

*Handout on Edible Plants  
of the Kenai Peninsula*



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# Contents

Contents	iii
1 Introduction	I
Purpose and scope	I
Resources	I
Motivations for partaking of wild plants	2
Regarding edibility	2
Cautions	3
Phenology	4
How to find the plants you are after	4
Rules and regulations	5
Ethics	5
2 The Plants	7
Pteridiophyta	7
Athyriaceae	7
Dryopteridaceae	7
Equisetaceae	8
Onocleaceae	8
Magnoliophyta	8
Adoxaceae	8
Amaranthaceae	8
Amaryllidaceae	9
Apiaceae	9
Araceae	10
Araliaceae	10
Asteraceae	10
Betulaceae	11
Boraginaceae	11
Brassicaceae	11
Caryophyllaceae	12

Crassulaceae . . . . .	12
Cyperaceae . . . . .	12
Ericaceae . . . . .	13
Fabaceae . . . . .	13
Geraniaceae . . . . .	14
Juncaginaceae . . . . .	14
Liliaceae . . . . .	14
Melanthiaceae . . . . .	15
Nymphaeaceae . . . . .	15
Onagraceae . . . . .	15
Phrymaceae . . . . .	16
Plantaginaceae . . . . .	16
Poaceae . . . . .	16
Ranunculaceae . . . . .	16
Rosaceae . . . . .	17
Typhaceae . . . . .	18
Urticaceae . . . . .	19
Violaceae . . . . .	19
Literature Cited . . . . .	21
Index . . . . .	25

## Introduction

### Purpose and scope

This handout was originally written as a teaching aid for an edible plants class provided to several Kenai Peninsula homeschool families. Its geographic focus is the western Kenai Peninsula. Fungi and marine algae are outside of the taxonomic scope of this handout, but I encourage the reader to learn more about these groups since they include multiple edible species available locally. Medicinal uses of plants are not covered. The text is biased towards plants that I know and use, includes some of my personal opinions, and should not be considered authoritative. It is intended as a help for learning about local edible plants.

### Resources

There are many excellent books covering identification of Alaska's plants and their uses, so it would be wasteful for me to make this into yet another guide when so many better resources are already available. I will try to make this handout a starting-off point directing you to the appropriate literature.

For getting to know our flora, the best book to start with is still [Hultén \(1968\)](#). Complementing this with the better keys and more thorough descriptions of [Welsh \(1974\)](#) will enable you to identify almost any vascular plant you will encounter locally. See also the more up-to-date floras of British Columbia ([Douglas et al., 1998a,b, 1999a,b, 2000, 2001a,b, 2002](#)). Although less authoritative and in places erroneous, [Shaffer \(2000\)](#) is worth consulting for local knowledge of our flora.

The best field guide to our area is [Pojar and Mackinnon \(2004\)](#). For woody plants, see [Viereck and Little \(2007\)](#). [Collet \(2002, 2010\)](#) provided a handy guide to the willows of our area. For sedges, see [Tande and Lipkin \(2003\)](#). For grasses, see [Skinner et al. \(2012\)](#). For aquatic plants, see [Center for Lakes and Reservoirs at Portland State University \(2009\)](#). For weeds, see [Cortés-Burns et al. \(2012\)](#), [AKEPIC \(2005\)](#), and [Whitson et al. \(2002\)](#).

Good books covering harvesting and use plants from our area include Heller (1976), Graham (1985), Jernigan et al. (2014), Kari (1995), Russell (2011), and Schofield (1993, 1998, 2003).

For more references, see the Alaska Native Plant Society's bibliography page at <http://aknps.org/Pages/Bibliography.php> and the USDA Forest Service's Alaska list of books their botanists use at <http://www.fs.fed.us/wildflowers/features/books/akbooks.shtml>.

## Motivations for partaking of wild plants

You may be interested in wild plants for a number of reasons, for example

- improving your wilderness survival skills,
- learning about cultures through studying ethnobotany,
- diversifying your diet beyond what is commercially available, and
- growing an appreciation of nature, using edible plants as a gateway to learning more about the plants around you.

These are obviously complementary rather than exclusive motivations, but your individual objectives do matter. For example, the survivalist would be seeking calories above flavor. He or she would be willing to choke down the bitterest root if it would provide the energy needed to keep going. In contrast, we Americans generally consume more carbohydrates at home than is good for us. For the table, we should be seeking to increase our intake of vegetables that provide roughage, vitamins, and minerals.

## Regarding edibility

While we may want to quickly classify every plant as either poisonous or edible, this dichotomy is neither realistic nor practical. The truth is that, for us humans, most plants are neither—they are simply inedible. We would get little that our bodies need from eating grass leaves, cottonwood bark, or spruce cones even though they are not toxic to us. I think the character Bree (a talking horse) from C. S. Lewis' *The Horse and His Boy* put it best in reference to our inability to eat perfectly good grass: "You're rum little creatures, you humans."

## Cautions

Consuming wild plants comes with inherent risks from potential mis-identifications, contamination, preparation, and the constitutions of individual people.

This is not a local flora or a practical plant taxonomy class. While I expect to be showing you how to recognize a handful of edible and poisonous plants, this will be far from exhaustive. I encourage you to obtain or borrow some of the better floras and guides listed above. Before you sample any plant, you must be absolutely sure of its identity and you should know about its edibility.

In the books you will sometimes see a plant categorized as both poisonous and edible, which is correct. In some species, the fruits may be edible while other tissues of that same plant contain anti-herbivory toxins (example: tomatoes). In other cases, a poisonous plant is rendered edible by thorough cooking.

In practice, when learning to become a forager, you should begin by conservatively considering that everything might be poisonous until you learn otherwise. The next step is to learn to recognize the poisonous plants. Once you can safely avoid these, begin harvesting the safest species, plants that are easy to identify and that do not require special care in harvesting or preparation in order to be palatable. Slowly build on this base, learning how to identify, harvest, and use a few new plant species every year.

Do not assume that an edible plant is safe to eat simply because it is growing wild. It is tempting to harvest plants from road sides and other disturbed areas, but this is where human-caused contamination is most likely. You may be better off taking in extremely low concentrations of pesticide residues from commercial produce than harvesting plants contaminated by street runoff or herbicides used in lawns.

Not all contamination is human-caused. If a seepage area or stream contains unacceptable levels of naturally-occurring arsenic, then plants from these areas would be unsafe to eat. It is also possible to pick up disease-causing pathogens from plants that are not cleaned properly. If it is unsafe to drink the water from a stream due to protozoans like *Cryptosporidium*, then it will also be unsafe to eat uncooked aquatic plants from that same stream.

Unlike most domesticated plants, wild plants often require particular care in harvesting and preparation in order to be palatable to humans. Wild plants must be able to fend for themselves. Where they invest in storing up energy for future use (for example, in a root stocked with starches), they usually also allocate resources to defence of that resource (for example, prickles, toxins, or foul-tasting chemicals). In order to get around these deterrents, we may need to wear gloves to avoid being poked, cook our harvested food thoroughly to

destroy toxins, or collect plants only at a particular time of year when distasteful chemicals are at their lowest concentrations.

Finally, just because a plant is considered edible does not mean that everyone can eat it. For example, in my extended family, one has an allergic response to mangos, another reacts badly to watermelons, another cannot eat wheat, and another cannot eat chard. All of these plants are available in the grocery store without any caution labels because they are safe for most people. When you first try a species, be aware that you might react badly to it even if it is a widely-used edible plant. For this reason, you should always take only a sample at first. Refrain from sampling more than one new plant at a time so that, if you do become ill, you can tell which plant caused the reaction.

## Phenology

We know that the time to go fishing for salmon is when the fish are in the river. Similarly, many plants can only be harvested during a narrow seasonal time window. Outside of this time they may be completely unpalatable. Even for plants that can be harvested year-round, there is often a part of the year when they are at their best in terms of texture, flavor, and nutrition.

## How to find the plants you are after

Of course the best way to start searching for edible plants is to explore your neighborhood. Learn to recognize all the plants in your vicinity, then read up about these to find out what your local edible resources are.

Alternatively, if you are after a particular kind of plant, first read up on its habitat, then check available distribution data. Hultén (1968) included good distribution maps. Search through available on-line data, which often include coordinates that can be mapped in programs such as Google Earth or programmed into a GPS. Alaska herbaria records can be searched via Arcotos (<http://arctos.database.museum/>) or the Consortium of Pacific Northwest Herbaria (<http://www.pnwherbaria.org/data/search.php>). Up-to-date exotic plant distributions are available through AKEPIC's data portal (<http://aknhp.uaa.alaska.edu/maps-js/integrated-map/akepic.php>). Citizen science observations can be searched through iNaturalist.org (<http://www.inaturalist.org/>). Lastly, GBIF (<http://www.gbif.org/>) is the global clearinghouse for species distribution data, aggregating from many collections and observation datasets.

## Rules and regulations

It is your responsibility to be aware of the land ownership where you take plants. On public lands, check the applicable rules and regulations or simply call the land managers to ask about your planned activities. On private lands, always obtain permission for your intended uses. See Table 1.1 for a summary of allowed plant harvest on Kenai Peninsula lands.

*Table 1.1: Summary of rules regarding harvest of edible plants by land ownership on the Kenai Peninsula.*

Land Owner	Personal Use	Commercial Harvest
Kenai Fjords National Park	not permitted	not permitted
Kenai National Wildlife Refuge	allowed	not permitted
Chugach National Forest	allowed	allowed with permit
Alaska State Parks	allowed*	not permitted
Alaska Department of Natural Resources	allowed	not permitted
Kenai Peninsula Borough lands	allowed	not permitted
Native Corporation lands	varies	?
private land	varies	varies

\*Berries and mushrooms may be harvested on Alaska State Parks. I failed to find out whether it is permissible to harvest other edible plant parts.

## Ethics

Be aware of the consequences of your harvesting activities to the land, plants, wildlife, and other people. In general, taking reproductive structures such as berries and mushrooms can be sustainable. Removing berries may reduce the reproductive success of the plants, but you are taking resources that the plant had already allocated to reproduction. The plants can afford this loss. In contrast, removing the taproot of a perennial plant can be lethal to a long-lived plant that may have taken years to grow. Such a resource may be highly susceptible to overharvest. For this reason indigenous peoples placed their own restrictions on harvest of some the more important subsistence plants. Do not diminish a valuable edible plant resource through overharvest.



## The Plants

Below a selection of plants are highlighted. Notably poisonous and edible plants are included; simply unpalatable plants are excluded.

Botanical names are emphasized as these are more trustworthy handles for the actual biological entities than are common names. The entries are organized alphabetically by plant families and species names.

For the purpose of this class, the origins of the plants are not emphasized. The present focus is on edibility, not whether a plant is native to this region.

### Division Pteridiophyta

#### Family Athyriaceae

*Athyrium filix-femina* (L.) Roth

Common names: lady fern

The fiddleheads are edible in spring, though they are inferior to *Matteuccia struthiopteris* due to the presence of brown, papery scales.

#### Family Dryopteridaceae

*Dryopteris expansa* (C. Presl) Fraser-Jenk. & Jermy

Common names: shield fern, spreading wood fern

As with *Athyrium filix-femina*, the fiddleheads are edible in spring, though they are inferior to *Matteuccia struthiopteris* due to the presence of brown, papery scales.

The roots of shield ferns were an important subsistence and survival food to many native peoples in the Pacific Northwest. See [Turner et al. \(1992\)](#) for an in-depth exploration of this topic.

## Family Equisetaceae

*Equisetum arvense* L.

Common names: field horsetail, common horsetail

The young shoots are edible but should be cooked.

*Equisetum fluviatile* L.

Common names: water horsetail, swamp horsetail

Young spring shoots are edible but should be cooked. Roots can also be eaten.

## Family Onocleaceae

*Matteuccia struthiopteris* (L.) Todaro

Common names: fiddlehead fern, ostrich fern

The large fiddleheads of the ostrich fern are the best of our local fern species. A friend of mine made an excellent pesto from the fiddleheads.

## Division Magnoliophyta

## Family Adoxaceae

*Sambucus racemosa* L.

Common names: red elderberry

The flowers can be eaten and juice from the mature berries can be used in wines and jellies. Ingesting other parts of the plant's tissues—including immature fruits—results in cyanide poisoning.

## Family Amaranthaceae

*Atriplex gmelinii* C.A. Mey.

Common names: Gmelin's saltbush

The greens are edible.

*Chenopodium album* L.

Common names: goosefoot, lamb's quarters

The greens are edible and nutritious.

*Salicornia europaea* L.

Common names: glasswort

This salty, succulent plant is edible.

## Family Amaryllidaceae

*Allium schoenoprasum* L.

Common names: chives, wild chives

All parts of the plant are edible.

Compare with the deadly poisonous *Zigadenus elegans*, which looks superficially similar when not in flower.

## Family Apiaceae

*Angelica lucida* L.

Common names: seacoast angelica, wild celery

The leaves and petioles are edible but quite strongly flavored. Be sure not to confuse with *Cicuta* species.

*Cicuta douglasii* (DC.) Coult. & Rose

Common names: western water hemlock

Both of our *Cicuta* species are deadly poisonous. As many members of the family Apiaceae look similar, be sure that you can recognize and avoid the water hemlocks.

*Cicuta virosa* L.

Common names: cowbane, northern water hemlock

See note above under *Cicuta douglasii*.

*Heracleum maximum* Bartram

Common names: cow parsnip, pushki

The interior of the leaf petioles can be eaten after being peeled. Pushki must be harvested with gloves to avoid contact with photosensitive toxins in stems and leaves.

*Ligusticum scoticum* L.

Common names: lovage, Scotch lovage, Scots lovage

The flavorful leaves are edible and can be used as a spice like celery.

## Family Araceae

*Calla palustris* L.

Common names: wild calla

When fresh this plant is highly toxic due to a high contraction of oxalic acid. It can be eaten after special preparation.

## Family Araliaceae

*Oplopanax horridus* (Sm.) Miq.

Common names: devil's club

The strongly-flavored new buds can be harvested in spring and are quite good in stir fries, dips, pestos, etc.

## Family Asteraceae

*Matricaria discoidea* DC.

Common names: disc mayweed, pineappleweed, wild chamomile

The flowers of this common weed make an excellent tea much like chamomile but fruitier.

*Sonchus asper* (L.) Hill

Common names: prickly sow-thistle

The young greens are edible.

*Taraxacum officinale* F.H. Wigg

Common names: common dandelion

Now a nearly ubiquitous plant on the Kenai, especially in disturbed areas, *T. officinale* was introduced into our area from the Old World. All parts of the plant are edible but usually quite bitter. As with many greens, the leaves are least bitter in the spring. The roots can be roasted and ground to make a tea sometimes used to extend or substitute for coffee.

Additional species of *Taraxacum* including the exotic *Taraxacum laevigatum* DC. (rock dandelion or red-seeded dandelion) and native *Taraxacum ceratophorum* (Ledebour) de Candolle (horned dandelion) and *Taraxacum phy-matocarpum* J. Vahl can be used similarly.

*Tragopogon dubius* Scop.

Common names: western salsify, yellow salsify

This weed has been collected from the Fred Meyer parking lot in Soldotna (AKEPIC, 2015). The roots are edible (AKEPIC, 2005).

### Family Betulaceae

*Betula papyrifera* Marshall

Common names: paper birch, white birch

The sap is gathered as a beverage and concentrated to make birch syrup. The inner bark can be used as a survival food.

### Family Boraginaceae

*Mertensia maritima* Gray

Common names: oysterleaf, oysterplant

The greens are mild and good.

*Mertensia paniculata* (Aiton) G. Don

Common names: northern bluebells, tall bluebells

The greens, best in spring, are edible and mild, but a little hairy. The flowers are tasty.

*Myosotis alpestris* auct. non F.W. Schmidt

Common names: alpine forget-me-not

The whole plant is edible.

### Family Brassicaceae

The Brassicaceae or mustard family is one of those few plant families where none of its members are poisonous, though many are quite spicy.

*Capsella bursa-pastoris* (L.) Medik.

Common names: shepherd's-purse

The greens and spicy fruits are a nice addition to salads.

*Cardamine oligosperma* Nutt.

Common names: little western bittercress

The mildly spicy greens reminiscent of watercress are some of my favorites to add to salads.

## Family Caryophyllaceae

*Honckenya peploides* (L.) Ehrh.

Common names: sea sandwort, seabeach sandwort  
The edible greens are rich in vitamin C.

*Silene vulgaris* (Moench) Garcke

Common names: bladder campion  
The leaves and young shoots are edible.

*Stellaria media* (L.) Vill.

Common names: chickweed, common chickweed  
This garden weed is edible and good.

## Family Crassulaceae

*Rhodiola rosea* L.

Common names: roseroot  
The greens are mild, succulent, and good. The root can also be eaten.

## Family Cyperaceae

*Carex macrocephala* Willd. ex Spreng.

Common names: largehead sedge  
The fruits and roots are edible ([Tande and Lipkin, 2003](#)).

*Carex lyngbyei* Hornem.

Common names: Lyngbye's sedge  
The young stem bases, roots, and seeds can be eaten ([Jernigan et al., 2014](#)).

*Carex utriculata* Boott

Common names: Northwest Territory sedge  
The pith of the stem and roots are edible ([Tande and Lipkin, 2003](#)).

*Scirpus microcarpus* J.Presl & C.Presl

Common names: paniced bulrush  
Roots and stem bases can be eaten.

*Schoenoplectus tabernaemontani* (C.C.Gmel.) Palla

Common names: softstem bulrush

The roots and flowering spikes are edible.

Family Ericaceae

*Empetrum nigrum* L.

Common names: crowberry

The somewhat bitter berries are nutritious and make an agreeable jelly.

*Vaccinium cespitosum* Michx.

Common names: dwarf bilberry

This is in my opinion the tangiest and tastiest of our blueberry species.

*Vaccinium ovalifolium* Sm.

Common names: Alaska blueberry, highbush blueberry

If you have access to a good patch of these, you are blessed. They grow in wetter forests on the Kenai, usually under conifers.

*Vaccinium oxycoccos* L.

Common names: bog cranberry, small cranberry

The berries of this diminutive little wetland plant are tart and tasty, best in the early spring when they thaw.

*Vaccinium uliginosum* L.

Common names: bog bilberry, northern bilberry, lowbush blueberry

This is our delicious and abundant blueberry of the mountains and wetlands.

*Vaccinium vitis-idaea* L.

Common names: lingonberry, low-bush cranberry

The tart berries are best after a frost.

Family Fabaceae

*Astragalus umbellatus* Bunge

Common names: tundra milkvetch

The root is edible.

*Hedysarum alpinum* L.

Common names: alpine sweetvetch, Eskimo potato

The roots are edible.

*Lathyrus japonicus* Willd.

Common names: beach pea

The greens are edible in spring. The peas are edible in moderation.

*Lupinus nootkatensis* Donn ex Sims

Common names: Nootka lupin

The roots can be eaten, but care must be taken not to confuse this with other lupine species.

## Family Geraniaceae

*Geranium erianthum* DC.

Common names: woolly geranium

The purple flowers are edible and make an appealing garnish. Be sure not to confuse with *Aconitum delphinifolium* because the leaves can look similar.

## Family Juncaginaceae

*Triglochin maritima* L.

Common names: common arrowgrass, sea arrowgrass, seaside arrowgrass

Both species of *Triglochin* are poisonous.

*Triglochin palustris* L.

Common names: marsh arrowgrass

Both species of *Triglochin* are poisonous.

## Family Liliaceae

*Fritillaria camschatcensis* (L.) Ker-Gawl.

Common names: chocolate lily, northern rice-root

The roots were used by many native peoples of the Pacific Northwest as a staple carbohydrate.

*Streptopus amplexifolius* (L.) DC.

Common names: watermelon berry, twistedstalk

The berries are mild and good. In spring the lower parts of the stem are tasty fresh, with a flavor reminiscent of cucumbers.

*Zigadenus elegans* Pursh

Common names: deathcamas, mountain deathcamas

This grass-like plant is deadly poisonous. It could be confused with wild chives (*Allium schoenoprasum*).

### Family Melanthiaceae

*Veratrum viride* Aiton

Common names: false hellebore

This plant is highly toxic.

### Family Nymphaeaceae

*Nuphar polysepala* Engelm.

Common names: yellow pond-lily

The seeds and roots are edible.

### Family Onagraceae

*Chamerion angustifolium* (L.) Holub

Common names: fireweed

All parts of the plant are edible. The new shoots and young stems can be cooked and eaten similarly to asparagus. The leaves are edible as a salad green early in the season before they become too bitter. The flowers are mildly flavored and used commonly in jellies, more for their color than their taste.

*Chamerion latifolium* (L.) Holub

Common names: dwarf fireweed, river beauty

As with *C. angustifolium*, all parts of the plant are edible. The new shoots of this species are particularly good.

## Family Phrymaceae

*Mimulus guttatus* DC.

Common names: monkeyflower

The whole plant including the showy flowers is edible and mild.

## Family Plantaginaceae

*Hippuris vulgaris* L.

Common names: mare's-tail

This edible plant is used as cooked greens.

*Plantago major* L.

Common names: broadleaf plantain, greater plantain

The greens are edible, but in my opinion not choice.

*Plantago maritima* L.

Common names: goose tongue, seaside plantain

The edible leaves are succulent and salty.

Care must be taken when gathering *P. maritima* because it can be easily confused with *Triglochin* spp. (arrowgrass) that grows in the same habitats.

## Family Poaceae

*Leymus mollis* (Trin.) Pilg.

Common names: American dune grass, American dune wild-rye, sea lyme-grass

The seeds are edible ([Jernigan et al., 2014](#)). A closely related grass, *Leymus arenarius*, was harvested and processed in quantity in Iceland ([Guðmundsson, 1996](#)).

## Family Ranunculaceae

In general, members of the family Ranunculaceae should be considered poisonous.

*Aconitum delphinifolium* DC.

Common names: larkspurleaf monkshood, monkshood

Monkshood is one of the most acutely poisonous plants in our area. Ingesting even a small portion of this plant should be avoided.

*Actaea rubra* (Ait.) Willd.

Common names: baneberry, doll's eyes

The plant is poisonous.

*Aquilegia formosa* Fisch. ex DC.

Common names: western columbine

The flowers and particularly their nectaries can be eaten fresh.

*Caltha palustris* L.

Common names: marsh marigold, yellow marsh marigold

All tissue of the plant contain the toxin ranunculin, but this can be destroyed by thorough cooking. The greens, cooked well, can be used much like spinach.

*Delphinium glaucum* S.Watson

Common names: glaucous larkspur, mountain larkspur

Though not as lethal as *Aconitum delphiniifolium*, larkspur is still quite toxic.

## Family Rosaceae

*Amelanchier alnifolia* (Nutt.) Nutt.

Common names: saskatoon, Pacific serviceberry, western serviceberry, serviceberry

In our area this shrub is most common on rocky, south-facing slopes. The berries are good and much like blueberries.

*Argentina egedei* (Wormsk.) Rydb.

Common names: Pacific silverweed, silverweed

The roots of this seaside plant are edible and were gathered by some native peoples of the Pacific Northwest. See [Turner and Kuhnlein \(1982\)](#) for more on this topic.

*Prunus padus* L.

Common names: European bird cherry, mayday tree

Preserves can be made from the fruits.

*Rosa acicularis* Lindl.

Common names: prickly rose  
Petals and rose hips are edible.

*Rosa nutkana* C. Presl

Common names: Nootka rose  
Petals and rose hips are edible.

*Rubus arcticus* L.

Common names: nagoonberry  
It is hard to find many of the berries, but they taste wonderful.

*Rubus chamaemorus* L.

Common names: cloudberry, low-bush salmonberry, salmonberry  
Berries (my favorite) are edible and choice.

*Rubus idaeus* L.

Common names: raspberry  
Berries are edible and choice.

*Rubus pedatus* Banks & Sol. ex Lowe

Common names: creeping raspberry, trailing raspberry  
The sparse berries are tart but excellent.

*Rubus spectabilis* Pursh

Common names: salmonberry  
Berries are edible and choice.

*Sorbus aucuparia* L.

Common names: European mountain-ash, rowan  
The berries can be used for preserves.

Family Typhaceae

*Typha latifolia* L.

Common names: common cattail  
The roots, young leaves, immature flower spikes, and pollen are edible.

## Family Urticaceae

*Urtica dioica* L.

Common names: common nettle, stinging nettle

The greens are edible, mild, and good when cooked. Until they are cooked, the plants must be handled with gloves to avoid urtication (Can you guess the etymology of this term? See footnote<sup>1</sup> for the answer.).

## Family Violaceae

*Viola epipsila* Ledeb.

Common names: dwarf marsh violet

This and our other species of *Viola* are edible.

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<sup>1</sup>Urtication refers to being stung as if by nettles. *Urtica*, the latin name for nettles, is derived from the latin word *uro*, meaning "to burn."



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## Index

- Aconitum*  
  *delphinifolium*, 14, 16, 17
- Actaea*  
  *rubra*, 17
- Adoxaceae, 8
- Alaska blueberry, *see* *Vaccinium ovalifolium*
- Allium*  
  *schoenoprasum*, 9, 15
- alpine forget-me-not, *see* *Myosotis alpestris*
- alpine sweetvetch, *see* *Hedysarum alpinum*
- Amaranthaceae, 8
- Amaryllidaceae, 9
- Amelanchier*  
  *alnifolia*, 17
- American dune grass, *see* *Leymus mollis*
- American dune wild-rye, *see* *Leymus mollis*
- Angelica*  
  *lucida*, 9
- Apiaceae, 9
- Aquilegia*  
  *formosa*, 17
- Araceae, 10
- Araliaceae, 10
- Argentina*  
  *egedei*, 17
- Asteraceae, 10
- Astragalus*  
  *umbellatus*, 13
- Athyriaceae, 7
- Athyrium*  
  *filix-femina*, 7
- Atriplex*  
  *gmelinii*, 8
- baneberry, *see* *Actaea rubra*
- beach pea, *see* *Lathyrus japonicus*
- Betula*  
  *papyrifera*, 11
- Betulaceae, 11
- bladder campion, *see* *Silene vulgaris*
- bog bilberry, *see* *Vaccinium uliginosum*
- bog cranberry, *see* *Vaccinium oxycoccos*
- Boraginaceae, 11
- Brassicaceae, 11
- broadleaf plantain, *see* *Plantago major*
- Calla*  
  *palustris*, 10
- Caltha*  
  *palustris*, 17
- Capsella*  
  *bursa-pastoris*, 11
- Cardamine*  
  *oligosperma*, 11
- Carex*

- lyngbyei*, 12  
*macrocephala*, 12  
*utriculata*, 12  
 Caryophyllaceae, 12  
*Chamerion*  
     *angustifolium*, 15  
     *latifolium*, 15  
*Chenopodium*  
     *album*, 8  
 chickweed, *see* *Stellaria media*  
 chives, *see* *Allium schoenoprasum*  
 chocolate lily, *see* *Fritillaria cam-*  
     *schatcensis*  
*Cicuta*, 9  
     *douglasii*, 9  
     *virosa*, 9  
 cloudberry, *see* *Rubus chamaemorus*  
 common arrowgrass, *see* *Triglochin*  
     *maritima*  
 common cattail, *see* *Typha latifolia*  
 common chickweed, *see* *Stellaria*  
     *media*  
 common dandelion, *see* *Taraxacum*  
     *officinale*  
 common horsetail, *see* *Equisetum*  
     *arvense*  
 common nettle, *see* *Urtica dioica*  
 cow parsnip, *see* *Heracleum max-*  
     *imum*  
 cowbane, *see* *Cicuta virosa*  
 Crassulaceae, 12  
 creeping raspberry, *see* *Rubus pe-*  
     *datus*  
 crowberry, *see* *Empetrum nigrum*  
*Cryptosporidium*, 3  
 Cyperaceae, 12  
  
 deathcamas, *see* *Zigadenus elegans*  
*Delphinium*  
     *glaucum*, 17  
 devil's club, *see* *Oplonanax horridus*  
  
 disc mayweed, *see* *Matricaria dis-*  
     *coidea*  
 doll's eyes, *see* *Actaea rubra*  
 Dryopteridaceae, 7  
*Dryopteris*  
     *expansa*, 7  
 dwarf bilberry, *see* *Vaccinium ce-*  
     *spitosum*  
 dwarf fireweed, *see* *Chamerion lat-*  
     *ifolium*  
 dwarf marsh violet, *see* *Viola epip-*  
     *sila*  
  
*Empetrum*  
     *nigrum*, 13  
 Equisetaceae, 8  
*Equisetum*  
     *arvense*, 8  
     *fluviatile*, 8  
 Ericaceae, 13  
 Eskimo potato, *see* *Hedysarum alpinum*  
 European bird cherry, *see* *Prunus*  
     *padus*  
 European mountain-ash, *see* *Sor-*  
     *bus aucuparia*  
  
 Fabaceae, 13  
 false hellebore, *see* *Veratrum viride*  
 fiddlehead fern, *see* *Matteuccia struth-*  
     *iopteris*  
 field horsetail, *see* *Equisetum arvense*  
 fireweed, *see* *Chamerion angusti-*  
     *folium*  
*Fritillaria*  
     *camschatcensis*, 14  
  
 Geraniaceae, 14  
*Geranium*  
     *erianthum*, 14  
 glasswort, *see* *Salicornia europaea*  
 glaucous larkspur, *see* *Delphinium*  
     *glaucum*  
 Gmelin's saltbush, *see* *Atriplex gmelinii*

- goose tongue, *see Plantago maritima*  
 goosefoot, *see Chenopodium album*  
 greater plantain, *see Plantago major*
- Hedysarum*  
   *alpinum*, 14
- Heracleum*  
   *maximum*, 9
- highbush blueberry, *see Vaccinium ovalifolium*
- Hippuris*  
   *vulgaris*, 16
- Honckenya*  
   *peploides*, 12
- horned dandelion, *see Taraxacum ceratophorum*
- Juncaginaceae, 14
- lady fern, *see Athyrium filix-femina*  
 lamb's quarters, *see Chenopodium album*
- largehead sedge, *see Carex macrocephala*
- larkspurleaf monkshood, *see Aconitum delphinifolium*
- Lathyrus*  
   *japonicus*, 14
- Leymus*  
   *arenarius*, 16  
   *mollis*, 16
- Ligusticum*  
   *scoticum*, 9
- Liliaceae, 14
- lingonberry, *see Vaccinium vitis-idaea*  
 little western bittercress, *see Cardamine oligosperma*
- lovage, *see Ligusticum scoticum*  
 low-bush cranberry, *see Vaccinium vitis-idaea*  
 low-bush salmonberry, *see Rubus chamaemorus*
- lowbush blueberry, *see Vaccinium uliginosum*
- Lupinus*  
   *nootkatensis*, 14
- Lyngbye's sedge, *see Carex lyngbyei*
- Magnoliophyta, 8
- mare's-tail, *see Hippuris vulgaris*  
 marsh arrowgrass, *see Triglochin palustris*  
 marsh marigold, *see Caltha palustris*
- Matricaria*  
   *discoidea*, 10
- Matteuccia*  
   *struthiopteris*, 7, 8
- mayday tree, *see Prunus padus*
- Melanthiaceae, 15
- Mertensia*  
   *maritima*, 11  
   *paniculata*, 11
- Mimulus*  
   *guttatus*, 16
- monkeyflower, *see Mimulus guttatus*
- monkshood, *see Aconitum delphinifolium*
- mountain deathcamas, *see Zigadenus elegans*
- mountain larkspur, *see Delphinium glaucum*
- Myosotis*  
   *alpestris*, 11
- nagoonberry, *see Rubus arcticus*  
 Nootka lupin, *see Lupinus nootkatensis*
- Nootka rose, *see Rosa nutkana*  
 northern bilberry, *see Vaccinium uliginosum*  
 northern bluebells, *see Mertensia paniculata*

- northern rice-root, *see* *Fritillaria camschatcensis*
- northern water hemlock, *see* *Cicuta virosa*
- Northwest Territory sedge, *see* *Carex utriculata*
- Nuphar*  
*polysepala*, 15
- Nymphaeaceae, 15
- Onagraceae, 15
- Onocleaceae, 8
- Oplopanax*  
*horridus*, 10
- ostrich fern, *see* *Matteuccia struthiopteris*
- oysterleaf, *see* *Mertensia maritima*
- oysterplant, *see* *Mertensia maritima*
- Pacific serviceberry, *see* *Amelanchier alnifolia*
- Pacific silverweed, *see* *Argentina egedei*
- panicked bulrush, *see* *Scirpus microcarpus*
- paper birch, *see* *Betula papyrifera*
- Phrymaceae, 16
- pineappleweed, *see* *Matricaria discoides*
- Plantaginaceae, 16
- Plantago*  
*major*, 16  
*maritima*, 16
- Poaceae, 16
- prickly rose, *see* *Rosa acicularis*
- prickly sow-thistle, *see* *Sonchus asper*
- Prunus*  
*padus*, 17
- Pteridiophyta, 7
- pushki, *see* *Heracleum maximum*
- Ranunculaceae, 16
- raspberry, *see* *Rubus idaeus*
- red elderberry, *see* *Sambucus racemosa*
- red-seeded dandelion, *see* *Taraxacum laevigatum*
- Rhodiola*  
*rosea*, 12
- river beauty, *see* *Chamerion latifolium*
- rock dandelion, *see* *Taraxacum laevigatum*
- Rosa*  
*acicularis*, 18  
*nutkana*, 18
- Rosaceae, 17
- roseroot, *see* *Rhodiola rosea*
- rowan, *see* *Sorbus aucuparia*
- Rubus*  
*arcticus*, 18  
*chamaemorus*, 18  
*idaeus*, 18  
*pedatus*, 18  
*spectabilis*, 18
- Salicornia*  
*europaea*, 9
- salmonberry, *see* *Rubus chamaemorus*,  
*see* *Rubus spectabilis*
- Sambucus*  
*racemosa*, 8
- saskatoon, *see* *Amelanchier alnifolia*
- Schoenoplectus*  
*tabernaemontani*, 13
- Scirpus*  
*microcarpus*, 12
- Scotch lovage, *see* *Ligusticum scoticum*
- Scots lovage, *see* *Ligusticum scoticum*
- sea arrowgrass, *see* *Triglochin maritima*
- sea lyme-grass, *see* *Leymus mollis*
- sea sandwort, *see* *Honckenya peploides*
- seabeach sandwort, *see* *Honckenya peploides*

- seacoast angelica, *see* *Angelica lucida*
- seaside arrowgrass, *see* *Triglochin maritima*
- seaside plantain, *see* *Plantago maritima*
- serviceberry, *see* *Amelanchier alnifolia*
- shepherd's-purse, *see* *Capsella bursa-pastoris*
- shield fern, *see* *Dryopteris expansa*
- Silene*  
*vulgaris*, 12
- silverweed, *see* *Argentina egedei*
- small cranberry, *see* *Vaccinium oxycoccos*
- softstem bulrush, *see* *Schoenoplectus tabernaemontani*
- Sonchus*  
*asper*, 10
- Sorbus*  
*aucuparia*, 18
- spreading wood fern, *see* *Dryopteris expansa*
- Stellaria*  
*media*, 12
- stinging nettle, *see* *Urtica dioica*
- Streptopus*  
*amplexifolius*, 15
- swamp horsetail, *see* *Equisetum fluviatile*
- tall bluebells, *see* *Mertensia paniculata*
- Taraxacum*  
*ceratophorum*, 10  
*laevigatum*, 10  
*officinale*, 10  
*phymatocarpum*, 10
- Tragopogon*  
*dubius*, 10
- trailing raspberry, *see* *Rubus pedatus*
- Triglochin*, 14, 16  
*maritima*, 14  
*palustris*, 14
- tundra milkvetch, *see* *Astragalus umbellatus*
- twistedstalk, *see* *Streptopus amplexifolius*
- Typha*  
*latifolia*, 18
- Typhaceae, 18
- Urtica*  
*dioica*, 19
- Urticaceae, 19
- Vaccinium*  
*cespitosum*, 13  
*ovalifolium*, 13  
*oxycoccos*, 13  
*uliginosum*, 13  
*vitis-idaea*, 13
- Veratrum*  
*viride*, 15
- Viola*, 19  
*epipsila*, 19
- Violaceae, 19
- water horsetail, *see* *Equisetum fluviatile*
- watermelon berry, *see* *Streptopus amplexifolius*
- western columbine, *see* *Aquilegia formosa*
- western salsify, *see* *Tragopogon dubius*
- western serviceberry, *see* *Amelanchier alnifolia*
- western water hemlock, *see* *Cicuta douglasii*
- white birch, *see* *Betula papyrifera*
- wild calla, *see* *Calla palustris*
- wild celery, *see* *Angelica lucida*
- wild chamomile, *see* *Matricaria discoidea*

wild chives, *see Allium schoenoprasum*

woolly geranium, *see Geranium erianthum*

yellow marsh marigold, *see Caltha palustris*

yellow pond-lily, *see Nuphar polysepala*

yellow salsify, *see Tragopogon dubius*

*Zigadenus*

*elegans*, 9, 15