



PLANTS IN ALUTIIQ SOCIETY

Alutiiq 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, and medicine. Alutiiqs 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 activities often conducted by women and their children. Children learn to respect plants. Over picking, 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, Alutiiqs harvest plants throughout the year. In spring, as the landscape begins to green, people gather vegetables like goose tongue, beach loveage, 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 mid summer, berry picking supplements vegetable collecting. Berry harvesting continues into fall. People often wait to pick certain varieties till 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.

Perhaps more important than their contribution to the diet, is their role as raw materials. Plants once provided lumber, thread and cordage, 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

Attention plant lovers: Two Kodiak parks display Alutiiq plantlore signs. Take a stroll through Fort Abercrombie State Park or through the City of Kodiak's Rotary Park to observe traditionally important plants in their natural habitat and learn more of their cultural uses. Groomed trails with illustrated signs and short written guides will lead you through spruce forest and wildflower meadows.



PLANTS AS FOOD

Plants remain an important subsistence food in Alutiiq communities. Although they are taken in smaller quantities than fish or sea mammals, Alutiiq families look forward to the first green vegetables of spring and to the sweet juicy berries that ripen with summer. Plants are also used as seasoning. Petrushki (Beach Loveage – Latin: *Ligusticum scoticum*) is a favorite addition to baked salmon. To extend the availability of plant foods, Alutiiqs once stored harvested plants in seal oil in seal stomach containers. They kept others in grass-lined pits or hung them from household rafters to dry. Today, families collect plants to eat fresh, to store in the freezer, and for jams and jellies that can be used year round. Here are two favorite Alutiiq plant recipes:

AKUTAQ

Eskimo Ice Cream, from Grace Harrod

- 2 or 3 Tbsp of oil
- ½ to 1 cup shortening (e.g., Crisco)
- 2 cups sugar
- 2 quarts to a gallon of berries (your choice!)
- ¼ cup lemon juice
- 1 cup or less of orange juice

Blend oil and shortening with an electric mixer. Add sugar (one cup at a time) and juice until fluffy – about 5 minutes or more. Add berries last using a spatula to combine with shortening mixture.



Salmonberries ripen in the sun.

PICKLED BULL KELP

- 4 cups rings or rectangles cut from stem of kelp
- ¾ cup white vinegar
- 2 1/2 cups sugar
- 1 Tbsp. mixed pickling spice
- 1 tsp. whole cloves

Remove outer skin of kelp with peeler and slice into rings or rectangles. Soak the kelp in fresh water for three days, changing the water several times a day to remove the salt. Enclose the spices in a cheesecloth bag and place in simmering vinegar and sugar for five minutes. Remove spices and pour the hot syrup over the kelp. Let stand overnight. Next day, drain off syrup, heat to boiling, and pour over kelp again; let stand overnight. On the following day remove syrup and heat to boiling. Place kelp slices in hot jars, cover with boiling syrup and seal, or store the pickles in a covered crock.

ATTENTION: *Information on plant foods is provided for educational purposes. The Alutiiq Museum does not recommend experimentation with wild plants. Any experimentation is done at your own risk.*