Edible Native Plants: Ethnobotany of the Local Area

The Ohlone people of the San Francisco Bay Area inhabited fixed village locations, moving temporarily to gather seasonal foodstuffs like acorns and berries. These food sources were abundant in earlier times and maintained by careful work. A rough husbandry of the land was practiced, mainly by annually setting fires to burn off the old growth to get a better yield of seeds. Here we present some ideas on some edible local native plants used by the Ohlone that you can grow in your ethnobotanical garden.

Ohlone Peoples Botanical, Animal and Mineral Resources:
http://www.primitiveways.com/Ohlone%20Peoples2.html

Native American Ethnobotany:
http://naeb.brit.org/uses/tribes/50/

California Native Plant Society
http://cnps-yerbabuena.org

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EDIBLE NATIVE PLANTS FOR THE GARDEN

- Manzanita (Arctostaphylos) Edible berries for colors.
- Hummingbird Sage (Salvia greggii) Edible leaves, flowers and seeds.
- yerba Buena (Zippium argenteum) Leaves edible and for tea.
- Indian Plum/Oldberry (Praerubus parviflorus) Edible tart, red fruit.
- Huckleberry (Vaccinium ovatum) Edible tea, red fruit.
- Layia platyglossa (Layia platyglossa) Edible seeds.
- Tidy Tips (Layia platyglossa) Edible flowers. Ground into flour.
- California Onion (Allium sp.) Edible flowers, stems, leaves and bulbs.
- California Poppy (Eschscholzia californica) Edible seeds. Toppings and flour.
- Beach Strawberry (Fragaria chiloensis) Edible fruit and leaves.
- California Hazelnut (Corylus cornuta ssp. oregano) Edible nuts. Nut butter and toppings.
- Northern Poppies (Eschscholzia californica) Edible leaves and seeds.
- Miner’s Lettuce (Claytonia perfoliata) Edible leaves, flowers and stems.
- Elegant Brodiaea (Brodiaea elegans) Edible flowers and bulb. Bulb needs to be cooked.
- Creosote bush (Larrea tridentata) Edible leaves when leaves are cooked.
- Manzanita (Arctostaphylos) Edible leaves, flowers and stems.
- California Onion (Allium sp.) Edible flowers, stems, leaves and bulbs.
- Strawberry (Fragaria chiloensis) Edible fruit.
- Tidy Tips (Layia platyglossa) Edible flowers. Ground into flour.

EDIBLE NATIVE PLANTS IN POTS

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- California Onion (Allium sp.) Edible flowers, stems, leaves and bulbs.
- California Hazelnut (Corylus cornuta ssp. oregano) Edible nuts. Nut butter and toppings.
- Cyanthillium (Cyanthillium) Edible flowers and bulb.
- Red Raspberry (Rubus idaeus) Edible fruit for wine and sauces.
- Wintercress (Barbarea orthoceras) Edible leaves. Soups and leaves.
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SAN FRANCISCO HOME COOKING

The next time you find yourself under a local coast live oak, ponder what it would’ve been like to have the whole Bay Area as your garden. Imagine knocking down acorns and grinding them into paste for bread and acorn soup. Or, gathering blackberries in your woven basket made out of iris, cattail, bulrushes and willows. In this ancient world, the hillsides are thick with game while the bay teems with fish. What would you create if your garden walk presented you with spicy watercress, fern fiddleheads, hazelnuts and blue elderberry juice? Would you wrap your fish in minty yerba buena? Or, glaze the vension in caramelized huckleberries? This is the beauty and the culture of the Ohlone people. You can bring it to life in your home garden.

Cooking With Native Plants

This recipe, adapted from the online cooking site Epicurious, features a leafy green called miner’s lettuce (Claytonia perfoliata). The native people discovered this delicious green long before the miners arrived during the Gold Rush so the common name is in need of an update.

MINER’S LETTUCE GOURMET SOUP

Miner’s lettuce is crunchy, mild and sweet with a little earthiness. Take advantage of the bounty that arrives during winter to make this modern recipe featuring an ancient ingredient.

Yield: Makes 4 servings / Active Time: 25 min / Total Time: 35 min

INGREDIENTS

- 1 cup chopped onions, scallions, and/or shallots
- 1 garlic clove, chopped
- 3 tablespoons unsalted butter
- 3/4 teaspoon ground coriander
- 3/4 cup diced (1/3 inch) peeled potato
- 3/4 cup diced (1/3 inch) peeled potato
- 1/4 teaspoon black pepper
- 3/4 cup diced (1/3 inch) peeled potato
- 8 cups coarsely chopped miner’s lettuce (3/4 lb)
- 3 cups water

PREPARATION

1. Cook onion mixture and garlic in 2 tablespoons butter in a 4- to 5-quart heavy pot over moderately low heat, stirring, until softened, 3 to 5 minutes. Add coriander, salt, and pepper and cook, stirring, 1 minute. Stir in potato, lettuce and water and bring to a boil, then reduce heat and simmer, covered, until potato is very tender, about 10 minutes.
2. Purée soup in batches in a blender (use caution when blending hot liquids) and transfer to a 2- to 3-quart saucepan. Bring soup to a simmer, then whisk in remaining tablespoon butter and salt and pepper to taste.

Harvesting Guidelines: Collecting from the wild is usually prohibited and is discouraged by CNPS. This guide is intended for garden use only. Keep in mind, caterpillars, birds, amphibians and reptiles all depend on native plants. So please celebrate when your plant leaves are chewed.

Note: For flowers the next year, permit bulb leaves to get brown and die back in the summer and do not eat the bulbs. Do not harvest plants from the wild.

Photos: Bob Hal / Margo Bors