

Traditional Knowledge about Plants

These are some pieces of scientific knowledge that First Peoples have known about plants since Time Immemorial. What other understandings can you add to the list?

Edible roots such as camas, balsamroot

Traditional knowledge:

Slow cooking makes the roots more digestible, more nutritious and sweeter.

In the past these roots were very important food items for many First Peoples. However, they contain inulin, a type of sugar that people can't digest. Slow cooking converts the complex sugars to the more digestible fructans and fructose.

While First Peoples don't use these chemical names, they have always understood the properties of the plant. To prepare the roots for eating, they traditionally cook them very slowly in a pit for a day or more to produce a sweet nutritious food.

Properties of different types of wood

Traditional knowledge:

Different species of trees produce wood with unique properties that can be used for different purposes..

Traditional understandings of what type of wood to use in a certain situation is an important part of Traditional Ecological Knowledge. This includes properties such as strength, durability and density. People know that western red cedar can be split cleanly along the grain, and that it can be bent and hold its shape by steaming. They know certain woods such as mountain alder are strong but flexible, so make good bows and snowshoes.

Strong fibres from plants

Traditional knowledge:

Some plants contain strong fibres that can be used for things like fabric, nets and rope.

Some plants such as stinging nettles contain fibres that can be processed for many uses. Using the fibres requires many types of knowledge, such as when to harvest it safely, how to process the plant to extract the fibres and how to spin a strong fibre.

Preserving berries by drying

Traditional knowledge:

Dehydration allows plants to be preserved for long periods of time.

All types of berries can be preserved by drying in the sun or wind. Traditionally berries were often cooked, mashed and spread on a mat to dry. The dried cakes had to be stored properly so they did not reabsorb water. When it was time to eat them, the berries could be eaten dried, or rehydrated.