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Edible Plants of the Prairie

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Psoralea esculenta
Prairie Turnip

Edible Plants of the Prairie

Sitting here, in this spot, in the prairie, looking across this beautiful Flint Hills landscape, one sees a diversity of plants, grasses, and wildflowers, many of which were profoundly important as food and medicines for the people who lived here before.

The Great Plains has more than 3,000 plant species, and more than 120 species were used

by Native Americans for food, seasonings, tea, health, and nutrition. Most of the knowledge of their uses for food and medicine was passed on by word of mouth, and the knowledge of plant lore has dropped dramatically, but anthropologists and ethnobotanists have recorded much information on the topic. Many Native American uses of prairie plants continue today on Indian reservations. The Flint



Hills is a small part of the original prairie region, but still very rich in useful plants. To use wild plants, one needs to learn them. A few plants around us today have poisonous parts, including horse nettle leaves and fruits, and death camas bulbs, so learn your plants before putting anything in your mouth! What follows is a discussion of some edible plants you can find today, right here in the Flint Hills.

PRAIRIE TURNIP,

Psoralea esculenta

The most important native food plant of the region, still found in well-managed Flint Hills pastures, was the prairie turnip. This egg-sized, turnip-shaped, starchy, bean family root was an important food. With the flavor of mild, raw peanuts, it could be eaten as a staple or added to bison stew. It could be dried, stored, and traded. The range of the prairie turnip is almost identical to the entire prairie region from Texas to the Canadian Plains and from the short grass prairie at the edge of the Rocky Mountains, east to lush tallgrass prairies in Missouri and Wisconsin. It was so important that the Omaha tribe determined the route of its summer buffalo hunt according to the availability of prairie turnips. Procuring wild food was primarily women's work. Prairie turnip roots were gathered communally in July. The roots were abundant, and in some areas they were semi-managed. Some women dried and powdered

the roots for winter use, while others peeled, cut, and set their slices in the sun, or braided whole roots together as long strings. These braids can still be purchased on Indian reservations in the Dakotas. The roots can be boiled when still fresh, or when dried and re-hydrated, be added to stews of venison, bison, or tasty Flint Hills beef. A bland flour could be pounded out from the dried roots to be used as a base for berry puddings. The prairie turnip has decreased in abundance from farming and heavy grazing. It is an indicator plant – finding a prairie turnip signals that the land is a well-managed native prairie.

GROUNDNUT, *Apios americana*

A prolific vine with clusters of violet-brown bean blossoms, the groundnut plant trails across the ground and over bushes in moist ravines, hiding several egg-sized tubers just below the soil surface. Eaten raw, boiled, roasted or fried, groundnuts are favorably compared to new potatoes in flavor. When mixed



with maple sugar, baked groundnuts have the flavor of candied yams. They have been a staple among at least a dozen Native American tribes. They were so abundant along prairies in the river bottoms that a town was named after them: Topeka means “a good place for groundnuts.” Botanist Asa Gray once argued that if Europe had been colonized by North Americans rather than the other way around, American groundnuts would have been taken along and fully domesticated, just as Europeans later did with Jerusalem artichokes.

WILD ONION, *Allium canadense*

Wild onion is a perennial bulb-forming species whose roots and green leaves have a characteristic garlic or onion smell. These plants have been used extensively wherever they are found. In the Flint Hills, large populations of plants are occasionally found on thin-soiled hilltops



or side-slopes of hills. They apparently were harvested and baked in pit ovens more than 1000 years ago. Native Americans have used onions in soups and stews with buffalo meat. They have also been eaten raw, and the bulbs keep for a long time.



ANNUAL SUNFLOWER,
Helianthus annuus

This annual is the state flower of Kansas. It likes weedy areas of fields and roadsides, but also can be found in almost any prairie. It makes small, tasty sunflower seeds, which were relished by both humans and birds. It is one of the

few native species that was turned into a crop plant. The sunflowers grown today for seeds, oil, and ornamental use are selections of our native annual weed.

JERUSALEM ARTICHOKE,
Helianthus tuberosus

This is actually a perennial sunflower, with multiple edible tubers sometimes as large as spring potatoes. The Jerusalem artichoke is both gathered from the wild and cultivated as a domesticated species. In the Flint Hills, it grows on light, nutrient-rich soils in places periodically disturbed by floods or other factors. It likes slightly more moist sites and is often found along the edge of a woods or a county road. Rodents sometimes gather and cache the tubers for later use, which, according to Meriwether Lewis, allowed Native people of the Upper Missouri to seek out, rob, and eat from these caches. Nearly all plains and prairie peoples have savored them for centuries, although their means of preparing the tubers varied considerably. The



tubers can be eaten raw, dried and re-hydrated, steamed, sautéed, boiled, fried, or pickled. They have a peculiarly pleasant, earthy taste, and a crunchy but watery texture. The tubers can be sustainably harvested without killing the plant in late autumn, after the first frosts, when the leaves have died back and the flower heads have released their seeds. One does not want to eat too many, as the Omaha name testifies to the lack of digestibility. They call them “the food for homeless boys,” referring to the gas passed by someone who eats too many of them.

LAMBSQUARTERS,
Chenopodium berlandieri

These plants are found in disturbed ground of prairies and are even more common on the edges of fields. This leafy, weedy plant is a very important plant as a source of greens.

Lambsquarters greens, cooked and with salt and butter, are one of the tastiest spring greens in the region. They are found from April through June. They have a very long history



of use by Native Americans as greens. And the dried seeds were collected, ground, and used as meal.



MILKWEED, *Asclepias syriaca*

The common milkweed is found in prairies, waste ground, and agricultural fields. It is recognized for its white, milky sap. Uncooked, it is poisonous, but when boiled it loses both its milk and poisonous properties. The Omaha, Ponca, Pawnee Winnebago, Potawatomi, and Kanza used it for its tasty cooked young leaves, flowers, or young pods, especially in stews. It is still

gathered by the Potawatomi on their lands north of Topeka to use in soups.

NEW JERSEY TEA,
Ceanothus americanus

New Jersey tea is a short, woody shrub and has stiff green leaves and clusters of pretty white flowers which are found blooming on rocky slopes in the Flint Hills in May. These leaves, which can be harvested in the spring or summer and dried, can then be boiled



to make a very tasty tea. It has the flavor of black tea but has no caffeine.

WILD PLUM, *Prunus americana*

Fleshy, oval fruits are produced on multi-branched shrubs, which can be pruned into small trees. The plums can be yellow, fire-engine red, or purple, and vary in size and flavor from patch to patch. They occur in thickets on the



edges of prairies, in pastures, fields, and along streams. The smell of plum flowers in the spring is perfume and the taste

in the late summer is tart and delicious. Many native tribes and immigrants have eaten them fresh, and some have dried them or made them into jams. The Lakota had a "red plum moon" in August that was a time for feasting.

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