

HEALING PLANTS IN NATIVE TRADITION

I. Curricular Area:

Health

Science

Materials: List of Plants to Research on Internet/or Plant Books. Excerpt from *Indian Boyhood*

II. Learner Outcomes:

Students will be able to:

1. Name two plant derived medicines discovered by Native Americans.
2. List four plants used by Native people for spiritual healing.
3. Draw one plant used by Native healers and explain its medicinal use.
4. Explain how Eastman's grandmother gathered medicinal plants.

III. Activities:

Students learn the names of diseases and plant remedies discovered by Native Americans, the complexity of the process by which Native plants are gathered, and the names of the plants used for spiritual healing.

Students visit the Healing Garden at the west end of the Educational Service Center (September and May) and correctly identify four healing plants.

Students conduct internet or plant book research on the healing qualities of one of the following plants and submit a drawing and a short written report on their findings.

Milkweed
Labrador or New Jersey Tea
Wild Mint
Wild Rose
Catnip
Trillium
Willow
Witch Hazel
Fox Glove
Purple Cone Flower
Burdock Root
Pacific Yew
Spruce or Balsam Needles
Sweet Flag
Wind Flower
Dogbane
Snakeroot
Pasque Flower
Bearberry
Prairie Clover
Mugwort
Goldenrod
Chokecherry
Ladyslipper
Cow Parsnip
Wild Ginger
Prairie Smoke
Coneflower
Smartweed

Students read the excerpt from *Indian Boyhood* by Charles Alexander Eastman and explain how Eastman's grandmother gathered medicinal plants.

IV. Evaluation:

Students demonstrate that they can name two plant derived medicines discovered by Native Americans, list four plants used by Native people for spiritual healing, and explain how Eastman's grandmother gathered medicinal plants through verbal feedback. They demonstrate they can describe the curative properties of one Native plant by conducting internet research and submitting a drawing and short report.

V. Background:

At the time of contact with Europeans, European doctors did not make much use of plant medicines. They used leeches, bloodletting and a variety of other techniques in their attempt to heal the sick. Native Americans, on the other hand, used the healing qualities of plants extensively. Over 200 plant medicines discovered by Native Americans are listed in the official U.S. book of Pharmacopeias. Some scholars have even suggested that the beginnings of modern pharmacy can be found in Native America. Some of these healing plants are still used today in a variety of forms. They include among others: the inner bark of the poplar and willow tree which yields aspirin, quinine bark to cure malaria, coca leaves to make Novocain, spruce and balsam needles to cure scurvy, and most recently, yew plant leaves to make a powerful cancer drug called taxol.

One reason Native people made greater use of plants may have to do with the respect the people held for plants and animals. They realized that plants are equipped with innate survival mechanisms that could be used by their human relatives. In addition, Native people looked to the animals whose survival instincts draw them to certain plants. . They found, for example, that the pregnant moose eats the inner bark of a certain tree and that pregnant women can steam this bark into a tea to ease labor pains.

Some common plant remedies were available to all families, and in late summer, the women gathered these plants for use throughout the year. In this case, parents and grandparents shared their plant knowledge with their children and grandchildren.

For spiritual healing and purification, one or more of four sacred plants are used. These are cedar leaves, prairie sage, sweet grass, and tobacco. Only tobacco is smoked in a pipe. The smoke is considered a prayer between humans and the spiritual world. Cedar, sage and sweet grass are generally burned in a shell bowl. Generally, an elder conducting a ceremony will ask an assistant to smudge (offer the smoke) to participants. This gesture is a form of purification.

Student Reading: The following excerpt is from *Indian Boyhood* by Charles Alexander Eastman. Eastman, a member of the Eastern Dakota Nation, was born in Minnesota before the War of 1862. In the aftermath of the War, Eastman and his relatives escaped to Canada. His father, Many Lightnings, was imprisoned in Davenport, Iowa for the part he played in the war to defend his homelands. When he was released from prison, he changed his name to Eastman and went to look for his son. Eastman put Charles in school for the first time when the boy was 16 years old. Charles Eastman went on to become a medical doctor and writer. The name, Ohiyesa, mentioned in the following excerpt means “the Victor”. As a young boy, Charles was selected as a mascot for the lacrosse team who won a big victory over their opponents. In celebration of this victory, Charles received a new name.

I distinctly recall one occasion when she (my grandmother) took me with her into the woods in search of certain medicinal roots. “Why do you not use all kinds of roots for medicine?” said I. “Because” she replied “the Great Mystery does not will us to find things too easily. In that case everyone would be a medicine giver, and Ohiyesa must learn that there are many secrets which the Great Mystery will disclose only to the most worthy. Only those who seek him fasting and in solitude will receive his signs.” With this and many similar explanations wrought in my soul wonderful and lively conceptions of the “Great Mystery” and of the effects of prayer and solitude. I continued my childish questioning, “but why did you not dig those plants that we sought in the woods, of the same kind that you are digging now?” “For the same reason that we do not like the berries we find in the shadow of the deep woods as well as those that grow in sunny places. The latter have more sweetness and flavor. Those herbs which have medicinal value shall be sought in a place that is neither too wet nor too dry, and where they have a generous of sunshine to maintain their vigor.

Someday Ohiyesa will be old enough to know the secrets of medicine then I will tell him all. But if you should grow up to be a bad man, I must withhold these treasures from you and give them to your brother, for a medicine man must be a good and wise man. I hope Ohiyesa will be a great medicine man when he grows up. To be a great warrior is a noble ambition; but to be a mighty medicine man is nobler.”

1. What technique did Eastman's grandmother use to gather medicinal plants?
2. What qualities were expected of a traditional healer?