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Flavors of home

*Useful plants of the Laguna de Santa Rosa*

By Autumn Summers

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Humans and plants have always been in relationship with each other. We have plants to thank for much of our food, medicine, clothing, shelter and for the very air we breathe. While many of us in Sonoma County appreciate the fresh flavors of locally grown vegetables and fruits, we don't realize that the plants growing right outside our backdoor or along our public trails have many uses besides being beautiful to look at.

Our own Laguna de Santa Rosa waterway in Cotati is home to many interesting and useful plants. Some of these are native species such as blue elderberry, California buckeye, willow, black oak, cattails, California poppy and some are introduced species - dandelion, yellow dock and fennel.

Blue elderberry's fragrant cream-colored blossoms are gathered in the late spring and are traditionally used as a tea to help with symptoms from colds and flu. The stems of this plant are used to make flutes and other musical instruments by the Pomo people and other Native American tribes.

The chestnut brown sausage-like seed head of the cattail is a common sight in local creeks and ponds in the fall. The rhizomes (creeping roots), bases of the fresh spring stalks, and the bright yellow pollen can all be eaten if collected and prepared correctly. Rope and raincoats are just two of the myriad uses of the leaves.

Our state flower the California Poppy, from its orange flower to its orange root, is a used by herbalists for reducing mild pain and insomnia.

The stately oaks have much to offer as food. Because of the abundance of acorns in California the native people were able to thrive and live in very dense populations compared with much of North America. Acorns were one of the staple foods for the Miwok, Wappo, Pomo and many other tribes in California. They contain a good balance of protein (3-6 percent), fats (up to 18 percent) and carbohydrates (up to 65 percent) and one mature black oak tree, one of the preferred acorns, could produce up to four hundred pounds of acorns a year.

The common weed dandelion is used from Europe to the United States to support liver health and the leaves are an especially good diuretic. Some also make wine out of the dazzling yellow flowers.

Another non-native plant yellow dock with its bright yellow root also supports liver health and acts as a mild laxative.

Fennel with its feathery leaves and highly aromatic seeds is commonly used to help with indigestion, colic and to help breast feeding mothers produce more milk.

This is just a hint of what the plants in our own backyards have to offer us. Hopefully this taste has whetted your appetite to learn more about the hundreds of plants in our area. The next time you stroll along the Laguna or explore a wild corner of your backyard may you appreciate the plants in a new way and began to build on the ancient relationship all humans have with the plant kingdom. Remember before trying to eat any wild plants make sure you have a positive identification, have gathered from a non-polluted site and from a place where it is legal to do so, and understand the preparation procedures. Your own backyard may be the best place to start.

*Autumn Summers has a BA in Anthropology with an emphasis in Ethnobotany. She teaches and is Program Coordinator at the California School of Herbal Studies. Her current focus is on teaching botany, edible and medicinal plant use, and seaweed classes in and around the San Francisco Bay Area. She is past President of the Sonoma County Herb Association and leads outings for LandPaths. She will lead a guided walk along the Laguna de Santa Rosa April 2. Meet at 6 p.m. at the accordion player in La Plaza Park.*

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