

# Plants and People

## A Florida Plant Guide



FLORIDA PUBLIC  
ARCHAEOLOGY  
NETWORK

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DEPARTMENT OF ANTHROPOLOGY

# About This Guide

Native Americans and some early settlers relied on the environment as their grocery, hardware stores, and pharmacy. Because of this the plants around them played an important part in their everyday lives.

**Archaeobotanists** study plants to learn about the different ways they were used by people in the past. Studying plant remains from archaeological sites helps these researchers reconstruct uses of different plants and learn about plant gathering techniques, trade networks, domestication and cultivation, and how human practices changed the environment.



The plants in this guide were used by people in the past and are still around today. The symbols next to their pictures show how people used each plant.



Food



Tools



Dyes & Paints



Medicine



Shelter



Storage



Transportation

**WARNING!** You should NEVER eat wild plants unless you know how to properly prepare them!



**Agrimony** makes a brass or yellow colored dye and is still used to treat many illnesses including skin irritations.

The fruit of the **American Groundnut** is available in all seasons and provided food to Native Americans all year-round.



Hi! My name is Tommy the Tortoise. I'll be giving you extra information about plants throughout this guide!



**American Mistletoe** was used as medicine even though all parts of the plant are poisonous. It is even dangerous to the trees it grows on!

The knees (roots that stick up out of the ground) of the **Bald Cypress** tree were hollowed out and used for bowls, cups, and other containers.



Knowledge of the uses of **Bamboo-vine** likely came from the Caribbean with migration and the slave trade.

The berries, roots, and leaves of the **Beauty Berry** bush can be used to make a medicinal tea.



**Black-eyed Susans** were used by Native Americans to treat headaches, colds, and injuries.





The very useful **Butterflyweed** was made into medicine, food, and cordage by Native Americans. As medicine, it was used to treat sore muscles and bruises.

**Button Snake-root** was used to make Native American medicines, including some for rituals. This plant was also used in the treatment of snake bites.



To tell the difference between button snake-root and buttonbush, just look at their leaves. Button snake-root has spiny leaves while buttonbush has long oval shaped leaves with no spines!

All parts of the **Buttonbush** plant were used by Native Americans to make medicines for fevers and even dental issues, but like many plants, can be toxic in large quantities.



The **Cabbage Palm** is the state tree of Florida. The fronds were used for thatch houses, mats, and cordage.



Native Americans taught early settlers about the many medicinal uses of **Boneset**.

The **Climbing Hempvine** was used as a skin medicine by native tribes all over the Southeast.



The bark of the **Coastal Plain Willow** was used to create a pain reliever like aspirin.



Ancient Romans used **Common Sowthistle** for salads and others still use it today to treat illnesses like fevers and high blood pressure.

Seminoles used the **Cocoplum** fruit for food, ashes for medicine, and branches for arrows.



Native Americans made the **Common Cattail** into medicine to treat cuts, scrapes, and burns.

**Coontie** is a poisonous plant but Native Americans figured out how to make the roots into a safe-to-eat soup called sofkee!







The flower of **Coreopsis** can make a yellow dye, while the whole plant makes a red dye.

Ancient Romans made salad with the leaves from a type of Dandelion found in Europe.



The whole **Dandelion** plant can be used to make a yellow dye.



The bark, flowers, and berries of the **Elderberry** shrub were made into dye for clothing and other textiles. The berries make a beautiful purple dye!

Native Americans and settlers noted that the **Florida Betony** made a great food, especially the tuber roots which were boiled like peanuts.



Seminole and Mikasuki tribes mixed the **Golden Polypody** with other ferns to treat chronic conditions.



**Goldenrod** was used to make a beautiful yellow dye.



The **Hickory** tree nuts can be eaten and the wood can be used to make tools like bows, arrows, and tool handles.



The inner bark and roots of the **Hog Plum** or **Tallow Wood** were used for medicine.



Wood from the **Live Oak** tree was used for fuel and in tool making. Dyes were made from the leaves, bark, and roots.

Native Americans used **Marsh Pennywort** to treat respiratory ailments.



The fruit of the **Muscadine Grape** was not only a yummy treat for early peoples but the Seminoles used the vines to make deer snares!



The roots of the **Partridge Pea** plant were used for medicine and the leaves were used for tea.

**Pickereelweed** seeds were eaten raw and can even be added to homemade granola mixes!



Many Native Americans used the **Pink Sundew** to make a topical medicine for skin ailments.

Like scientists today, Native Americans had to experiment to determine what plants were safe to eat and use for medicine.



**Pokeweed** is very toxic, but when prepared correctly can be used to make food or medicine.



Fruit from the **Pond Apple** is safe to eat in any form, but powder from the seeds can be dangerous.

All parts of the **Prickly Pear** cactus (Tommy's favorite food!) were eaten. Its roots were boiled and applied as medicine on sores.



Pioneer children made a game of popping the **Purple Passion Flower's** yellow fruit.



It is believed that **Queens Delight** was used by Native Americans to treat stomach illnesses.

Dried **Red Bay** leaves were used in cooking and for making tea.



The Seminole used **Red Cedar** to treat a number of illness such as "Rainbow sickness" (fever, stiff neck, backache) and "Hog Sickness" (unconsciousness). Other native peoples used red cedar as incense during rituals.

When the wood from the **Red Mangrove** burns it creates a high temperature fire that is perfect for firing pottery and cooking!



Native Americans collected the sap from the **Red Maple** tree to make sugar and a kind of sweet drink.



**Red Mulberry** leaves made a medicinal tea to treat a number of ailments and the wood was used to make tools. Plus, the berries make a yummy snack!

Native Americans called **Sassafras** “green stick” and used it to treat illnesses like digestive pain.



Native Floridians and early settlers used dyes to color clothing and probably other handmade cloth like mats and blankets.





The **Saw Palmetto** shrub fronds provided fiber for baskets and ropes.

The **Sawgrass** plant was used to make small woven baskets.



The **Seminole Pumpkin** fruit and flowers were used to make bread and soup.

The **Slash Pine** and **Longleaf Pine** trees were used as lumber for buildings and dugout canoes.





**Spanish Moss** was used in the earliest pottery made in Florida to keep the clay together and stop the pot from cracking when it was fired.



**St. John's Wort** can be used for many things, including a yellow dye.



Not only was the **Strangler Fig** tree sap processed into chewing gum by Native Americans, but the wood was also used to make arrows!



Native Americans used dried **Stenandrium** to ward off children's bad dreams.





The leaves of the **Swamp Dock** were used to prevent smallpox after early settlers arrived.

Doctors and scientists today use knowledge from Native People to make medicine.



The husk of **Walnuts** can be used to make a rust colored dye.



Civil War doctors used **Sweet Gum** to treat diarrhea and dysentery.



Wax from the berries of the **Wax Myrtle** shrub was used to make smokeless candles by early settlers!



Seminoles used **White Crownbeard** to treat illnesses including “bear sickness” (fever, headache, stomachache).

The leaves, seeds and roots of the **White Water-lily** were eaten by Native Americans and settlers.



The **Winged Sumac** shrub leaves and berries were used in making dyes.



Medicinal uses of **Witch-hazel** were passed from Native Americans to settlers and are still used today. You can probably find it in your local grocery store!

The whole **Yarrow** plant can be used to make a yellow or iron colored dye, depending on how it is processed.



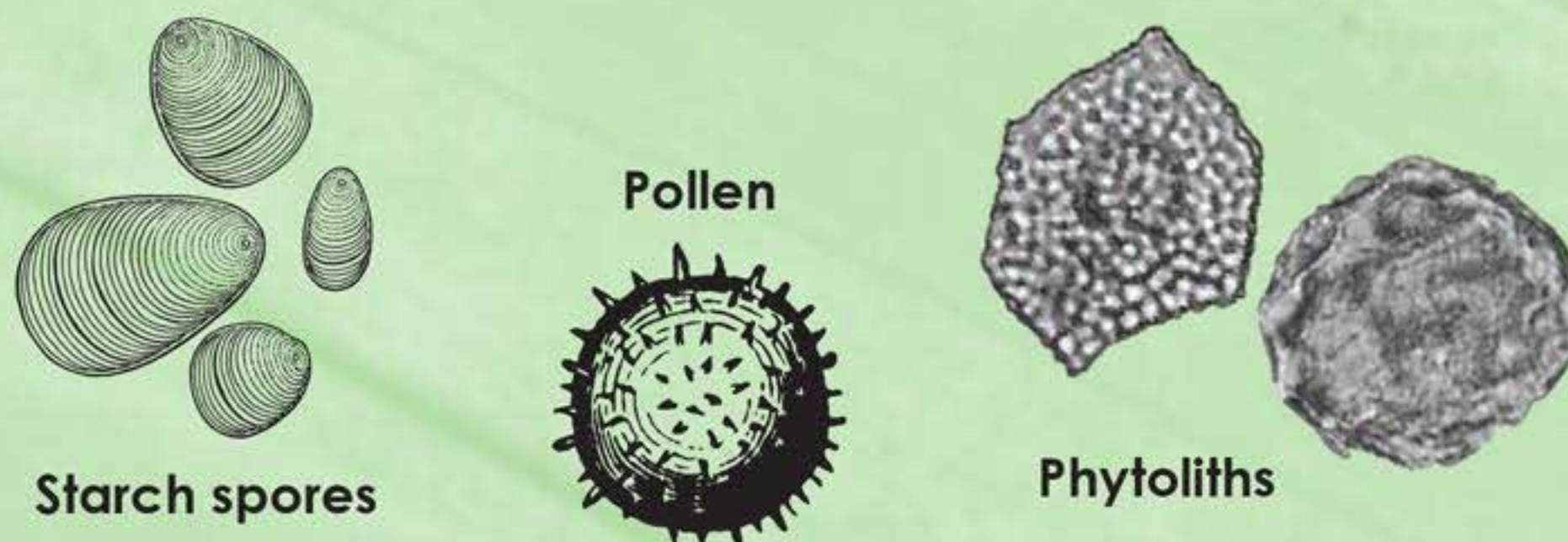
Not only was the **Yaupon Holly** bush used in making tea for the "Black Drink" ceremony but the branches were also made into arrows!

Wild plants must be specially prepared for use as food and medicine. So remember to **NEVER** eat wild plants unless you know how to properly prepare them!



# Plants and Archaeologists

Archaeologists find many different kinds of plant remains including seeds, leaves, nuts, wood, and flowers but also microscopic remains such as starch spores, pollen, and phytoliths. However, plant remains are some of the first things to decay at an archaeological site. This means that they only preserve under special environmental conditions.



Thanks to recent advances, it is now possible to study microscopic plant remains. These give archaeologists a better idea of what types of plants were around a long time ago, and in some cases, how Native Americans might have used them. It is even possible through experimental archaeology to examine residue in containers and recreate ancient recipes!

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# For More Information

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<http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/uw152>

<http://www.wildflower.org/plants/>

<http://www.fnps.org/resources/pubs>

<http://nbbd.com/edibleplants/index.html>

<http://www.fnps.org/natives/interpretivetrails>

<http://www.floridaplants.com/native.htm>

<http://www.fairchildgarden.org/education/kids-families/downloadable-learning-modules>

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