



THE NATIVE WAY

Plant Use by Native Americans

Purpose of This Activity: To understand the historical significance of plants and trees in the lives of Native Americans in Washington.

Research and display five or more plants from the Native Plant List. (See **Information to Help You** below.) Use researched information, along with a book on plant identification, to complete this project.

Important! While searching for common plants, be aware that some plants are toxic; others can cause irritation simply by touching them. Do not ingest any plants! Before picking any plants, be sure you have the property owner's permission as it is illegal to remove plants from most state and city parks. Check the rules before you begin.

1. Collect samples of five native plants if possible. If no plants are available, use library materials to make drawings.
2. Demonstrate how each plant was used by Native Americans in Washington. Provide modern-day products that meet the same needs. For example, next to a cattail plant in your display might be a nylon parka and an explanation that this is our modern equivalent to a woven cattail-leaf cape.
3. Each plant in the display should have a brief summary describing where the plant grows and how it was used.
4. Based on what you have found out about specific plants and their uses, create your own names for each of the plants you've identified. Then draw and label pictures of people using the plants.

Information to Help You

The Native Americans (indigenous people) in Washington lived and flourished for thousands of years before contact with the Europeans. They thrived in a natural world—the trees and waters were a living part of their customs, speech, legends and everyday life. The Native Americans formed a way of life based on accommodation and equality with nature, taking only what was necessary, wanting little more.

Native Americans used the common plants around us for many purposes. Several of these plants are listed along with a description of how each was used.

NATIVE PLANT LIST

PLANT

(common & botanical name)

USES

Big-leaf Maple (*Acer macrophyllum*)

- Bark was made into rope
- Used leaves to lay fish on while cleaning them (Squaxin)
- Used to build framework for sweatlodges (Lummi)

Blue Elderberry (*Sambucus glauca*)

- Berries were eaten
- Pith was removed from the stem and a plug inserted to make a whistle for calling elk (Quinault)

Broad-leaved Cattail (*Typha latifolia*)

- Woven into mats used for mattresses, raincoats, capes, lightweight baskets

Camas (*Camassia quamash*)

- Bulbs eaten as source of starch
- Coveted trade item between eastern and western Washington tribes

Douglas-fir (*Pseudotsuga menziesii*)

- Used to make salmon spears and dip net handles
- Bark boiled and used on infections
- Bark boiled for light brown dye to color fish nets to make them invisible to fish (Swinomish)

Giant Vetch (*Vicia gigantean*)

- Soaked roots, used water as a hair wash (Makah)

Pacific Flowering Dogwood (*Cornus nuttallii*)

- Charcoal used for tattooing (Quinault)
- Wooden discs used for games (Skagit, Klallam)

PLANT

(common & botanical name)

Pacific Yew (*Taxus brevifolia*)

USES

- Used to make bows, arrows, whale harpoons (Makah)
- Used for canoe paddles, war clubs (Swinomish)
- Made into wedges for splitting logs, household utensils, combs, drum frames, digging sticks for roots and clams

Sitka Spruce (*Picea stichensis*)

- Sprig used as charm for whalers (Makah)
- Roots used for basketry, rain hats, whaling rope
- Pitch used for canoe caulking

Skunk Cabbage (*Lysichitum americanum*)

- Used leaves on the head for headache

Sword Fern (*Polystichum munitum*)

- Used to line baking pits
- Leaves used for mattresses (Quileute)
- Spread on drying racks because berries do not stick to leaves (Squaxin)
- Roots roasted and eaten like potatoes

Thimbleberry (*Rubus parviflorus*)

- Bark boiled and used as soap (Cowlitz)
- Dry leaves crushed into powder and applied to burns to avoid scars

Vine Maple (*Acer circinatum*)

- Woven into baskets
- Used to make salmon tongs

Western Red Alder (*Alnus rubra*)

- Used to make eating utensils
- Provided firewood (does not spark)
- Rotten wood rubbed on the body for aches and pains
- Cones and catkins chewed as cure for diarrhea
- Bark boiled and made into tea for colds

PLANT

(common & botanical name)

Western Red Cedar (*Thuja plicata*)

USES

- Disease-resistant wood used for house planks, house posts, roof boards, canoes, boxes, cradles, spindle for spinning mountain goat wool

Western White Pine (*Pinus monticola*)

- To relieve aches and pains, young shoots boiled and a bath was taken in the water

Wild Rose (*Rosa nutkana*)

- Used as breath sweetener
- Tea made from roots for cold remedy
- Roots boiled and taken by the spoonful as a remedy for a sore throat



Pacific Yew