

# Naut'staat Alutiit'stun – PLANTS IN ALUTIIQ SOCIETY



Alutiiq/Sugpiaq people are best known for their use of marine resources—sea mammals and fish harvested with complex technologies like kayaks, harpoons, and nets. Around Kodiak, protein and fat are the central components of a traditional diet, and carbohydrates are eaten in smaller quantities. Yet plants have always been an essential source of food, raw material, medicine, and fuel. Alutiiq people still transform trees, shrubs, and herbs into everything from a shelter to a salad.



*Clyda Christensen with a handful of spring greens. Photograph by Priscilla Russell. KANA Collection.*

All members of Alutiiq communities participate in plant collecting, although men and women harvest different species.

Men procure plants for raw material—particularly the wood used to fuel fires, smoke fish, and build houses. Women collect plants primarily for food and medicine. Berry picking and vegetable harvesting are often conducted by women and their children. Children learn to respect plants. Overpicking, breaking branches, stepping on plants, or eating too much while you are collecting are considered poor etiquette. Moreover, families own certain collecting spots that they visit each year.

Although most people think of summer as the time to collect plants, Alutiiq people harvest plants throughout the year. In spring, as the landscape begins to green, people gather vegetables like goose tongue, beach lovage, or hemlock parsley from the beach. In the past, this was also the time when fresh, dry grass was cut to provide a clean cover for household floors and sleeping areas. By midsummer, berry picking supplements vegetable collecting. Berry harvesting continues into fall. People often wait to pick certain varieties until October or November, when the first frost sweetens the fruit. In fall and winter, storms

replenish the supply of driftwood collected for fuel. And in late winter, Alutiiq people gather kelp and seaweed to eat, particularly when other sources of fresh food are hard to obtain.

Plants are also an important source of raw materials. Plants once provided lumber, line, lashing material, weaving material, insulation, bedding, and even pigment for paint. Plants are also a central source of medicine. Healers use herbal remedies to treat everything from scrapes and swellings to more serious illnesses like fever, arthritis, and respiratory problems. Carefully collected herbs are used both fresh and dry. They are employed in washes and poultices, or steeped in hot water to create soothing teas. Others are applied in the sweat bath—where steam releases their rejuvenating powers. Healers often offer a small gift to the plants they collected, to help ensure the potency. A strand of thread, a match, or bit of tobacco may be left as a thank you and sign of respect. Gatherers also leave the root system of a plant intact whenever possible to help guarantee future harvests.



## TAKE A PLANT WALK

Download the free Alutiiq Plants app to your iOS or Android devices to learn more about Alutiiq plantlore. Or visit the Alutiiq Museum's online plant gallery at <https://alutiiqmuseum.org/learn/plant-gallery>.