



# PACIFIC NORTHWEST MEDICINAL PLANTS

IDENTIFY, HARVEST, AND USE  
✦ 120 WILD HERBS ✦  
FOR HEALTH AND WELLNESS

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# PREFACE

**M**y first field guides still sit on a bookshelf in my office at home. Each crease, dirt smudge, dried plant specimen, and dog-eared page in those books is a testament to days of adventure pregnant with the promise of meeting new plant friends and allies in the forests, mountains, valleys, and deserts of my cherished Pacific Northwest home. I used those books so much that the information they contained became a part of me, but one day I knew it was time for me to take off the training wheels and leave the field guides at home.

I very clearly remember that day. It was a day tinged with sadness because knowing the plants well enough to leave the books behind also meant saying goodbye to the thrill of discovery and the wonderment that propelled me on many epic quests. At the time I knew there would always be new things to discover, relationships to deepen, and aspects of nature to wonder upon, but it would never be like it was in those early days.

If you are just beginning your journey on this green path, I envy you. Out in the wild, many new friends and allies await. Amid the earth's myriad flowering colors and the infinite shades of green knowledge within her

whispering leaves, you will experience the excitement, joy, and awe that comes when you finally discover and meet a new plant that's been calling to you. Instead of just gazing longingly at the pictures in this book, you will have the opportunity to smell the sweet scent of the flowers, stroke the subtle fuzz on the underside of the leaves, and watch how the plants sway in the wind to greet you as you enter the forest.

Getting to know plants is like meeting a lifelong friend. You will need to give as much or more than you receive. It takes dedication to develop these relationships, but you will never be alone again. Wherever you go you

will be surrounded by friends. Like the books that inspired me, I hope that this book helps you find, remember, and renew your connection to the wild. You will meet plants that grow along your favorite hiking trails and in your neighborhood park, plants that grow way out in the mountains and absolutely won't grow in anybody's garden, and others that will happily grow in your garden or that thrive in ground disturbed by the presence of humans. The thing that unites these plants is that they grow without our aid and sometimes despite our attempts to eradicate them. They embody the forces of nature and possess a spirit that renews and invigorates our own wildness. By connecting with and using these plants as medicine, we can retune our physical bodies in relationship to the land. By connecting with the wild places within ourselves and by harvesting and making medicine from these wild plants, we remember how to be in harmony with nature.

How did I get started on this path? After watching my grandparents die without dignity in the hospital, I was unable to go near a hospital for years without having a panic attack. These and other mainstream health care experiences affected me deeply. I knew that I never wanted to end up in the hospital. Even as a teenager, I knew that the hospital was not a suitable environment for healing. It was a place to die, not a place to get well.

In my early twenties, I started learning about herbs and wanted to make my own medicine because I was sure that civilization had no interest in my well-being and, in any case, it was headed for a collapse. I knew that if I wanted to survive the downfall, I would have to take matters into my own hands. As I've cultivated this rebellious spirit of self-reliance over the years, my views on how to bring about societal change have shifted.

Rather than hunker down and wait for the end of civilization, I've spent the majority of my adult life making medicines to share with my community, empowering others to do the same, and teaching classes that allow people to experience the magic and power of plant medicine so that we ourselves can shape the world in which we want to live.

The wild plants have become my friends and teachers. Harvesting them to make medicine has brought health and happiness to my life on so many levels. While I understand that wild plants will never be the main supply of medicine for the modern world, they will always have their place.

Health care is a right all humans ought to share equally. As people continue to become disillusioned with a system increasingly dependent on developing new drugs to increase profits for shareholders, it becomes more important that we have access to medicines that grow in the backyards, fields, meadows, and wild areas near our homes. It is refreshing to return to the roots of healing and find natural remedies that support our own health and well-being as well as that of our families and friends.

Wild medicinal plants carry a different medicine than herbs cultivated in gardens. They not only create the conditions for physical health and inspire harmony within our bodies, but they remind us of the wild places within ourselves and connect us to nature. Can we truly be healthy without a connection to the foundations of all life here on Earth? I say no, and in my experience it is this disconnect that is at the root of so much of our current dis-ease as a society.

Retaining and developing a connection to the wild through making medicine from and ingesting wild medicinal plants can enliven and invigorate our lives in a very special way. It can lead us to the remembrance of a



Dawn breaks over a high desert creek lined with sagebrush and cottonwood.

culture that respects the land and all creatures of the earth, one that is guided by the very same principles that the natural world uses to organize itself.

So now I take another step on my path as I write this book for you. I am honored to share the knowledge that I've gathered in more than two decades of wildcrafting, medicine making, and working with plant medicine. Connecting with these plants has helped me connect with parts of myself that have been marginalized, pushed aside, and forgotten. By studying these plants and the places where they grow, I remember who I am. I see their dignity, power, and beauty reflected in me. I remember my indigenous self as the presence of the ancestors who lived intimately with these lands—digging roots, gathering leaves, and making medicine

by the cycles of the moon—reverberates through my being.

Without my first field guides, I would never have experienced these things. To their authors I am deeply indebted and forever grateful. I can only hope that you will find similar inspiration in the pages that follow and wish you the best on adventures of your own.

May these chapters inspire you to seek out your own philosophy of health, and may the plants be agents of healing, teaching, and guidance for you in the same way that they've been for me.

Open yourself to the wild. The plants await.

Take a moment to listen.

They are calling.



# barestem biscuitroot

*Lomatium nudicaule*

Indian consumption plant

**PARTS USED** seed

*Pungent seeds speed the healing of flus and others viral outbreaks.*



The small yellow flowers of barestem biscuitroot ripen into large, winged seeds.

## **How to Identify**

Compound leaves, mostly basal and divided 1–3 times into 3–30 lance- to oval-shaped leaflets, arise from stout taproots. The leaflets are smooth edged or coarsely toothed near the tip and are arranged opposite each other on the leaf stem. From a swollen bulb at the top of the flower stem, stalks of unequal length hold widely spaced compound umbels of small, yellow or rarely purple flowers that bloom from mid spring to early summer. (An umbel is a grouping of flowers whose stalks, called rays, all originate from

the same point. In a compound umbel, a secondary set of smaller umbels sits at the end of each ray rather than a single flower.) Oblong to elliptic, ½-inch-long seeds with wings that are shorter than the seed's width sometimes taper to a beak-like tip. The stems and leaves of this hairless, 10- to 28-inch-tall perennial are covered with a bluish waxy coating.

## **Where, When, and How to Wildcraft**

Stands of barestem biscuitroot are found from southern British Columbia to central

California in dry, open spaces, sagebrush scrub lands, and on grassy, exposed mountain slopes at low to middle elevations. Strip ripe seeds from their stalks in summer when they are just turning from yellow to brown. If they are too young, the flavor will be overly sharp and pungent; too old, and they will have lost their aromatics. When just right, the chewed seeds emit a roundly pungent sensation that expands throughout the mouth and head.

### Medicinal Uses

The seeds of barestem biscuitroot have an affinity for the upper respiratory tract, lungs, and stomach. Like the roots of desert parsley (*Lomatium dissectum*), they are strongly antiviral. Use the seed tincture or the tea to aid the body in recovering from flu and other viral infections. Although most research has focused on desert parsley, the seeds of barestem biscuitroot were and continue to be used extensively by native peoples for similar conditions.

### Future Harvests

Take no more than a third of the seeds from each plant. If, as you harvest, you find mature brown seeds that are past their prime for use as medicine, sow some of them  $\frac{1}{2}$  inch deep in spots where they will get a little extra water to help their germination and initial growth.

## HERBAL PREPARATIONS

### Seed Tea

Standard decoction

*Drink 3–4 fluid ounces up to 5 times per day.*

### Seed Tincture

1 part dried seed

5 parts menstruum (75 percent alcohol,  
25 percent distilled water)

or

1 part fresh seed

2 parts menstruum (100 percent alcohol)

*Take 15–20 drops up to 5 times per day.*



# black cottonwood

*Populus trichocarpa*

balsam poplar

**PARTS USED** bud, twig

*Resinous buds expel mucus from the lungs, soothe sore muscles, and speed the healing of cuts, scrapes, and burns.*



The sound of black cottonwood leaves fluttering in the wind brings joy to the heart.

## How to Identify

From late winter to early spring, resinous buds swell and fill the air with their sweet fragrance. Hanging catkins (dense spikes of single-sexed flowers that lack petals), male and female on separate trees, emerge from early to late spring, followed by thick, dark green, heart-shaped leaves with pale undersides and pointed tips. Fine teeth and small hairs line the edges of the alternately arranged, deciduous leaves. After they ripen, hairy seeds burst out of 3-chambered

capsules, filling the sky and covering the ground with the white fluff that gives the cottonwoods their name. Smooth bark thickens into deep furrows as the broad-trunked trees age, and brown twigs turn gray after their first year.

## Where, When, and How to Wildcraft

Found throughout western North America from sea level to middle elevations, this rapidly growing tree (formerly *Populus balsamifera* subsp. *trichocarpa*) resides in wet forests



The first scent of the resinous, sweet-smelling buds heralds the arrival of spring and the beginning of the harvest season.

and along waterways from Alaska to California. At lower elevations west of the Cascades, black cottonwood often grows in large stands in the bottomlands of large streams and rivers. East of the Cascades its range is limited to protected valleys and canyons.

From mid winter to early spring, look for low-hanging branches or limbs that have fallen to the ground after a windstorm. Cut the bud-laden branch ends. Remove buds to make a fresh tincture, or place the bud-covered twigs in bags to dry for making oils or dry bud tinctures. Leaving the slow-to-dry buds on the twigs increases airflow to speed the drying process. Save the twigs for tea after you've removed the dried buds to make an oil or tincture.

### **Medicinal Uses**

Warming and stimulating resins in the buds stimulate lung secretions to expel mucus,

speed the healing of infections, and increase the circulation of blood to the exterior. Take the tincture in hot water to clear the lungs of hard stuck mucus that causes rattling unproductive coughs, to stimulate circulation to promote sweating and bring blood and warmth to the surface of the skin and extremities, and to help resolve nonviral lung infections.

Bitter salicylates in the buds and twigs reduce inflammation and relieve pain. Rub the oil on sore muscles and strains. The bud oil combines well with hairy arnica and/or Saint John's wort oil to reduce joint swelling and to ease the pain and inflammation of carpal tunnel syndrome. Drink a tea of the bitter twigs for added effect.

The bud salve or butter reduces swelling, prevents infection, and promotes rapid skin cell regeneration. I find the butter especially helpful for burns and chapped lips.



Growing upward of 100 feet, black cottonwood is this region's tallest native, deciduous tree.

On the emotional level, the deep anchoring and solidity of this tree is a signature for its ability to impart calmness. Black cottonwood teaches us to radiate a quiet dignity and to receive and transform chaotic energies. It has shown me that when I feel overwhelmed by life, there is often an internal process of change trying to take place. It asks me to stop resisting and go into the process so that the transformation can occur.

### **Future Harvests**

Find large downed branches to harvest from, or take a few twigs from each tree. Stick branches in the ground where you harvest; they will root in and make new trees.

## **HERBAL PREPARATIONS**

### **Twig Tea**

Standard decoction

*Drink 3–4 fluid ounces up to 3 times per day.*

### **Bud Tincture**

1 part fresh buds

2 parts menstruum (100 percent alcohol)

or

1 part dried buds

5 parts menstruum (70 percent alcohol,  
30 percent distilled water)

*Take 30–60 drops up to 4 times per day.*

### **Bud Oil and Salve**

*For bud oil, follow directions for Dry Herb*

*Infused Oil on page 64 but use 1 part buds by weight to 10 parts oil by volume. For the salve, follow directions on page 65.*

## **Black Cottonwood Bud Butter**

dried black cottonwood buds

clarified butter

1. Measure 1 part by volume of dried black cottonwood buds. Grind them with a coffee grinder or other device to the consistency of corn meal.
2. In a double boiler, heat 2 parts by volume of clarified butter (also known as ghee).
3. Add the ground buds and simmer for 4 hours on very low heat, stirring occasionally. Heating the mixture too high will ruin the medicine.
4. Into a clean, dry jar, pour the bud-infused butter through a cheesecloth-lined funnel to strain out the herb material.
5. Label accordingly, and store in a cool dry place.

*Adapted from Michael Moore*



# bladderwrack

*Fucus distichus*

popweed, rockweed

**PARTS USED** thallus

*Easily identified by the gas-filled bladders at the tips of its blades, this iodine- and mineral-rich seaweed is a specific remedy for underactive thyroid and goiter. It also helps prevent thyroid cancer.*



Reproductive bumps form on the gas-filled bladders.

## How to Identify

Forming dense canopies that shelter other algae and invertebrates, this green to olive-brown seaweed attaches to rocks with a single, disc-shaped holdfast. Blades,  $\frac{1}{2}$  to 1 inch wide with raised midribs along the center, fork several times into Ys. Young blades may appear flat and lack bladders, but as they mature the tips turn yellowish green, swell up, and form small reproductive bumps. The mitten-shaped, gas-filled bladders allow the

4- to 20-inch-long thallus (the nonvascular, undifferentiated vegetative body of lichens and seaweeds) to float and stretch upward toward the sun.

## Where, When, and How to Wildcraft

Often the dominant species of algae in the mid-intertidal zone, this hardy seaweed (formerly *Fucus gardneri*) inhabits exposed coastal waters and sheltered bays and estuaries. Because it tolerates a wide range of

salinity, it can also be found at the mouths of streams that deposit freshwater into the sea. Find bladderwrack growing in dense bands on rocks and mussels all along the Pacific coast from the Bering Sea and Aleutian Islands in Alaska to Point Conception in central California. In sheltered areas bladderwrack can live for up to 5 years; those growing in exposed sites and battered by waves have an average life span of 2 to 3 years.

Harvest during a low tide from early to mid summer as the thalli mature and the bladders swell. Because bladderwrack grows in the mid-intertidal zone, from just below average sea level to the upper limit of the average lowest tides, they are underwater except during the twice-daily low tides. Consult a local tide table to plan an opportune harvest time. The most extreme low tides each month coincide with the new and full moons.

Collect from rocks rather than gathering specimens that have washed up on shore that have most likely deteriorated and lost their medicinal properties. Using a knife or scissors, trim 2–3 inches from the tips of the thalli. Wash away sand and other debris with ocean water and place the seaweed in a clean collecting bucket. Pour off water from the bucket before you leave the beach, and keep the seaweed covered and out of direct sunlight while transporting it home. Spread the seaweed out on screens to dry in the sun. If it's cloudy or raining, use a dehydrator on the lowest setting or set your screens indoors near a wood stove or other heat source. An electric fan will speed the process.

### Medicinal Uses

Bladderwrack is high in a form of iodine that is easily converted into thyroid hormones. Ingest powdered bladderwrack daily for underactive thyroid gland (hypothyroidism)

or for goiter, an enlargement of the thyroid gland in response to inadequate supplies of iodine. Iodine 131 is released daily into the atmosphere by nuclear power plants and facilities all over the world. The human body readily absorbs this radioactive isotope and stores it in the thyroid gland, leading to increased risk of thyroid cancer. Daily intake of seaweeds including bladderwrack supplies the body with iodine 127, the natural form of iodine. If the thyroid has adequate supplies of iodine 127, it has no need to take up the radioactive form. Store dried seaweeds for 8–10 weeks prior to ingesting; based on iodine 131's rate of decay, this will ensure that the seaweeds are free of any accumulated radioisotopes.

Bladderwrack can also be taken to reduce prostate inflammation or to lower blood pressure. Apply a poultice or a hot compress to relieve joint pain.

### Caution

If you are dealing with any type of thyroid condition, consult a physician or other qualified health practitioner before starting a treatment plan.

### Future Harvests

Always leave at least 2 inches remaining at the base of the blade above the holdfast to ensure the regrowth of these perennial algae. Be mindful of your steps as you gather and avoid stepping on these seaweeds and other organisms.

## HERBAL PREPARATIONS

### Ground Thallus

*Take 3–5 grams daily.*

# blue elder

*Sambucus cerulea*

blue elderberry

**PARTS USED** flower, berry, leaf

*Fragrant flowers and tart berries speed the passage of colds and flus.*



The sweet, musty smell of the sweat-inducing elder flowers is hypnotic.

## How to Identify

Each year thick, purplish green stalks emerge from the base of this vigorously growing opposite-leaved perennial that grows as wide as it is tall, up to 13 feet. As the pith-filled stems age, they develop a reddish, warty bark that eventually becomes gray with linear ridges. Compound leaves are divided into 5–9 elliptic to ovate, serrated leaflets that emit a nutty smell when rubbed or crushed. Flat-topped clusters of white to cream-colored, musty-smelling flowers bloom from late spring to late summer and ripen into dark blue berries, whose whitish waxy coating

gives them a lighter hue. Heavy clusters of mature berries weigh down the branches from late summer to early autumn.

## Where, When, and How to Wildcraft

Find this shade-intolerant shrub on both sides of the Cascade Crest from southern British Columbia to California growing in dry well-drained soils along roads, in clear cuts, and in forest clearings.

Harvest the flowers from late spring to late summer before they are pollinated by taking the whole cluster. For a fresh plant tincture, clip the small stalks just below



## A MADCap HORSE

A MADCap HORSE is a simple and useful mnemonic device for identifying trees and shrubs with oppositely arranged leaves. With a few exceptions, such trees and shrubs in North America are members of one of these families or genera.

- Adoxaceae (a newly identified family that contains elders and viburnums)
- Maple (*Acer*)
- Ash (*Fraxinus*)
- Dogwood (*Cornus*)
- CAPrifoliaceae (honeysuckle family)
- HORSE chestnut (*Aesculus*)

Notable exceptions to this rule include western burning bush (*Euonymus occidentalis*), Oregon boxwood (*Paxistima myrsinites*), buffaloberry (*Shepherdia* species), silktassel (*Garrya* species), Lewis's mock orange (*Philadelphus lewisii*), whipplevine (*Whipplea modesta*), and buckbrush (*Ceanothus cuneatus*).

the tightest grouping of flowers. To dry the flowers for tea, put the whole and intact flower heads on screens, and remove and discard the larger stems after the material is dry. Gather clusters of berries when they are ripe and juicy. For tea, dry the berries in a dehydrator. For tincture, pick the fresh berries off the stalks individually. The leaves can be harvested throughout the growing season and are best used fresh to make oil.

### Medicinal Uses

A tea of the flowers or the tincture in hot water promotes sweating and supports the body's natural response to fever. Blue elder is indicated for people with a bluish cast to the skin who may lack oxygen, as it opens the bronchioles and stimulates blood flow to the surface of the skin and extremities. It is also one of the safest and gentlest flu remedies, suitable for very young children and the elderly. A classic western herbal formula can be made by combining equal parts of blue elder flower, yarrow flower, and field mint leaves.

The berries are strongly antiviral and will significantly reduce the recovery time during a bout of flu. They can be consumed

as a tincture, a decoction of the dried berries, or a syrup. An infused oil of the leaves relieves pain and inflammation from sprains, strains, and bruises. The salve is used to treat hemorrhoids.

Elder flower tincture develops a sweet, musty flavor that gets better as it ages. I see this as a signature for the way it helps us ripen into elders. It also resolves fear of death or transformation and helps with letting go and accepting change.



Blue elders like the open sunny spaces created by clear cuts.



Note the whitish waxy coating on the berries.

### **⚠ Caution**

Due to the presence of hydrocyanic acid, the seeds may cause nausea and dizziness with vomiting and/or diarrhea. Some people can eat lots of berries without any adverse effect, whereas others eat just a few and begin to feel queasy. Test your own sensitivity by eating a few at a time to see what happens. When I eat the berries raw, I don't chew the seeds. Berries prepared as tea or tincture are perfectly safe to consume.

### **Future Harvests**

When harvesting elder flowers or berries, I've come to an agreement with the birds, bears, and other creatures who receive nourishment from this tree. I take only what I can reach from the ground; ladders or other height boosters are not allowed. This leaves plenty of berries on each tree for all to ingest, enjoy, and participate in the dispersal of seed.

## **HERBAL PREPARATIONS**

### **Flower Tea**

Standard infusion

*Drink 4–6 fluid ounces up to 5 times per day.*

### **Berry Tea**

Standard decoction

*Drink 4–6 fluid ounces up to 5 times per day.*

### **Flower Tincture**

1 part fresh flowers

2 parts menstruum (75 percent alcohol,  
25 percent distilled water)

*Take 15–60 drops up to 5 times per day.*

### **Berry Tincture**

1 part fresh berries

2 parts menstruum (100 percent alcohol)

*Take 15–60 drops up to 5 times per day.*

### **Leaf Oil and Salve**

*For the leaf oil, follow the directions for Fresh Herb Infused Oil on page 63. For the salve, follow the directions on page 65.*