubus parviflorus*). Rosehips (*Rosa* sp.) were occasionally gathered.



ELDERBERRY

OTHER PLANT FOODS



Balsamorhiza sagittata
Balsamroot

Various other foods played a part in the Nez Perce diet. Several kinds of mushrooms were boiled or fried. Sunflower seeds were gathered, roasted, ground and formed into balls with added rendered fat. Pine nuts from long-needled pines were roasted and eaten. Wild honey and the jellied sap of the tamarack (*Larix occidentalis*) were used as sweeteners. In the spring, the sweet, tender inner bark of the ponderosa pine (*Pinus ponderosa*) was gathered in strips and eaten as a treat.

Dark brown pine tree lichen (*Alectoria jubata*) was gathered, the needles removed,

and washed. It was cooked overnight with camas in an earthen pit, becoming gelatin like. Then it was ground into a meal and dried. The meal was boiled into a mush, and rendered fat, ground camas, or berries were added to make a dish called "ho'pop".

The young tender stems of arrowleaf balsamroot (*Balsamorhiza sagittata*), wild celery (*Lomatium grayi*), elk thistle (*Cirsium scariosum*), and cow parsnip (*Hieracleum lanatum*) were also peeled and eaten like celery in the spring.

USES OF PLANTS TODAY

Camas, kouse, and bitterroot are still used today. Huckleberries are now the most popular berry, although serviceberries and elderberries are still occasionally gathered. Ho'pop is still used by some people.

In the past, plants were a necessary part of everyday life. Today, other foods are easier to obtain and the old foods are used mainly for special occasions. The plants are also not as abundant as they once were because much of their habitat

has been plowed up, trampled by grazing livestock, or affected by pesticides.

Today, plant foods serve as a link with the past and are part of the proud heritage of the Nez Perce.

WARNING: Do not try to duplicate the use of these plants as individual allergic reactions or your misidentification of a plant may prove fatal.