

FACT SHEET: Edible Wild Plants Gathered by the Osage



OSAGE WOMEN - EXPERT BOTANISTS

The **Osage women** knew it was important to balance plant foods with the animal foods the men hunted. Some of these plant foods the women grew as crops, but many they gathered in the wild.

Osage women were expert botanists. They knew **how to identify** specific edible plants in the wild, **what areas** to look for them in, and know **how to prepare and sometimes store** them. They also knew **when to harvest** the wild plants, gathering them according to the seasons they were ready.

For example, in spring, they collected leaves from young succulent plants, which helped supplement the dried food rations stored over winter. In summer, they collected edible fruits such as grapes, berries and nuts. In fall, they gathered acorns and fruits, and dug root plants.

This vast botanical knowledge, acquired over centuries of living off the land, was taught to the children and passed from generation to generation. Here is some of what we know about the plants they used:

NOTE: Do NOT eat any of the following without the identification and approval of an expert botanist!

- **THIS NOT A GUIDE FOR GATHERING AND EATING** - It is for cultural background information purposes only.
- The early Osage women were expert botanists - we are not! Many of the following are difficult to identify, may cause allergic reactions, and require special preparation to avoid toxicity.

Following are plants cited in "Osage Foods" booklet. In addition to special pages in booklet, see following links for more detailed info:

- [Paw paws](#) *Asimina triloba*
- [Prickly Pear Cactus](#) - *Opuntia humifusa* [more info](#)
- [Wild Onions](#) - *Allium canadense* [more info](#)
- Berries: [Wild Strawberries](#) - *Fragaria virginiana* [more info](#); [Blackberries](#) *Rubus L.*; [Red Raspberry](#) *Rubus idaeus*; [Black Raspberry](#) *Rubus occidentalis*; [Dewberry](#) *Rubus flagellaris*
- [Buffalo Gourd](#) *Cucurbita foetidissima*
- [Paw Paw](#) *Asimina triloba*
- [Persimmons](#) *Diospyros virginiana*
- [Yonkapis](#) *Nelumbo lutea* - see also special article [North American Lotus \(Nelumbo lutea Willd.\)](#); [Sacred food of the Osage People](#)

Wild Nuts cited as eaten by the Osage: All nuts are a good energy source - high in calories and protein.

- Acorns (oak trees): [Red Oak](#) *Quercus rubra L.*, [White Oak](#) *Quercus alba*, [Blackjack Oak](#)
- [Black Walnuts](#) - *Juglans nigra L.*
- [Pecans](#) - *Carya illinoensis*
- [Hazel nut](#) - *Corylus Americana* Hazelnuts are very tasty and the wild ones are especially flavorful.
- Hickory - *Carya spp.* esp. thick-shelled (more in early in Missouri sites)

More Edible wild plants cited as used by the Osage:

1. [Gayfeather](#) *Liatis punctata* During the month of August, the Osage harvested the roots of gayfeather. These would be stored in caches for use during the winter and probably became sweeter with age, as their stored starch changed to sugar. Kindscher 144, Mathews 443, 478

2. [Groundnut or Indian Potato](#) *Apios americana* Brilliant scarlet flowers. Were an important food source; very drought resistant. The Osage gathered them in late summer and fall and stored them in caches for winter use. Kindscher 49, Mathews 443, 449. "Topeka" in Osage means place where we dug potatoes. (Burns 212)
3. [Netleaf Hackberry](#) *Celtis reticulata* Torr. Shrub-size hackberry with fleshy round fruits, which are edible as with all hackberry species. Were used by the Osage in hackberry cakes, which were stored in caches over the winter. Kindscher 242, Mathews 443. Also *Celtis occidentalis*, Hunter & Pearsall, 821.
4. [Prairie Turnip](#) - *Psoralea esculenta* a/k/a Large Indian Breadroot. [More info](#) The prairie turnip was probably the most important wild food gathered by Indians who lived on the prairies. Would peel roots and dry for storage. Kindscher 185.
5. [Purple Poppy Mallow](#) *Callirhoe involucrate* The Osage gathered them in late summer and fall and stored them in caches for winter use. Kindscher 49, Mathews 443, 449.
6. [Wild Grape](#) - *Vitis cineria* [More info](#) Grow on woody vines up to 45 feet long. Eaten fresh or dried. Hunter & Pearsall 824.
7. [Wild Rose](#) *Rosa arkansana* [More info](#) High in Vitamin C. Rose hips (fruits) were gathered by women and children as an emergency food for Osage. Can be used during droughts since they are one of the deepest-rooted prairie plants (up to 21 feet). Kindscher 201, Mathews 489.
8. [Violet Wood Sorrel](#) *Oxalis violacea* [More info](#) Osage ate the leaves which have a sour, salty flavor. High in Vitamin A. Kindscher 160, Mathews 454.
9. [Wild Plum](#) *Prunus Americana* - Hunter & Pearsall. Wild plum fruit was extensively consumed by Indians of the prairies, either fresh or made into a sauce, or pitted and dried. Kindscher 171. Hunter & Pearsall, 822.

MEDICINAL PLANTS

For information on **MEDICINAL PLANTS** used by the Osage, see the following cited in Kindscher, Kelly. *Medicinal Wild Plants of the Prairie: an Ethnobotanical Guide*. Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 1992.

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| 1. Buffalo Gourd 77 | 5. Purple Poppy Mallow | 7. Smooth Sumac 185 |
| 2. Culver's Root 216 | 230 | 8. Wild Indigo 70 |
| 3. Dewberry 276 | 6. Seneca Snakeroot | 9. Willow 196 |
| 4. Goat's Rue 284 | 166 | 10. Yarrow 18 |

Sources:

- Burns, Louis F. *History of the Osage People*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2004.
- Hunter, Andrea and Deborah M. Pearsall, "Analysis of Botanical Remains from Osage and Missouri Sites."
- Kindscher, Kelly. *Edible Wild Plants of the Prairie: an Ethnobotanical Guide*. Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 1987.
- Matthews, J. Joseph. *Children of the Middle Waters*. Norman: Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 1961.
- USDA Plants Database https://plants.usda.gov/about_plants.html
- Kansas Wildflowers and Grasses <http://kswildflower.org/index.php>
- For more info on native plants, see Oklahoma Native Plant Society, <http://www.oknativeplants.org/>
- Compiled 2018.

