



Foothills

Nature Notes

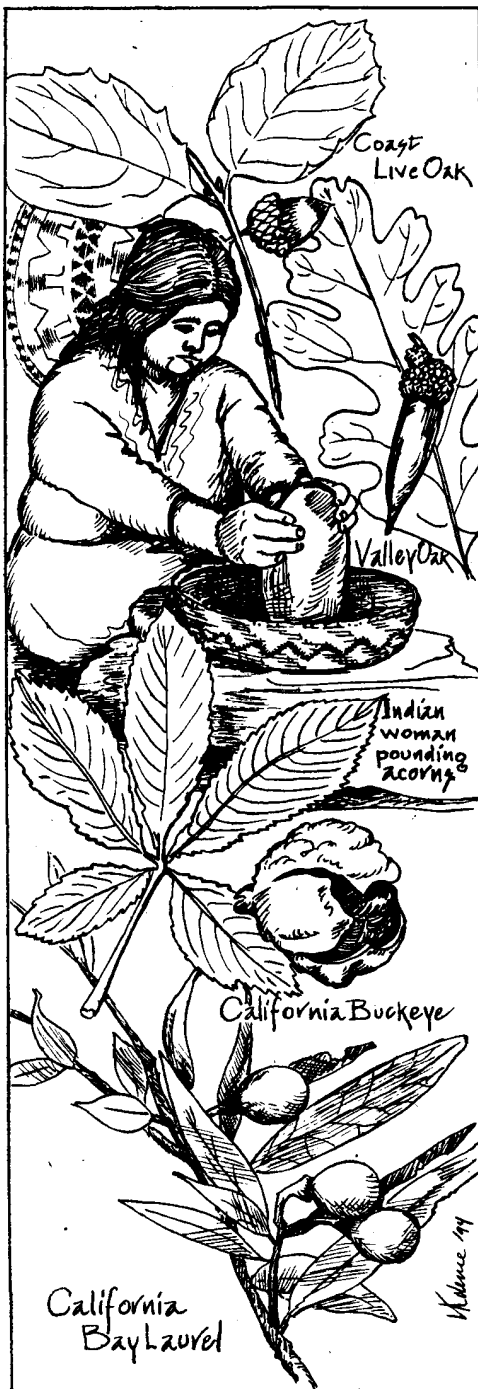
CITY OF PALO ALTO • COMMUNITY SERVICES DEPARTMENT • OPEN SPACE, PARKS AND GOLF DIVISION

Indian Food Plants

The native people of the San Francisco Peninsula lived mostly along the shores of San Francisco Bay where unlimited supplies of shellfish provided easy and bountiful collecting. Stands of massive Valley Oaks interspersed with Coast Live Oaks supplied abundant fall harvests of acorns, a food staple basic to the livelihood of most tribes of California Indians. The local Costanoan Indians supplemented their diet of shellfish and acorns with a variety of other plant and animal foods. Ignoring the many medicinal uses of dozens of local plants, we find the Indians utilized still quite a number of native plants for foods. Many, such as these listed below, can still be found in our foothills preserves.

ACORNS Acorns constituted the most important plant food in the Indian's diet. The acorns of all oaks were used, but certain species were highly preferred. Locally, the Valley Oak (*Quercus lobata*) and the Coast Live Oak (*Quercus agrifolia*) were favored species. Families of some California Indian tribes were known to collect as many as 500 pounds of acorns to last the year. Acorns were dried and stored in baskets for future use. Preparation consisted of first shelling the nuts and grinding them into meal on a flat stone or in a mortar. The meal was then leached to remove the bitter tannin. In order to do this, sand was used to line a shallow depression in the ground in which the acorn meal was placed. Repeated rinsing with water would eventually leach away the bitterness. A second way was to place the meal in a wide shallow basket, and pour in water to filter out the tannin. The leached meal was cooked in water as a soup or gruel, or was formed into cakes and baked in earthen ovens.

NUTS The California Buckeye (*Aesculus californica*) was ground into meal and prepared much like acorns. The large, pear-shaped buckeye fruit were peeled, opened, soaked in water for a day, ground into meal, and finally leached in a sand or basket filter. The exceedingly bitter buckeyes required considerably more leaching than acorns. Some Indians baked the whole fruit first, then sliced and soaked them for a few days in a running stream. Probably the most abundant nut in the foothills was that provided by the California Bay Laurel (*Umbellularia californica*). Nuts were gathered and stored, then roasted before being eaten. Bitterness was removed during the roasting process. Occasionally the roasted nuts were ground and the meal formed into small bread-like cakes.



SEEDS Many seeds were gathered and ground into meal for baking or gruel. Various grass seeds were used, as were those of Chia (*Salvia columbariae*), Holly-leaf Cherry (*Prunus ilicifolia*), and certain species of Ceanothus (*Ceanothus sp.*).

BERRIES The berries and fruit of many trees and shrubs provided a welcome variety of fare in the Indians' diet. Blackberries (*Rubus ursinus*) were eaten when available as were elderberries (*Sambucus sp.*). Elderberries were dried and stored for winter use and were also made into a drink. Toyon (*Photinia arbutifolia*) berries were gathered in quantities in late fall and roasted over hot coals which removed the bitterness. Manzanita (*Arctostaphylos sp.*) berries were eaten fresh when ripe. Ripe berries were collected by shaking branches of the plant over a collecting basket. The ripe pulp was also pounded into a powder which could be stored and later prepared into a beverage by adding water. Madrone (*Arbutus menziesii*) berries were also eaten fresh when ripe and could be cooked, dried, and stored for later use. Choke cherries (*Prunus demissa*) were leached before being eaten.

GREENS Greens were provided by young, tender shoots of the Cattail (*Typhus sp.*), which grew commonly in pond and marsh areas. Miner's Lettuce (*Montia sp.*), is a little, round-leaved herb, abundant in the early spring in wet and semi-shaded areas. It was relished as a raw green by the Indians. The name Miner's Lettuce came from the original 49ers, who also relished the same green.

ROOTS Many plants possess underground parts (roots, rhizomes, bulbs, etc.) which were used as food by the Indians. The rhizomes of cattails were roasted and eaten, or dried and ground into meal for later use. The fiber-covered bulb of the Soap Plant or Amole (*Chlorogalum pomeridianum*) was dug up and boiled like potatoes. The bulbs of the Wild Onion (*Allium sp.*) were eaten raw or baked in hot ashes. The roots of Mule Ears (*Wyethia sp.*), a conspicuous spring wildflower bearing large yellow daisy-like flowers, were dug up and then fermented for a day or two by placing them in the ground with hot stones.

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