

Digging Stick Technology

Digging sticks were one of the most important tools in many First Nations communities in the past. They use a simple yet elegant technology.

The digging stick was an essential part of a woman's toolkit for many First Nations who harvested large amounts of roots and bulbs.

Digging sticks are usually made from hardwood, such as Pacific yew, oceanspray, saskatoon berry and crabapple. Sometimes in the past they were made from antlers of caribou, elk or deer.

In the Stl'atl'imx language the word for oceanspray, a hardwood plant, translates to mean "digging stick plant."

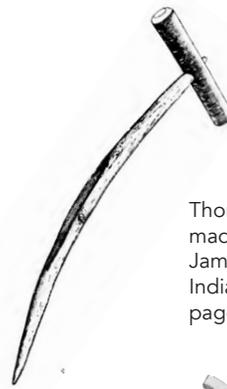
Many digging sticks, especially those used by interior First Nations, have a crossbar handle at the top. This could be antler, mountain goat horn or wood. Many sticks used on the coast had a rounded knob at the top.

Often wooden digging sticks were reversible. The handle had a hole drilled to accept one end. The sticks were sharpened at both ends. If the bottom tip became dull during digging, the stick could be pulled out of the handle and reversed so there was a new sharp tip ready to dig.

The tips were not only sharpened. They were also fire hardened in hot coals. This made them last much longer.

The shape of the stick was important, too. If the wood did not have the proper curve, it could be shaped by bending it through a steaming process.

To use the digging stick, it is first pushed down into the soil, then pulled back. It might take one good pull, or pushing and pulling a number of times, to lift up a good clump of roots or bulbs.



Thompson digging stick made of hardwood. Source: James Teit, *The Thompson Indians of British Columbia*, page 231.



Chilcotin digging stick made of caribou antler. 97 cm long. Source: James Teit, *The Shuswap*, page 513

Once the roots and bulbs have been exposed, the harvester can then pick those that are the best size for harvesting. The sod can then be put back in place, and the remaining plants can continue to grow. This ensures the plants are harvested sustainably.

Digging sticks were used for others purposes as well. They could be used for weeding areas where root plants were grown, excavating for house pits or pit ovens, and, on the coast, for digging clams.

Digging sticks were usually used by women. For a woman, they were very personal items. They were made specially for her, and matched her height and how she would use it.

The handles were often decorated with designs that had special meaning to her. When she died, her digging stick might be buried with her, or used to mark her grave.