Edible Plants of the Prairie

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Sitting here, in this spot, in the prairie, looking across this beautiful Flint Hills landscape, one sees a diversity of plants, grasses, and wildflowers, many of which were profoundly important as food and medicines for the people who lived here before. The Great Plains has more than 3,000 plant species, and more than 120 species were used by Native Americans for food, seasonings, tea, health, and nutrition. Most of the knowledge of their uses for food and medicine was passed on by word of mouth, and the knowledge of plant lore has dropped dramatically, but anthropologists and ethnobotanists have recorded much information on the topic. Many Native American uses of prairie plants continue today on Indian reservations. The Flint Hills is a small part of the original prairie region, but still very rich in useful plants. To use wild plants, one needs to learn them. A few plants around us today have poisonous parts, including horse nettle leaves and fruits, and death camas bulbs, so learn your plants before putting anything in your mouth! What follows is a discussion of some edible plants you can find today, right here in the Flint Hills.
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PRAIRIE TURNIP, *Psoralea esculenta*

The most important native food plant of the region, still found in well-managed Flint Hills pastures, was the prairie turnip. This egg-sized, turnip-shaped, starchy bean family root was an important food. With the flavor of mild, raw peanuts, it could be eaten as a staple or added to bison stew. It could be dried, stored, and traded. The range of the prairie turnip is almost identical to the entire prairie region from Texas to the Canadian Plains and from the short grass prairie at the edge of the Rocky Mountains, east to lush tallgrass prairies in Missouri and Wisconsin. It was so important that the Omaha tribe determined the route of its summer buffalo hunt according to the availability of prairie turnips. Procuring wild food was primarily women’s work. Prairie turnip roots were gathered communally in July. The roots were abundant, and in some areas they were semi-managed. Some women dried and powdered the roots for winter use, while others peeled, cut, and set their slices in the sun, or braided whole roots together as long strings. These braids can still be purchased on Indian reservations in the Dakotas. The roots can be boiled when still fresh, or when dried and re-hydrated, be added to stews of venison, bison, or tasty Flint Hills beef. A bland flour could be pounded out from the dried roots to be used as a base for bery puddings. The prairie turnip has decreased in abundance from farming and heavy grazing. It is an indicator plant – finding a prairie turnip signals that the land is a well-managed native prairie.

GROUNDNUT, *Apios americana*

A prolific vine with clusters of violet-brown bean blossoms, the groundnut plant trails across the ground and over bushes in moist ravines, hiding several egg-sized tubers just below the soil surface. Eaten raw, boiled, roasted or fried, groundnuts are favorably compared to new potatoes in flavor. When mixed...
of use by Native Americans as greens. And the dried seeds were collected, ground, and used as meal.

MILKWEED, *Asclepias syriaca*

The common milkweed is found in prairies, waste ground, and agricultural fields. It is recognized for its white, milky sap. Uncooked, it is poisonous, but when boiled it loses both its milk and poisonous properties. The Omaha, Potawatomi, Pawnee Winnebago, Potawatomi, and Kansa used it for its tasty cooked young leaves, flowers, or young pods, especially in stews. It is still gathered by the Potawatomi on their lands north of Topeka to use in soups.

NEW JERSEY TEA, *Ceanothus americanus*

New Jersey tea is a short, woody shrub and has stiff green leaves and clusters of pretty white flowers which are found blooming on rocky slopes in the Flint Hills in May. These leaves, which can be harvested in the spring or summer and dried, can then be boiled with maple sugar, baked groundnuts have the flavor of candied yams. They have been a staple among at least a dozen Native American tribes. They were so abundant along prairies in the river bottoms that a town was named after them: Topeka means "a good place for groundnuts." Botanist Asa Gray once argued that if Europe had been colonized by North Americans rather than the other way around, American groundnuts would have been taken along and fully domesticated, just as Europeans later did with Jerusalem artichokes.

WILD ONION, *Allium canadense*

Wild onion is a perennial bulb-forming species whose roots and green leaves have a characteristic garlic or onion smell. These plants have been used extensively wherever they are found. In the Flint Hills, large populations of plants are occasionally found on thin-soiled hilltops.
or side-slopes of hills. They apparently were harvested and baked in pit ovens more than 1000 years ago. Native Americans have used onions in soups and stews with buffalo meat. They have also been eaten raw, and the bulbs keep for a long time.

ANNUAL SUNFLOWER, Helianthus annuus

This annual is the state flower of Kansas. It likes weedy areas of fields and roadways, but also can be found in almost any prairie. It makes small, tasty sunflower seeds, which were relished by both humans and birds. It is one of the few native species that was turned into a crop plant. The sunflowers grown today for seeds, oil, and ornamental use are selections of our native annual weed.

JERUSALEM ARTICHOKE, Helianthus tuberosus

This is actually a perennial sunflower, with multiple edible tubers sometimes as large as spring potatoes. The Jerusalem artichoke is both gathered from the wild and cultivated as a domesticated species. In the Flint Hills, it grows on light, nutrient-rich soils in places periodically disturbed by floods or other factors. It likes slightly more moist sites and is often found along the edge of a woods or a country road. Rodents sometimes gather and cache the tubers for later use, which, according to Meriwether Lewis, allowed Native people of the Upper Missouri to seek out, rob, and eat from these caches. Nearly all plains and prairie peoples have savored them for centuries, although their means of preparing the tubers varied considerably. The tubers can be eaten raw, dried and rehydrated, steamed, sautéed, boiled, fried, or pickled. They have a peculiarly pleasant, earthy taste, and a crunchy but watery texture. The tubers can be sustainably harvested without killing the plant in late autumn, after the first frosts, when the leaves have died back and the flower heads have released their seeds. One does not want to eat too many, as the Omaha name testifies to the lack of digestibility. They call them "the food for homeless boys," referring to the gas passed by someone who eats too many of them.

LAMBSQUARTERS, Chenopodium berlandieri

These plants are found in disturbed ground of prairies and are even more common on the edges of fields. This leafy, weedy plant is a very important plant as a source of greens. Lambsquarters greens, cooked and seasoned with salt and butter, are one of the tastiest spring greens in the region. They are found from April through June. They have a very long history...
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On that day Zebulon Pike not only named the Flint Hills but also gave us a description of the wildlife seen from this location. His naming of the Flint Hills has stood the passage of time. But what of the wildlife observations; what changes have occurred? Obviously some names have changed. We still recognize buffalo, elk and deer. Cabrie is the pronghorn or the antelope. And the panther is today known as the mountain lion.

**BISON**

Without a doubt, the bison or buffalo was the most important animal on the Great Plains to both the Native Americans and the members of the Pike Expedition. For the Expedition, buffalo provided easily obtained food. For the Native Americans the buffalo was much more than food. It also provided clothing, tools, and even shelter. The annihilation and near extinction of the buffalo has been well documented and is well known. An estimate of 4 million buffalo in one herd was made in southwestern Kansas in 1871. From 1872-1874, 1.3 million buffalo hides were shipped from Kansas. The last wild buffalo was shot in Kansas in 1879 north of Elkhart. From estimates ranging from 30-70 million animals, the herd was reduced to only about 300 animals by 1893. Private herds in the United States today total less than 200,000 animals. There are no truly wild herds today in Kansas, but one of the best places to see them is at the Maxwell Wildlife Refuge east of McPherson.

**ELK**

Like the bison, the elk, or Wapiti, was also pushed from the Great Plains. Elk were still considered common in western Kansas as late as 1875. They were extirpated from most of the Great Plains by the 1890s. Elk were originally a plains animal, at home on the open prairies. Unlike bison however, elk were able to make a very tasty tea. It has the flavor of black tea but has no caffeine.

**WILD PLUM, Prunus americana**

Fleshy, oval fruits are produced on multi-branched shrubs, which can be pruned into small trees. The plums can be yellow, fire-engine red, or purple, and vary in size and flavor from patch to patch. They occur in thickets on the edges of prairies, in pastures, fields, and along streams. The smell of plum flowers in the spring is perfume and the taste in the late summer is tart and delicious. Many native tribes have eaten them fresh, and some have dried them or made them into jams. The Lakota had a "red plum moon" in August that was a time for feasting.


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