

# Traditional Medicinal Plants

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- By Barb Scott

**When we see plants, we first try to identify them, then maybe touch or smell them. Admire the foliage or clip a flower for a vase.**

If it is a vegetable- or fruit-bearing plant, we may think about how to use the plant for food, but less commonly we think about using it for medicinal purposes. On August 17<sup>th</sup>, eight Sault Naturalists were treated to the medicinal point of view from First Nation member Denyse Johnson at the Hiawatha Highlands Conservation Area. Denyse belongs to the Bear Clan of the Ojibway, who are the medicine providers for their tribe. The Ojibway have a holistic approach to good health that incorporates traditional medicine for mental, emotional, spiritual, and physical well-being.



Denyse started us out by showing us the plants she had recently collected for her people back home near Sarnia – mint, sweet gale, yarrow, evening primrose, pearly everlasting, and blueberry leaves. Her grandparents taught her not only what plant will treat what ailment, but also to collect only those plants whose story she knew. Denyse can only hear and tell these stories in the winter after the first

snowfall when it is time to be still. Other traditions include not harvesting plants when it's raining, out of respect for them, as it is the plants' time to drink. Harvest time is between about 9 AM and 6 PM because the medicine is going through the plant at that time. There can be no money exchanged for the medicine. Children do not ingest medicine until they are seven years old, but are simply bathed in it or it is rubbed on their skin. A plant's leaf or flower



shape is a clue to what it is good for treating – for example, the round shape of the tansy flower means it is good for eye ailments. Salves were traditionally made with bear grease, but it's OK to now use vegetable fats such as

coconut oil, too. As for invasive exotic plants, the Ojibwe don't see them as "bad" or plants to be eradicated. The plants are here to provide medicine for what ails people and will go away when they are no longer needed.

Next we meandered away from the parking lot, identifying what caught our eye and stopping to discuss its traditional medicinal uses (see table at the end of this report). Plantain is a sign that the "Little People" are about, causing mischief. One time while camping Denyse crushed the flower stalk and

seed heads and spread them around her tent as protection from the tricksters.

We stopped at the creek to admire the slimy watershield, a bald eagle overhead, and the big leeches, and then proceeded to the bridge for a lunch break. Rob Routledge spotted some interesting aquatic plants and hopped down for a closer look, exploring further into deep water. He was rewarded for his efforts by finding the rare *Eleocharis robbinsii* (one 1935 record in Algoma) and *Schoenoplectus subterminalis* (no records for Algoma). They are two members of the *Cyperaceae* or sedge family that are obligate inhabitants of wetlands. Unfortunately, the leeches took advantage of the water overtopping his boots and tried to get their own lunch by fastening to Rob's feet.



After lunch we ambled back to the parking lot via the trail. Denyse talked about the uses of maple water (maple tree sap, now marketed as the “new coconut water”) and why you should stand under a birch or “tattoo” tree during a storm (lightning never strikes a birch tree). The paper birch bark is used to wrap foods to preserve them and to wrap bodies in preparation for burial. Before wrapping, bodies are first bathed in cedar leaf- infused water. Cedar baths are also the first bath for babies.

After listening to all that, we decided to get ice cream, which may not have been good for us physically, but it was definitely good for us mentally and emotionally. ☀

Val Walker provided the photos in this report. Renee Wysynski also took photos, which can be found here:

<https://flic.kr/s/aHsmGjD6e7>



I am very grateful to them both. They tell the story better than I can. Thanks, Val and Renee!

Plant common name	Plant part	Preparation*	Medicinal Use(s)
Apple	Fruit peel or leaves	*	Regulate blood sugar; digestion problems
Aster	Leaves	*	Kidney problems
Balsam Fir	Leaves	*	Expectorant
Balsam Fir	Pitch	As is	Toothache; muscle aches
Black spruce	Pitch	Salve	Muscle pain
Blueberry	Leaves	*	Blood cleanser
Blueberry	Roots	*	Burns
Burdock	Roots	*	Kidney problems; protection medicine
Cedar	Leaves	*	Internal cleanser
Cedar	Leaves	Tea	Relaxation, Lung problems; put in shoes f
Chaga mushroom	Mushroom	*	Cancer
Choke cherry	Leaves	*	Inflammation
Clover	Leaves	*	Mild expectorant -- good for young children and the elderly
Evening primrose	Leaves	*	Woman's medicine
Ferns	Leaves	As is	Wrap produce to keep it fresh and bug-free
Ferns	Leaves	*	Intestinal worms
Fringed bindweed	Leaves	Infusion	Eye wash
Goldenrod	Leaves	*	Cancer, tuberculosis
Goldthread	?	Infusion	Baby's teething pain
Ground pine	Leaves	Tea	Cold, flu
Heal-All	Leaves	Tea or poultice	Many uses
Horsetail	Leaves	?	Broken bones
Jewelweed	Sap	As is	Itchy skin
Joe-Pye Weed	Roots	*	Flu, tuberculosis
Maple	Sap	As is	Blood thinner
Mint	Leaves	Infusion	Skin problems
Mullein	Leaves	Infusion	Psoriasis
Partridgeberry	Leaves	*	Stomach or heart problems
Phragmites or giant reed	Roots	*	Diabetes
Pineapple Plant	Leaves	*	Lung problems
Pineapple Plant	Leaves	Salve made with fat	Lung problems
Plantain	Leaves	Tea or poultice	Itchy skin; pull venom out from wounds
Plantain	Flowers and stalk	*	Stomach or intestinal problems
Red osier dogwood	?	Infusion	Baby's teething pain
Red raspberry	Leaves	*	Cramping during "moon time"
Sasparilla	Roots	?	Blood pressure
Spirea	Leaves	*	Spine problems

St. John's Wort	Leaves	*	"Winter medicine" - depression
Sweet gale	Leaves	As is	Sleep on leaves to fend off nightmares
Sweet gale	Leaves	*	Sleep problems
Tamarack	Leaves	Salve	Warts, exzema, psoriasis
Tansy	Leaves	*	Pink eye or other eye problems
Willow	Bark	Tea or as is	Pain relief
Yarrow	Leaves	*	Woman's medicine, fevers
<p>*Unless noted differently, the preparation is a tea made from fresh or dried plant parts. An infusion is a tea but is applied externally only.</p> <p>? = missing information</p>			