A Celebration Of People And Plants

Prairie Plants and Their Uses

Bob Henrickson, Nebraska Statewide Arboretum, Inc
In 1914 Dr. Melvin Gilmore interviewed elder Native Americans that had lived with the plants and gathered them.

In the days before food was distributed by Indian agents on the reservations and they still knew the old names, uses and symbolism.
• Uses of Plants by the Indians of the Missouri River Region- by Melvin Gilmore

• Medicinal Plants of the Prairie- An Ethnobotanical Guide- by Kelly Kindscher

• Wild Seasons: Gathering and Cooking Wild Plants of the Plains- by Kay Young
• Dr. Gilmore was one of the first Americans to import the ecological approach to botany.

• The view that plants should be studied in their relationships with other living things as a community.

• The elders shared information so that future generations of their own people as well as the white people may know and understand their manner of life.
Quotes from Melvin Gilmore in 1914

• We shall make the best and most economical use of all our land when our population shall have become adjusted in habit to the natural conditions

• The country can not be wholly made over and adjusted to a people of foreign habits and tastes.

• There are large tracts of land in America whose bounty is wasted because the plants which can be grown on them are not acceptable to our people
Prairie Plants & Their Uses

- Medicine or healing
- Ceremony; ritual; custom; song; story
- Culinary
- Many plants served as a mark or sign in the floral calendar.
• Used by little boys in play to make arrows for their toy bows
• Dr. Weaver found over 200 individual plants per square yard in a tallgrass prairie near Lincoln! Despite intense competition, prairie plants all seem to get along.

• Weaver found over 90% of the foliage in some prairies to be big bluestem; when mowed back to the ground, the clumps occupied only 14% of the soil surface.
Dr. John Weaver, the famous prairie ecologist from UNL, found over 90% of the foliage in some prairies to be big bluestem; when mowed back to the ground, the clumps occupied only 14% of the soil surface.
young men gathered the green blades and braided them into garlands, which they wore round the neck for their pleasant odor.

All the tribes hold this plant in very high esteem for medicinal use, and by the Pawnee especially for ritualistic religious
Sweet Grass, *Hierchloe odorata*

It was used for perfume and was burned as an incense in any ceremony or ritual to induce the presence of good influences or benevolent powers,
Sweetgrass is the sacred hair of our Mother Earth. Native people pick it and braid it in 3 strands representing love, kindness, and honesty.
Silver King Artemisia, *Artemisia ludoviciana*

- Lakota name “gray herb”; tea for stomach ailments; leaves burned as incense to drive away bad spirits. Sun dance.
Fringed Sage, *Artemesia frigida*

“Brooms for sweeping the lodge floor was made by binding together a bundle of the tops. The plant has a agreeable, wholesome odor.”
Pasque Flower, *Pulsatilla patens*

often called “twin flower” or “old man of the prairie” because flowers usually appear in pairs and the seed heads resemble the gray hair of an elder person.
The Lakota believe each species has its own particular song, an expression of its life or soul.
Ground Plum, *Astragalus crassicarpos*

the little pea-like fruits were used as a seasonal indicator for corn planting schedule
Fringed Puccoon, *Lithospermum incisum* "used as a remedy for colds; dried tops burned as incense."
Hoary Puccoon, *Lithospermum canescens*
• red dye from roots and used to color gum from compass plant; powder from roots to treat gunshot wounds.
‘Gumbo Lily, Oenothera caespitosa’ has four wide, heart-shaped petals, like an open parachute landing upside down.” – Claude Barr
Bitterweed, *Hymenoxys scaposa*
Soapweed, *Yucca glauca*
• root soaked in water to make sudsy soap. Bound with sinew to make fire drill. Fire source in treeless prairie.

• Leave fibers used as thread and tip as needle; used to help extract thorns
“the most arresting color on the Plains from early May to July…its brilliancy is set off by the gray-green, rough-hairy leaves. Strong ground-gaining roots, to be well considered when placing in the garden.” – Claude Barr
Slender Wild Parsley, *Musineon tenuifolium*
• All parts are edible, leaves, flowers, stalks & roots.

• When steamed the stalks compare to asparagus. Young leaves & flowers used in salads

• The Lakota made a blue paint from the flowers that they used to decorate their clothing, hence the name Indian Paint
Prairie Spiderwort, Tradescantia ohioensis
• Local names include “snotweed” and “cow-slobbers”

• A poultice made by crushing the leaves of the plants was used as a treatment for insect bites and stings.

• Mucilaginous juice resemble spider’s silken strands.
called “sour herb”; Pawnee say the buffalo were very fond of this plant; children ate leaves and flowers.
Meadow Anemone, Anemone canadensis
• The root is one of the most highly esteemed medicines. eye wash.

• The right to use this plant belonged to the medicine men.

• Pulverized root for wounds taken internally and applied externally; “eye wash medicine”
Prairie Alumroot, Heuchera richardsonii
• Poultice of powdered roots applied to sores.

• Decoction of root or root chewed for diarrhea.

• Infusion of root used to wash sore eyes

• Used pounded dried roots to help close wounds that were difficult to heal. Also soar throats.

• The chemical “alum” is an astringent and antibacterial
Dwarf Blue Indigo, *Baptisia minor*
“Used by small boys as a rattle when they play at having a dance.”
“plump columns of wide trumpets, more intensely brilliant than any sky, above long and narrow, channeled, blue-green leaves.” –Claude Barr
Shell-leaf Penstemon, *Penstemon grandiflorus*
• called “butterfly flower”; root boiled used for pains in the chest or stomachache;

• tea from leaves for fever.
Showy Penstemon, *Penstemon cobaea*
Summer Bloomers

Pale Purple Coneflower, *Echinacea pallida*

Narrowleaf Coneflower, *Echinacea angustifolia*
- root is pungent, used as a cure for snake bites; blood purifier; tooth aches; tonic; antiseptic; intestinal worms

- Echinacea seems to have been used as a remedy for more treatments than any other plant.
Leadplant, Amorpha canescens
• Called “buffalo bellow plant”

• Blooms when buffalo are in rut

• Powdered leaves blown into wounds to promote scab formation

• Powdered dried leaves mixed with buffalo fat for pipe tobacco
• Makes a delicious “prairie tea”

• One Tbs. dried leaves per cup of water; bring to boil and simmer for at least 4 minutes.
The leaves were used by all the tribes to make a drink like tea. The taste is something like that of the Asiatic tea and is much better than that of the South American yerba mate.
Hoary Vervain, Verbena stricta
• leaves boiled to make a tea for stomachache or for a beverage tea; root used as a remedy for fits and to clear up cloudy urine.

• “one of the best palliatives for the onset of a virus cold”
Prickly Poppy, Argemone polyanthemos
• called “thistle used to dye arrows yellow.”

• sap used to treat eye sores.

• juice reported to have sedative properties.
• The hollow stems were used to make toy flutes and pop guns.
• The fruits on approaching maturity are broken off and stored away for their pleasant odor.
• They are scattered and rubbed over clothing; a slight evanescent fragrance.
Butterfly Milkweed, *Asclepias tuberosa*
• called “pleurisy root” by settlers or “raw medicine” by native tribes and was used for bronchial trouble

• The root was eaten raw; also chewed and put into wounds; pulverized when dry and blown into wounds.
Common Milkweed, *Asclepias syriaca*

- This plant was used for food at three stages of its growth!
• Young sprouts in early spring are like asparagus sprouts.

• The clusters of flower buds and fragrant flowers dipped in fritter batter and fried are delicious.

• Boiling young fruits while firm and green.

• The Omaha named cabbage “white man’s wahtha,” when the Omaha first saw cabbage and noted its use boiled, as they boiled milkweed
Cat-tail, *Typha latifolia*
• Used to make dressings for burns and scalds

• On infants to prevent chafing, as we use talcum powder.

• As a filling for pillows and padding for cradle boards and in quilting baby wrappings.

• A great quantity of down was collected in which to lay a newborn infant.
In early summer harvest the tender lower shoots by pulling on the tops. The tasty white stems loosen from the base. They are fine food eaten raw, boiled, or steamed. Eaten raw they taste like cucumber and when cooked more like corn.

The green “male” floral spikes resemble corn and were boiled or roasted—like corn on the cob. The appearance of this spike coincided with the maturing of the corn.

Copious amounts of pollen will fall from the flower spike by mid summer. It can be shaken into a paper bag and used as a thickener in soups or mixed with flour for baking golden pancakes or muffins.
“Cattail Corn”
“Cattail Pollen”
• Purple Poppy Mallow, Callirhoe involucrata
Called “smoke treatment medicine” by the Teton Dakota

Dried root fired, the smoke was inhaled for cold in the head; the aching parts bathed in it.

The large tapering root is edible and was eaten raw, boiled or roasted; the leaves were used as a thickener in soups and stews.
Purple Prairie Clover, *Dalea purpuraea*
• The leaves were used for tea. The root was chewed for its pleasant taste.
• Tough elastic stems bound to make brooms for sweeping lodge…’broom weed’
• Root, pulverized, was put into hot water as a preventative… ‘sweet medicine’
Upright Prairie Coneflower, *Ratibida columnifera*
• called “little sunflower” or “used to drink milk with”; tea from leaves used for stomachache and tea from flowers to relieve headache.

• beverage tea from the leaves; boiled leaves and stems to relieve poison ivy.
Prairie Bushclover, *Lespedeza capitata*

- “called “male buffalo bellow plant” and “rabbit foot.” Stems were used as a “moxa” as they did with leadplant.
- Material that is burned on the skin for its counterirritant effect
Fall Bloomers

Dotted Gayfeather, *Liatris punctata*
• Lakota name “lumps in carcass” referring to similarity of hardened roots to deer excrement. Pawnee name is “round medicine”.

• Pulverized root eaten to improve appetite, powdered plant made into a tea for heart pains.
Yellowdicks, *Helenium amarum*
“children gathered chewing gum from the upper parts of the stem, where the gum exudes, forming large lumps.”

Compass Plant, *Silphium laciniatum*
“Ponca say where this plant abounds lightning is very prevalent, so they will never make camp in such a place.”
Wild Bergamot, *Monarda fistulosa*

- blossoms used as an eye wash and as a remedy for fevers and colds; treating respiratory problems.
• Var menthifolia called “Wahpe washtemna (Dakota), “fragrant leaves”.
• “This form is one of the plants connected with the Sun Dance, according to J. Owen Dorsey.”
• “The Pawnee recognized four forms, from “ill smelling” to “shot may times still fighting.”
Joe-Pye Plant, *Eupatorium purpureum*

• This was named for the Indian medicine man who was famous throughout New England for using it to cure typhus.
Plains Prickly-Pear Cactus, *Opuntia polyacantha*
• The fruits were eaten fresh after the bristles had been removed, or they were stewed.

• The mucilaginous juice of the stem was utilized as a sizing to fix the color painted on hides.

• The mucilaginous juice was rubbed on moccasins as a natural sizing agent.
How’s It Growing?

Wednesdays 11:00am - Noon

Hosted by
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“Dedicated to answering your growing questions”
…enriching lives through the beauty and wonder of plants.

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