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Natural food makes good eating

How often has one wondered, when observing the desert and contemplating upon its vast loneliness, the survivability of ancient Indians in this habitat? The starkness of the landscape, high temperatures and lack of water would appear to present formidable barriers to the possibility of the Indian providing for himself as well as for others. Yet over the centuries he accumulated the necessary knowledge of the plants and animals in his surroundings to survive under unusual situations and changes in conditions. This experience usually took its toll in the form of illness and even death of those

who experimented with the edibility of untried plants. Years later someone might find that the same plant, when cooked, was harmless and perhaps even delicious. It became necessary, therefore, to identify the common edible plants as well as the poisonous. They had to know where each variety of edible plant grew, its seasonal availability and when its parts became ripe. The land was the Indian's supermarket supplying all his needs — groceries, medicines, utensils, clothing, tools, and home-building materials.

However, their "supermarket" was not as convenient as its modern-day counterpart. The gathering of plants, seeds and berries was time-consuming and an arduous task followed by laborious and tedious but skillful preparation of the food. Boiling was the mainstay of cooking and required careful attention to the fire and stirring of the pot's contents. To conserve water, always a consideration on the desert, foods that could be roasted were prepared by baking in the ashes rather than boiling. Much time had to be spent pounding mesquite beans and other wild seeds in the mortar or grinding corn at the *metate*. Many foods could be eaten either raw or after processing by these methods, immediately, or dried for storage.

Many Indian recipes for various desert plants still exist and it is possible for us to prepare these foods as meals in lieu of "store-bought" preparations. However, eating for pleasure may differ from eating for survival as our "cultivated" tastes may find some of these foods unpalatable, while to the hungry Indian they may have been tasty.

We owe it to ourselves to at least identify, gather and prepare one of these foods for the experience and satisfaction of trying to learn how to "live off the land." With patience and time we could even prepare a complete meal for some special holiday or festive occasion. A word of caution: It is imperative that we are capable of identifying plants accurately or have someone along on gathering trips knowledgeable in plant identification. Also, authentic or proven recipes and instructions should be followed precisely, or serious illness or even death can result. (Three sources of recipes are given below.) Finally, as with all foods, they should be eaten in moderation. Even the common apple seed is poisonous, and when eaten in excess can be fatal.

Following are some plants of the desert that have provided successful edible and tasty recipes:

- ✓ Agave or century plant — baked, syrup, nut butter, chiffon pie.
 - ✓ Barrel cactus — candy. (Not suggested as a water source — causes nausea.)
 - ✓ Cholla or jumping cactus — buds, squash, fried, and in corn mush.
 - ✓ Ocotillo — flower punch, desert punch.
 - ✓ Prickly pear — fruit juice, jelly, preserves, pickled, nopales.
 - ✓ Saguaro — pudding, seed candy, seed bread, salad, jam, jelly.
 - ✓ Yucca or bannana yucca — flower soup, or in hash.
 - ✓ Jojoba — raw or roasted nuts, coffee.
 - ✓ Mesquite — gruel, broth, dumplings, pudding, bread, punch, jelly.
 - ✓ Sunflower — pudding, gravy, bread, coffee.
 - ✓ Wild grape — jelly.
 - ✓ Desert hackberry — jam, sauce, bread.
 - ✓ Squawberry or lemonade berry or skunk bush — juice, jam, bread, pudding.
 - ✓ Wolfberry or tomatillo — syrup, sauce.
 - ✓ Buffalo gourd or coyote melon — seeds, mush.
 - ✓ Cattail — boiled stalk, root shoots, soup, muffins, bread.
 - ✓ Devil's claw or unicorn plant — boiled unicorns, seeds.
 - ✓ Mormon tea — tea.
 - ✓ Wild onion — roasted or braised, soup.
 - ✓ Canaigre, wild rubarb, or dock — boiled, or pie.
 - ✓ Dandelion — crowns, coffee, wine.
 - ✓ Monkey flower — greens.
 - ✓ Miners' lettuce — greens.
- Three sources for detailed information on recipes and uses: *American Indian Food and Lore* by Carolyn Niethammer; *Wild Edible Plants of the Western United States* by Donald R. Kirk; and *Common Edible and Useful Plants of the West* by Muriel Sweet.