

## Plant Uses of the Coast Miwok

by Charles Kennard

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*Coyote-man . . . gathered a lot of sticks of different kinds - some hard, as oak, madrone, and manzanita; some soft and hollow, as the sage herb - and made a big pile of them and said that by and by they would turn into people. Then he went all over the country and wherever he wanted a village he laid down two sticks, and gave the place a name - and the name he gave it then has always been its name and is its name to this day. Then he went away. In a short time the sticks turned into people, and all the rancherias were started with the first real people. In places where he had put sticks of hardwood the people were strong and well and warm-blooded and could stand cold weather; but in places where he put poor wood the people were weak and sickly and could not stand cold weather. (Coast Miwok story recorded by C.H. Merriam)*

Plants are people's ancestors, their brothers and sisters sharing the earth, in the Coast Miwok world view. It is a mutually beneficial relationship, in which, if plants are treated with the respect and restraint that is relatives' due, the food-gatherer or basket-weaver will be rewarded with bountiful harvests. Weavers today say that living plants need to be used in order to flourish, but at the same time the gatherer must leave a prayer and an offering in exchange, and honor taboos regarding when and how to gather.

These attitudes, together with practices such as pruning, weeding, digging and fire-setting, regulated and increased the harvest of what we tend to keep at arm's length with the term 'natural resources.' The relationship between people and landscape was intimate, spiritual and transforming. Pre-European contact Marin was no virgin wilderness, as park managers discover through their efforts to maintain open grasslands and their floral diversity. Here, where lightning is rare, frequent intentional burns are necessary to prevent brush from taking over meadows and hillsides at the expense of grasslands, and keep forest undergrowth from accumulating to dangerous levels.

Virtually every common native plant has a traditional Indian use as food or medicine, in ceremonies, or for making houses, clothing, boats, baskets, tools or twine. There was a gathering season for each, and as much harvest as possible was preserved for future use, protected in a granary or stored in a dry place not too far from the warm hearth. Basketry materials required storage and seasoning to shrink fully before use.

In February, the first spring greens were greeted with delight: miner's lettuce with its spade-shaped first leaves, clovers, mule-ears and fiddleneck. Gray willow, used in basketry, budded in March, when Coast Miwok families traveled up to the Healdsburg area to cut and peel longer withes than those found at Nicasio. (The Ross Valley's last known



*Baskets and twine made from local plants by Charles Kennard*

gray willow died in 1998.) In late April, the first wood strawberries bear fruit, heralding the Strawberry Festival - revived at Kule Loklo, near Olema, in 1987 - when dancers carry the delicate fruit into the roundhouse hung with wreaths of wildflowers. Spring was the time for digging 'Indian potatoes,' the bulbs and corms of grassland flowers in the lily family. Among them were Ithuriel's spear, blue dick, onions, mariposa lilies, and the blue-flowered camas found near the radio station on the Point Reyes peninsula. Soap root bulbs were dug before the flowers emerged, and were transformed into little brushes, glue, and food, as well as soap.

As spring turned into summer, the berry and seed season began: manzanita berries and California blackberries ripened, as did the fruit of the rare leatherwood shrub found near Nicasio and at Bodega; the seeds of checkerbloom, farewell-to-spring, California buttercup, mule-ears and goldfields were parched with hot coals and ground into flour for *pinole*. In the summer, tules were cut to dry for thatching and for double-ended tule boats, and hazel sticks were gathered for cradles and strong burden baskets. It was also harvest time for huckleberries, blue elderberries, and the late-blooming tarweeds.

Fall was a busy time, when a village gathered enough acorns to allow for 400 pounds or more for each family. The Ross Valley still has an abundance of live oaks and valley oaks, although few residents are allowing the trees to regenerate themselves for the future. The October Acorn Festival is a time of celebration and thanksgiving at Kule Loklo. California-laurel fruits were also gathered, the flesh to be eaten raw, the nut to be stored and baked. Fall was the time for collecting cordage material from perennial herbs before rain rotted their dying stems; the Coast Miwok most likely made use of California hemp growing eight feet tall along San Anselmo Creek, dogbane found near Fairfax, and the ground iris, whose leaf contains two strong fibers. Coast Miwok are known to have used split roots of the yellow bush lupine, which grows in sandy soil behind the dunes, and fiber from the riparian shrub, ninebark, for twine and rope. To gather the sedge rhizomes used in fine basketry, later generations of Coast Miwoks have gone to Sonoma County, but the prized basket sedge can be found in small patches in the Ross and San Geronimo valleys too.

In the rainy winter months, golden chanterelle mushrooms push up through the forest humus, and oyster mushrooms form pale staircases up the trunks of dead alders and oaks; these fungi and others were baked on hot rocks, perhaps alongside toyon berries. In the winter too, more hazel and willow were gathered, for making work-baskets and traps.

Coast Miwok today continue to celebrate the rhythms of the seasonal cycle, teaching the rest of us the beauty and generosity of this earth, especially of this corner of the earth where we live, Marin County.

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