

Knowledge of Native Elders
 Johnson Moses
 Summary by David Dodson
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Today Johnson told us about the many plants his people used and the various things for which they were used.

In the springtime when the ice went out on the rivers and the gravel bars were exposed most native people would search out and dig up _____, a root. It was peeled and eaten raw. These would last until about mid-June, when they became too tough to eat. In August the new plants would be edible and were dug through September.

TLOX was dug during the same time frame. It was found on the open gravel bars, among cottonwood trees and in sandy places. Horsetail was found in cutbanks. Inside the old dry shell a new plant was found. It was very sweet and eaten mainly by the young people. Fresh (new) willow sprouts gave a very edible inner cambium (inner bark). Rhubarb was also eaten. Used up to the leaves. It only lasted about a month then it became bitter. Found it along lakes and streams. Johnson said his mother used to have a ten gallon keg that they filled with rhubarb and carried to Allakaket in the spring. Leaves (new ones) from certain willows were used. Crowpipe, little black stems peeking up through the moss were pulled, dried and smoked way back before people could get tobacco. People used to look for mice caches they would dig them up to get the roots and other plants stored there. They always left some food, usually dried fish, in exchange. It wouldn't be right to take the mouses food and leave nothing.

Medicines

Inner bark (cambium) mixed with cottonwood seeds, boiled together. Johnson said his mother would wash his head with this mixture to heal sores from mosquito bites. Johnson used on his own boy for empetigo. Also good for infected cuts. Worked near wonders. Eliza related how her people used currant stems mixed with juniper to ease allergic reactions. Johnson said that willow leaves were chewed and put on bee stings to ease the pain. He then told a story about burning his hand with hot grease when he was little. His mother packed it with willow leaves and it healed in about two weeks. Soft spruce gum was used to heal cuts. The hard spruce gum was chewed like chewing gum. The used to collect it and take it to Kobuk to trade.

Uses of Wood

Birchbark was used for many things. To cover boats, make containers, baskets, cups. Birch wood used for snowshoe frames, some sled parts. "Its the most important tree in the world, I'll bet". White spruce was used for canoe frames because it split so easily and evenly. Johnson described how the shavings were picked up to use to paint snowshoe frame and how all the left over scraps were cleaned up and carried off. If you left them to rot where you had found the good canoe tree, you probably wouldn't find another good canoe tree for a long time. Tamarack used to make fish traps. Spruce roots, from smaller trees were pulled up and those about

the size of a pencil were split and used to tie sleds and canoe frames and other things together. Paper birch used as firestarter. The black space left when birchbark has been peeled off was used for fish-cutting tables as it is rough and provides a non-slip surface.

Johnson then described the way a moose's stomachs are constructed and how the plant materials from moose and caribou stomachs were eaten. Eliza is working with Johnson getting plant names.

In response to questions from the class, Johnson said that he had heard of people eating fireweed, but not his people. Wild onions were eaten regularly, boiled with fish in the summer. Cattails, fiddle-ferns and mushrooms (mouse food) not eaten. Dry grass was gathered and used as insoles in skin mukluks and in rubber boots. Peat moss, from dry lake beds, was cut into strips and layered over poles as insulation for winter houses. Not used for fires. Rose hips were boiled with a little flour like a pudding. Indian ice cream - berries of various kinds mixed with moose or caribou fat. Certain kind of root (kind of red-brown), from dead spruce used in tanning moosehide. Plants weren't stored for the winter by Johnson's people. His mother's people (Eskimo) stored berries and other plant parts in seal oil. He told story about going over to Kobuk to trade for seal oil. Went in winter and pulled a bladder back filled with oil. If it was real cold, the bladder would be hard and easy to pull. If it warmed up, the oil would slosh forward and back making it very difficult and tiring to pull. They always hoped for cold weather.