



# BEST PRACTICES FOR FORAGING AND HARVESTING INDIGENOUS AND WILD PLANTS

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*This work was supported by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Office of Tribal Relations, Indigenous Food Sovereignty Initiative*



## >> Harvest Sustainably

When we harvest sustainably, we maintain ecological balance and ensure the perpetuation of our plant and wildlife relatives. Indigenous sustainability isn't necessarily about "leave no trace" or "minimizing impact." Indigenous sustainability works with the environment to leave a positive impact on the land. Traditional methods of foraging have been shown to positively impact seed dispersal and germination, soil health, and plant productivity.

## >> Asking Permission and Giving Back

Permission is not just about asking various landowners if you can go onto their property to harvest plants. When we ask permission, we also ask the Plant Nations for their guidance, preferences, and permission to take from their communities. Plants are sentient and communicative. If we are willing to ask and listen, plants will tell us what they need and how we can best practice reciprocity in a world where consumerism, capitalism, and consumption have led to the exploitation of our plant and animal relatives.

One of the greatest challenges in returning to a traditional diet is land access. Most private lands are off-limits to Foragers, and there are extremely strict laws regulating foraging on most public lands as well. Wherever you go, make sure to get permission from landowners and land managers. Familiarize yourself with current laws and regulations for harvesting on state and federally managed lands.

## >> Proper Identification

Learning to properly identify plants is an important activity for Indigenous people everywhere. While poisonous plants aren't necessarily common, some important traditional plant foods can look very similar to plants that might, at the very least, make you sick. By learning some basic plant morphology and the names of the plants around you, you can harvest with



confidence and with the vast knowledge of your ancestors guiding you.

Additionally, Indigenous peoples all over the world have their own systems of plant classification, and these systems are vitally important to understanding how plants may be related to each other, how they live on the landscape, and how they might be used for food, medicines, and materials. For example, the plant *Acorus calamus* is known as *siŋkpǎéǰhawote* or “muskrat’s food” in Lakota. This name tells us about this plant’s importance on the landscape and, if we know that muskrats are an animal that lives in or near water, we can also assume that *siŋkpǎéǰhawote* must grow in the water.

There are all kinds of amazing books, websites, social media pages, and videos available for beginner foragers who are learning to identify plants. However, consider talking to your elders and other knowledge holders in your communities to gain different and vitally important perspectives on plant identification.

### »» **Consider Conditions**

Unfortunately, many areas from which you might forage will be heavily polluted by cars, industry, or agriculture. It’s never a good idea to harvest from roadside ditches and along the edges of agricultural fields that may have been sprayed with dozens of herbicides, pesticides, and fungicides. That said, when you find a place that may have been sprayed once or twice to kill “weeds” or invasive species, you may wish to ask yourself: “Are the plants I’m interested in harvesting more or less polluted than the stuff I get in the grocery store?” The answer may surprise you. For example, you may question the dandelion greens in your yard because your neighbor sprayed once earlier in the spring, but many common, store-bought salad mixes are sprayed with upwards of 52 pesticides. That is not to say that you should be careless. If you are harvesting watercress from a polluted waterway, you could get a parasitic infection. Or, if you are harvesting cattails from a roadside ditch, the cattails will probably contain heavy metals from vehicular runoff.

Just be aware and ask lots of questions from your local roads department, your parks and recreation department, and your community.

### »» **Follow Local Indigenous Protocols**

Indigenous harvesting protocols were put into place over thousands of years of lived experience with the landscape on which we all reside. These protocols exist for important reasons... whether it is for purposes of sustainability, personal safety, or ceremony, you should follow the protocols of the people who came before you. Follow the protocols of your teachers and advisors. If you are not on the land of your ancestors and you would still like to honor them, it might be advisable to first follow the protocols of the people whose land you are on and ask elders or other knowledge holders if you may then honor your own peoples’ protocols without any disrespect to the land, you’re on. Remember that protocols exist for a reason and that a plant which is plentiful in some areas may be threatened in others. So, talk to local indigenous peoples to find out what protocols best serve sustainability and overall plant and human health.