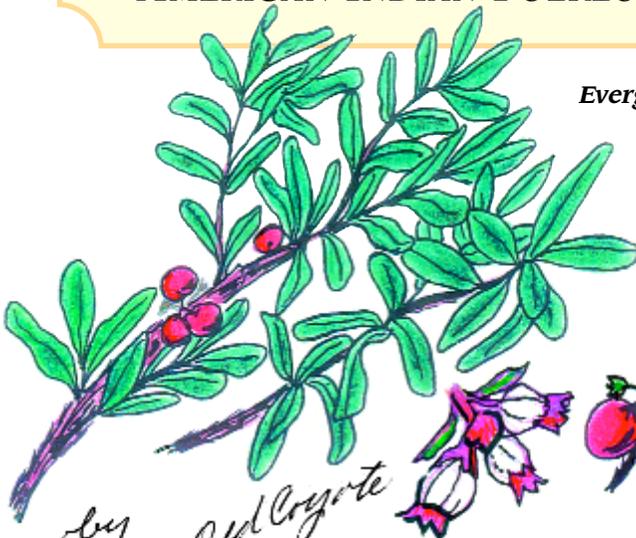


Bearberry ~ “Kinnikinnick”

AMERICAN INDIAN FOLKLORE • FOOD • MEDICINE • SMOKE



*Evergreen kinnikinnick—
thick, leathery leaves
that do not bow
to wintry wrath,
But keep their
sweetness to temper
the twang of
the tough
taste of early
tobaccos,
Making them
pleasant for
smoking.*

*Arctostaphylos uva-ursi (L.) Spreng.
Ericaceae • HEATH OR HEATHER FAMILY*

~ INDIAN NAMES ~

OMAHAS: *Kinnecanick*
("mixed or made" tobacco)

CROW: *oopiishiia*
("mixed with tobacco")

NORTHERN CHEYENNE:
NO' ANEONOTSE

CREE: *ah-chi-kah-si-pah-kwah*

~ ECOLOGY & FOLKLORE ~

Bearberry or kinnikinnick is a small, evergreen shrub with thick, leathery, green leaves that turn red in winter, with pink bell-like flowers that turn to red berries. It is found growing low along the ground, often around the bases of other evergreens, forming a carpet in the conifer forests of the Rocky Mountains from northern Canada to Mexico.

A most useful plant, people of all native tribes pulverized the leaves and berries and mixed them with other plants in a tobacco mixture for pleasant smoking. The berries were eaten at times and medicines were gotten from the leaves.

Bearberry is a prostrate, trailing shrub that grows in a circular mat up to 15 feet wide of dense leaves. Its growth is best on coarse, well-drained, gravelly or sandy soils in partially shaded areas. A mountain plant, bearberry is frequently found under

ponderosa pines at 3500–5000 feet and grows abundantly under douglas fir, engelmann spruce and lodgepole pine in the evergreen forests at 6000–9000 feet.

Because bearberry grows in dense carpets on underground roots that form an almost impen-



etrable mass, new seedlings do not grow in bearberry. This may conserve moisture and prevent erosion, but it discourages growth of other shrubs and trees.

Bearberry leaves are high in tannin so were used in tanning processes, even in Sweden. One thing about the berries is that

they remain on the plants all winter and can be used when no other fruits are available—a sort of emergency food. An interesting folklore fact was that the Flathead people used it to predict their winters. If there were only a few berries on the bushes, they predicted a mild winter. If there were many berries, they got ready for a long, cold winter.

~ FOOD & FORAGE ~

The Great Plains Indians knew the bearberry tasted better if picked when reddish and ripest, usually in August. At any time, however, this fruit is mealy, dry, and not very exciting. Too many eaten raw are difficult to digest.

The berries have been found to make good pies or cobblers and great jelly. They may be eaten in quantity when stewed into sauces, soups or pudding, as the Indian people prepared other fruits. They may be dried, ground into meal and cooked as such. The seeds of the berries may be



to make their infusion. They also wet the dried leaves and

rubbed them as a poultice on painful places on the back.

We now know its effectiveness for bladder and kidney ailments is due to arbutin found in the leaves. In urine, arbutin hydrolyzes to hydroquinone, a mild antiseptic and antiferment that when used as a uterine excitant strengthens and gives tone to urinary passages. Too much of a bearberry tea can irritate the mucosa of the stomach, so care should be taken.

The same tea is a mild vasoconstrictor to the endometrium

of the uterus, so it is useful for

painful and heavy menstruation. It should not be used during pregnancy because it may result in decreased circulation to the fetus. One-fourth cup of leaves boiled in a gallon of water for 20 minutes then cooled in a soothing sitz bath each day for 3–4 days after childbirth will reduce inflammation and prevent infections.

The Cheyenne also used bearberry berries as part of a medicine for colds and coughs. They used the crushed leaves as a tea, powder or poultice to treat sores and skin abrasions, irritations, rashes, and hives. Highly

removed and the berries and ground into flour. A good beverage can be made with the berries (see recipes, next page). Or just boiling them with seasoning and eating the broth has been done.

Bearberry is not much relished by domestic animals, but is a source of food for the wild animals. While deer and elk will browse the foliage some, other animals such as bears, grouse and wild turkeys will eat the berries when they are ripe in autumn.

~ MEDICINAL USES ~

The Plains Indians and early pioneers knew the value of bearberry for its healing qualities, mostly in the leaves, which were collected in autumn usually after the night's dew was evaporated on a sunny day. They were dried carefully in a well ventilated place, preferably outside in the shade.

Most tribes made an infusion of the leaves that was useful as a mild astringent and a diuretic for increasing urinary flow, for bladder and for back pains possibly due to kidney problems. The Cheyennes boiled the leaves, stems and berries



BEARBERRY LEAVES are evergreen and stand vertical, short-petioled. They are thick, shiny and leathery, darker green above and lighter underneath, spatulate-shaped (round on the outer edge, narrowing toward the base) and slightly hairy, about 1" long.

FLOWERS form clusters on short pedicels at the end of branches, short tiny stalks with united petals (corolla), white or pink, nodding. They are upside-down and bell-shaped, with scaly bracts. Outer flower parts (calyx) have 5 sepals, united at the base to form a reddish flower cup. Stamens are twice as many as lobes of corolla, usually 10. Anthers have a pair of bent-back awns; anther stalk is hairy and enlarged at base.

FRUITS are a druping berry with 4–10 nut-like seeds making up one solid stone. Short-stalked with scaly bracts; usually bright red (may be pink); 1/2" in diameter, smooth outside.

STEMS are slender and leafy and have several growing from a single root. They trail along the ground sending out new rooting shoots with erect twigs rising 4–6" high. Bark is dark-brown-to-reddish, becoming shreddy with age.

BEARBERRY CIDER

Gather enough berries for at least 1 quart. Scald the berries until the seeds are soft. Crush the mixture to pulp. Add 1 quart of water to 1 quart of the mixture. Let it settle for a period of time. Strain the mixture through a sieve to remove chunks which are usually made up of the clumped seeds. Let the liquid cool. Sweeten it with honey or sugar to suit taste. (The drink is acid and spicy, and can be drunk without sugars.) This drink behaves like apple cider and when allowed to set for a while become somewhat tangier.

BEARBERRY WINE

Some people have harvested the berries and turned them into wine. Use the recipes easily available for chokecherry wine.

FRIED BEARBERRY POPCORN!

The Plains Indians found a better way to make kinnikinnick berries more edible—by frying them. Pick enough berries for the number of people who will eat them, about a cup per person. Wash berries. Put some grease (fat, lard or vegetable oil) in a skillet. Put skillet on low heat on the stove or hold it over a campfire. Like popcorn, the berries will pop. They can be eaten right away. The frying process seems to enhance the sweetness of the berries, a little like fried apples. Cinnamon can be sprinkled on them.



BEARBERRY AS A CONDIMENT FOR PEMMICAN

Pemmican is a concentrated mixture of fat and meat protein used as a nutritious food, often seasoned with dried fruit. The word comes from the Cree, *pimihkân* (pemmican), itself derived from the word *pimî* (fat or grease). Pemmican was invented by the native peoples of North America and widely adopted as a high-energy, non-spoiling staple by Europeans involved in the fur trade.

Traditional preparation: Lean meat of large game such as buffalo, elk or deer was used (and often the livers). It was cut in thin slices and dried over a slow fire or in the sun until hard and brittle. Then it was pounded into very small pieces almost powder-like in consistency. (Today a meat grinder is used.) The meat was mixed with the melted fat in a 50/50% ratio.

Berries such as cranberries, blueberries, chokecherries or bearberries were picked, washed and dried, then pounded into powder, added to the meat/fat mixture, and rolled into balls or patties. Properly prepared and packed into rawhide pouches, pemmican could be stored for long periods of time. ■

astrigent, a strong tea of leaves was used as a wash for minor skin irritations.

Flathead people also crushed the leaves and applied the powder as a poultice on burns. The Crow crushed the leaves to use on canker sores in the mouth. And after cleansing of open sores, they put powdered leaves on them. They also used bearberry leaves to alleviate earaches by inhaling the smoke from the leaves through a pipe, then detaching the pipestem and using it to blow the warm smoke into the ear.

~ SMOKING KINNIKINNICK ~

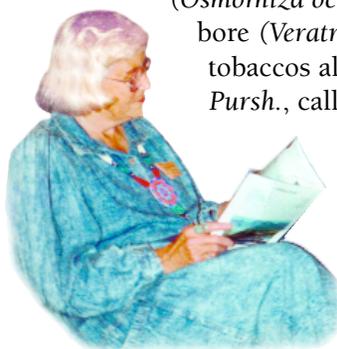
Before Indian people were introduced to cultivated tobacco, they made plant mixtures to smoke in their pipes. Cree people smoked bearberry leaves in their ceremonies. Northern Cheyennes dipped the leaves in their meat soups so the leaves were covered with grease, then dried the leaves and added them to a mixture of other plants and smoked it in their red-clay pipes made of pipestone.

Historically, the common name bearberry comes from the botanical/Latin name, *uva* (grape, hence berry) and *ursi* (bear's).

The label “kinnikinnick” is derived from *kinnecanich*, an

Omaha Indian word meaning “mixed or made” tobacco, since the leaves and sometimes the berries were smoked. Other plants in the smoking mixture included: the leaves of the sumac (*Rhus glabra* L.); the inner bark of dogwood called red willow by many Indian peoples (*Comus stolonifera* Michx.); an osha called Nez Perce root (*Lingusticum tenuifolium* Wats.); the inner bark of sweet cicely (*Osmorhiza occidentalis*); and the roots of false hellebore (*Veratrum viride*).

The native “mixed or made” tobaccos also included *Nicotiana quadrivalvis* Pursh., called wild tobacco and known to all Indians of the Great Plains. This was later replaced by the tobacco cultivated by the white man; however, they added their *kinnikinnick* mixture to the white man's tobacco when they thought it was too strong. ■



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