



Jija uniya.^a

She's picking berries.

The Upper Kuskokwim People and Gathering Plants in the Upper Kuskokwim

Gathering Plants

“The Upper Kuskokwim River that we live on is located in the Boreal Forest in the Interior of Alaska. The Boreal Forest is made up of many kinds of forests that include aspen stands, bogs with meadows, marshes, rivers and lakes. Many different kinds of animals such as bear, moose, and rabbits also live there.

We have many White Spruce and Black Spruce trees in the Boreal Forest. We also have Balsam Poplar, Paper Birch and Aspen trees that grow along the south side of the river bars and recent burns. Alder, blueberry, Highbush cranberry, Labrador tea, rose and willow grow in the forest while grasses, lichens, and mosses cover the ground. Horsetail grows in the forest.” (Alaska Ecosystems: Alaska Department of Fish and Game Website)

Our people use the plants for food, homes, travel and medicine. We eat plants like cranberries, Indian Potatoes, and wild carrots and use alder and willow for smoking fish. The homes we live in are built from spruce trees and we heat them with firewood.

We use the bark from birch trees to make baskets for carrying water and picking berries and also use it to cover canoes. Horsetail, stinging nettle, wormwood and yarrow are used for medicine.

When we harvest the plants, we are careful to only pick the plants that we will use and to always leave some of the plants in the area. We do not take all of the plant unless we need to and do not strip all the bark on the inside or the outside of the tree because it will die.

We believe we must respect the plants we pick. Some Elders say that you should talk to the plant and tell it what you are going to use it for while. Other Elders say you should leave something after you take the plant, and pray while you pick and prepare medicinal plants.

Our people need to know when to pick the plant during the year because some parts of the plant are stronger at certain times of the year than others. Also, we need to decide whether we will use the plant for food or for medicine because that will help us to know when to gather it.

When we gather plants, we go with someone who knows how to use them! This is because everyone's body is different and someone may not be able to eat certain plants or may only be able to eat a certain amount of the plant. (Garabaldi 1999:3)



Netł silak'a nighenił.^b

She gave me some cranberries.

Picking, Preserving and Using Berries

Berries are one of our most important wild food plants. The berries that we eat and use for medicine are Blueberries, Salmonberries, Lowbush cranberries, Highbush cranberries, Raspberries, Kinnikinnick berries, Timberberries, and Wild Rose hips.

How many berries we pick depends upon the temperature, the rain and snowfall, and the birds and the animals that eat them. When there is too much or too little rain in the springtime, a late spring frost, or lower than normal temperatures, we are not able to pick as many berries. The black bears and birds also affect how many berries we can gather during a low berry year.

During the summer and fall, our women and older girls usually pick the berries and the men come along to protect them from the bears. We pick berries for part of the day near our community or the place we go fishing at. Other times, we may walk several miles or go upriver by boat for many miles to find a good berry picking site. Sometimes, people stay after fish camp ends to wait for the blueberries and low bush cranberries to ripen so that they can pick them. (Stokes 1985:292)

Long ago, the women would go out in groups of four or five to pick berries just before the snow flew so that they would freeze and stay fresh. When the women got lots of berries, they packed them in baskets, sewed a birch bark covering over them, and then cached the berries in the hills. Once the ground was covered with snow, people brought the berries back to the village by dog team, usually when they came back from winter camps for the mid-winter celebrations. (Sullivan 1942:35-36)

Our people used berries mostly for food. We also ate the berries and stored them in many different ways long ago. Because berries like raspberries (dwh nikotl') and currants (nodzihnihhaltl'una) spoiled quickly, they were hard for us to keep over the winter. We cooked the berries, mixed them with grease, and occasionally added fish eggs. This made a jam that we could put in birch baskets to keep cool or frozen.

Another way we kept the berries was to put them in an ice cream called nemaje that was made with berries, grease, and fish or animal meat. To make the ice cream, we cooked the meat, squeezed the juice out of it, and then broke the meat into little pieces. We stirred the meat and the grease together until it made a smooth paste and then added the berries. We also added sugar, Indian potatoes and caribou moss to the mixture. We ate the nemaje fresh or froze it to use later.

Our people stored the berries in an animal stomach that was prepared as a container. The animal stomach was put in a cache under the ground or in a hole in the bottom of a lake and then dug back up before the lake froze. After the weather got cold, the berries were safe for the winter.

Because we needed to prepare for hard times, our people also picked the dry berries like bearberries with lots of seeds and that did not taste good. We dried the berries, mixed them with grease and let the mixture harden. Once the mixture was hard, we sliced it like a sandwich or stored it for the winter. Sometimes, this food kept us from starving.

Today, the berries are easy for our people to keep over the winter because we freeze them or make them into jams. We also eat the berries raw or pack berries like blueberries that have lots of juice in them in layers of sugar, cover them, and then keep them cool. Our people also use berries for other purposes such as hot packs for aches and pains. We also boil the berries and use the juice to dye grass for mats, porcupine quills and other things. (Kari 1971:31-33)



Noygw highnede ił eko tazyo.^c

He went for spruce boughs for the tent floor.

Harvesting and Using Trees

“Trees are the plants that our people utilize the most. They are used for heating homes, preserving meat and flavoring, building construction, and making other wooden things.

White spruce is our most important tree because it is the best tree for building log cabins. White spruce also makes good firewood. During the spring and early summer, people cut down the trees that they will use for log cabins and peel them.

In the winter, people cut the trees for firewood. Many people use green white spruce for burning. However, trees that are dead or dry standing and seasoned make better firewood.

“Black Spruce (Ts’ima) which is also called a "gee-pole" spruce, isn’t used as much as the White spruce. Because the black spruce is small and there are many of them in one area they make a poor source of firewood. But it is a strong, tough wood that can be used as poles used in the construction of fishwheels, fish drying structures, trap sets and tent poles.” (Stokes 1985:298-299)

Spruce trees have many other uses. Spruce boughs make a good camp bed, and are also used to cover the roofs of small buildings. They make good floor coverings in a tent. (Kari 1977:5-6)

Spruce is also used as medicine. Collect the very tips of young spruce trees and chew them raw or boil them for tea. The tea helps relieve bone aches, itchy throats, colds, flu and tuberculosis. The sap makes a good spring tonic (Stanek 1998:5-6). Old spruce cones can be used to dry up ear infections and cones from young spruce trees can be made into a tea that will help get rid of coughing and sore throats (Andre, Fehr 2000:17-18). The scent of spruce boughs in the tent keeps people healthy. Spruce boughs can be boiled to make a steam to breathe in that relieves cold symptoms and keeps people healthy. (Kari 1977:5-6)

Birch trees which grow in the Upper Kuskokwim drop their leaves every fall and grow about 60 to 70 feet tall with white bark. Its wood is the hardest and longest lasting and is good for carving and making things that need to last a long time. The wood also bends well and holds its shape so it is good for making toboggans, sleds, snowshoes, and boards for lumber.

In the old days, we lived completely by hunting and fishing and spent a lot of time on snowshoes. We also traveled by dog team pulling a sled or toboggan. Birch was used in traps and snares, bows and arrows, and was carved into kitchen and eating utensils. In the summer we made our canoe frames out of birch wood and covered it with birch bark.

Birch bark is gathered in the spring while the sap is running and the bark hangs looser and peels off easy. The bark folds up and can be made into watertight baskets without cracking. Before we had metal pots we cooked in birch bark baskets by filling them with water and putting hot rocks into it to make the water boil.

(Jones and al 1984:3, 4, 6-9, 13-160)



K'esht'r'esh^d

Birchbark canoe

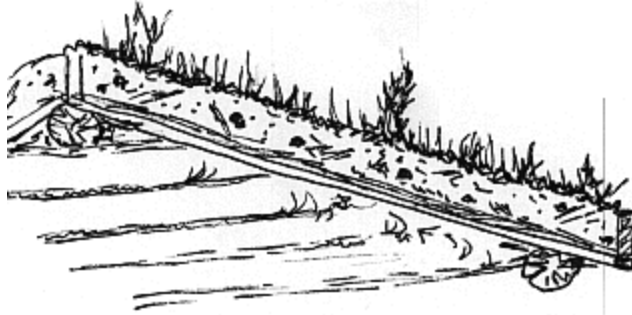
Birch is also used as food too. Long ago, the sap was really good for getting fresh vegetables and vitamins in the early spring. Now, we still collect the sap as it rises in the tree during the spring to make syrup. The sap is also good to put on boils and sores as medicine. Birch root tea can be made for washing the eyes of people with snow blindness. A mouthwash can also be made from the leaves. (Kari 1977:14-15)

Alder (k'isr) is part of the birch family and is somewhere between a tree and a shrub. The bark is very dark and it is a favorite wood for smoking fish. It gives the fish a good flavor. It is good firewood also. Because it will grow high up in the mountains, alder is sometimes the only firewood is available. It has also been used to build shelters at mountain squirrel camps and to make squirrel snare sticks.

Alder is useful for making poles and digging sticks, and if there is no other wood available, you can make snowshoes with it. Alder branches with leaves make good roofs on camp shelters. They are good steambath switches too! (Kari 1977:20)

Both poplar and cottonwood trees grow well in river bottoms and sand bars in our area. (Davis 1981: Article # 483) The winter buds are medicine for sores, rashes or frostbite. They are dried and mashed into a powder. Mix the powder with oil and use it as a salve. The buds can also be cooked with grease over low heat for about 10 minutes. This takes the sap out of the buds and it goes into the grease. Throw the buds away and use the grease as a salve. The salve is really good for baby rash. The buds can be picked all winter and into the early spring before the leaves come out. The salve can be stored all summer in a cool place. Aspen branches are useful for beaver bait. (Kari 1977:16, 19)

Tamaracks (łat'ighazya) are found throughout the Upper Kuskokwim area in small numbers and usually are found near swamps and low-lying areas. It has needles for leaves like a spruce but it drops them in the fall like a birch. Its wood is hard and is good for boat ribs and sled runners. Emergency snowshoes can be made from tamarack. Otherwise they have little value except as an occasional source of firewood. This wood makes lots of hot heat. (Stokes 1985:301)



Kayih highne nan' di'eł'an.^e

Go and get moss for the house.

Using Willows and Other Plants

We have several species of willows in our area including Bebb willow, Arctic willow, Alaska Bog willow, Skeleton Leaf willow and Gray Leaf willow. They can be hard to tell apart if you have not been taught by your Elders.

Long ago, we used the willow fibers from the inner bark for thread or binding twine for small fish nets, fish traps, and dipnets. (Stokes 1985:301) We also used larger willow branches for tent poles and also stuck into the bottom of a river or creek for fish traps. The wood also made good smoke for drying meat, making spoons and forks, and frames for drums.

Now, we continue to make Beaver stretchers (mitoy'dineltr'esh heye) from willows. (Andre, Fehr 2000:51-52) We also use willows to make tent pegs and hangers for teapots when cooking over a campfire. (Stokes 1985:301) We bend over thick willows to create rabbit snares. Because young willows are strong, we use also them to hang fish. (Andre, Fehr 2000:51-52)

We mix willow branches (k'wy' dilo') with the spruce boughs in a tent. They don't dry up as easy and they smell good too. They can serve as the flooring until spruce boughs are cut and laid. (Andre, Fehr 2000:51-52)

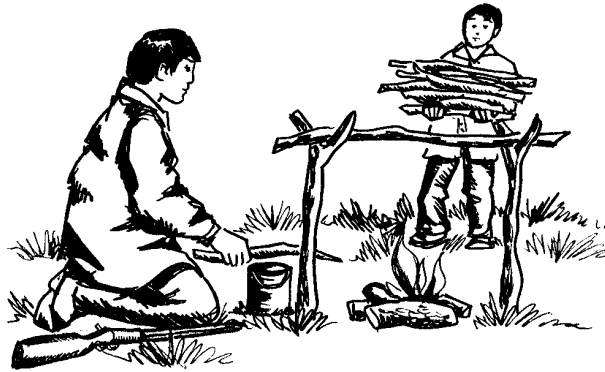
We have a number of other plants that we gather in the area for food and medicine. The plants include wild grass, moss, White Wet moss, Caribou moss, birch punk, wormwood, horsetail, dandelion, nettle, fireweed, Labrador tea, Indian potato, and yarrow.

Grass (ch'itsan') is found around our homes where the ground has been disturbed. Once the grass dries in the fall, we harvest it before the first snow. It is cut with a knife just above the roots and then bundled up with string and stored in a dry place. We use grass mostly used for lining dog houses during the winter months. In the past, grass was used as a lining or insole for moccasins and winter boots. (Stokes 1985:302)

We use moss for building moss houses, to insulate log homes, and to lay against the side of tents to help with the wind. (Stokes 1985:303) Sphagnum moss is a light, green colored moss that grows in wet places. It can be used for toilet paper, diaper liners and birch bark cradles. If you go to an area where there isn't any wood to burn, you can dry the moss and use it to make a fire. (Kari 1977:148; Andre, Fehr 2000:60-61).

Caribou moss which is caribou and reindeer eat is a lichen that grows close to the ground in open areas. We boil the moss for food and eat it plain or mix it with berries, fish eggs or grease. Men also drank the tea before they went to the mountains because it gave them strength and helped them to walk a long ways. We also used it for cleaning pots and pans. (Andre, Fehr 2001:60) Be careful if you eat or drink this plant because it can cause stomach problems if you do not cook it long enough. (Kari 1977:151) It is best to have an Elder or adult help you prepare it.

There are four kinds of punk that grow on birch trees. They are a brown punk, a hard white punk, a soft white punk, and a black burl. (Kari: 1977:159-162) We burn the brown punk in the stove and then mix the ashes with tobacco. (Stokes 1985:302) Brown and hard white punk can be used to repel mosquitoes. In the old days, we made bullets from the soft white punk to put into popguns that were made from False elder.



Duŵ nodilghwch.^f

He's hauling firewood.

In the past, we were able to dry and pound black burls into a fire starter and to carry fire with us from one place to another by lighting one end of the burl and letting it smolder. We also put it in our boots and mittens to help keep our hands and feet warm.

(Kari 1977:159-162)

Horsetail is a plant that has been here since the dinosaurs lived on the earth. It is a jointed grass that grows in wet places and is eaten by ducks and geese. Although we do not eat the plants, we do eat the root tubercles raw.

Horsetails can be used for medicine. When a person is sick, we steam the leaves and stems and breathe them in for colds and stomach troubles. Baskets are decorated with dry horsetail stems. When we want to trap an animal, we rub the horsetail between our hands until it becomes a powder that can be used to conceal the trap. (Kari 1977:75-76; Schofield 1999:24)

Fireweed is about three feet tall with purple and pink flowers that bloom from the bottom of the flower cluster up to the top. Winter arrives shortly after the flowers finish blooming. Fireweed is one of the first plants that grows on the land after a fire.

We eat the young stems and the leaves raw, boil them or boil them with fish eggs. Also, we eat the flowers and mix them in with salads or make them into honey or jelly. The plant can also be used as medicine for cuts, burns and upset stomachs.

A light green tea can be made from the leaves that are on the plant before it begins blooming. The tea has a sweet taste. (Kari 1977:116; Andre, Fehr 2000:55; Schofield 1999:63)

Labrador tea is a plant with woody stems, leaves that are green on the top and brown underneath, and white flowers. When you crush the leaves, they give off a strong smell. The leaves stay green during the winter.

We boil the leaves and the branches until the water turns dark. The tea can be used for a hot drink, medicine for colds, arthritis, and a wash for sores. Also, the tea also be used to marinade meat or the leaves and stems can be put into a pot and cooked with the meat for a fishy brown bear taste.

Scientists warn that people can get sick if they drink too much of it. However, we have been using it for generations. Do not drink a lot of tea at once if you are not used to it. Also, do not use the tea if you have problems with your heart/and or high blood pressure because it can cause heart palpitations, cramps, or drowsiness.

Warning: There is a plant called bog rosemary that looks a look like Labrador tea. There is a very toxic plant, bog rosemary, that looks a lot like Labrador tea but it has white under the leaves and doesn't produce a strong odor. Don't pick that plant! (Schofield 1999:53, Kari 1977:99-100)

Indian Potato which is also known as Wild Carrot grows about two feet tall. The plant is branched, sprawling, and grows from a horizontal root. The leaves are pinnately divided, the flower stalks are long and have light pink to purple flowers that look like they flow down one side of the stem.



Ch'ita', toził^g

Soup

We eat the roots for food. When we dig up the roots, we use a sharp pointed stick or our hands because a shovel will cut the roots. The best time to dig the roots is during the spring after the ground thaws or after the first frost when they are juicy and soft.

However, we have to know what we are doing because this plant looks a lot like bear's Indian potato or Wild Sweet pea which is very poisonous for people. It is easier for us to recognize the plant during the summer. However, this is when the roots taste the worst and are tough and dried out.

We eat Indian potato raw, boil it, bake it or fry it. It can be boiled with berries and mixed with grease. It can be used in nemaje. The roots are best stored below ground or in grease so they don't dry out.

In the old days we dug and stored lots of the roots. Sometimes in the early spring we would run out of food and have to dig for these roots to keep from starving. They would have to clear the snow and burn a fire over the area all day to thaw the ground, and then they dug the potatoes. (Kari 1977:103-105)

We also use wormwood, stinging nettle, and yarrow for various medicines. It is important to work with an Elder or an older person when gathering and preparing these plants for use.

Notes- for “The Story of the Upper Kuskokwim People and Gathering”:

1. The story was adapted from the references that were listed after each section in the story. The full references are found in the Gathering Bibliography on page 137.
2. Upper Kuskokwim translations for this section were provided by Ray Collins and Betty Petruska in the Upper Kuskokwim Athabascan Junior Dictionary. The reference for the dictionary and the page numbers for the translations that were taken from the dictionary are provided below:

Dictionary Reference- Collins, Ray, and Betty Petruska. 1979. *Dinak’i (Our words)*. Upper Kuskokwim Athabascan Junior Dictionary. Anchorage. NBMDC.

Page numbers- for the translations taken out of the dictionary:

- a. She’s picking berries, page 7.
- b. She gave me some cranberries, page 21.
- c. He went for spruce boughs for the tent floor, page 97.
- d. Birch bark canoe, page 8.
- e. Go to get moss for the house, page 65.
- f. He’s hauling firewood, page 33.
- g. Soup, page 95.

