

Harvesting and Usage

This is not a comprehensive list of native plants that are edible or all the ways they can be used. We have tried to include all of the plants included in these recipes.

Acacia	Seeds and honey
Agave	Syrup
Amaranth	Leaves and seeds
Barrel Cactus	fruit and seeds
Chia	Seeds
Cholla	blossoms
Desert Willow	Blossoms
Devils Claw	Fruit
Juniper	berries
Lamb's Quarters	Leaves and young seeds
Mesquite	flour
Oaks	Acorns
Ocotillo	blossoms
Palo Verde	peas
Prickly Pear	Blossom, Fruit and pads
Purslane	plant
Tepary	Beans
Yucca	blossoms and seeds

Acacia: The pods can be collected when dry. Crack the pods. We used a pair of pliers as they are too small for the usual nut crackers. Remove the seeds from around the pith and dry. When very dry store in tight jars. Cook as you would any dry bean. The boil, soak for an hour drain and then cook till tender method works. One caveat, we found that some of the seeds will not soften no matter what you do. So be sure to warn any who are eating to watch for an occasional hard bean. For the honey we went to a local bee keeper.

Agave: We did not harvest the Agave syrup but purchased it commercially.

Amaranth: Also known as pigs weed and careless weed will grow just about anywhere once the monsoons have started. Pick tender leaves from the plant. You can use the side stems, but the main stem tends to be too fibrous. To harvest the seeds, wait till the plant is dry then cut the tops where the seeds pods are. The pods on wild amaranth tend to be very prickly and hard. One method that works is to take a pair of very thick leather gloves (barbecue gloves work) and rub the pods between your hands. Screen out the larger particles as the seeds are quite small then winnow. You can also buy amaranth



seed commercially. If you have cultivated amaranth the plants have been hybridized to produce a lovely flower then all you need do is wait till the plant is ready to drop the seeds put a paper bag over the dried flowers and shake. You will get a lot of seeds with some chaff that you can then winnow.

Barrel Cactus: The fish hook barrel is very popular and has big yellow fruits. The fruit is ready to pick when you can remove it from the plant with a simple twist. Since there are no thorns on the fruit you can pick with your bare hands. However, some use tongs or forceps to prevent being stuck by the fish hook thorns on the plant itself. To use cut the flower end off, about 1/4 to 1/2 inch. Either cut in half and scrape out the seeds or just cut the bottom off and poke out the seeds. The fruit can be eaten raw or used in many recipes. It can be canned or frozen. I usually boil for 15 minutes before freezing. The seeds need to be extracted from the pith that surrounds them. Either dry, crush to remove the seeds then screen and winnow or put the seeds and pith in a bowl and cover with water. The pith will float. Use your fingers to loosen as much of the seed as you can from the pith. Pull out the pith and discard or dry, crush and winnow it if you want to get all the seeds. You will end up with a lot of seeds in the bowl. Drain, I use a very fine strainer. Then lay out on a cookie sheet and use your favorite method to dry. On sunny days I cover with a towel and put outside in the sun. When dry store in sealed jars. The seeds should be coarsely ground before use as the coating is tough and can cause stomach upset when consumed in quantity.

Chia: We used commercially available chia. If you can find it in the wild or you grow your own, then you will need to crush the seed pods then winnow. Chia are a very small seed.

Cholla: The blossoms come out in the spring. There are lots of thorns so be careful. We used the blossoms for the wine. Many parts of the cholla are edible. Pick the petals when they have fully opened.

Desert Willow: The desert willow blossoms over much of the summer. Pick the blossoms off the tree and use within 24 hours.

Devils Claw: Pick when the fruit is still green. Can be used very small or large depending on what you want to do with it. It will last in the refrigerator for several days. Is wonderful pickled, can be blanched and frozen. Use like you would okra.

Juniper: The juniper berry takes two years to mature. It will go from green to blue to brown. Pick when it starts turning brown. Dry fully and store in sealed containers. Do not crush until ready to use as it will lose its scent and flavoring qualities quickly.

Lamb's Quarters: Pick leaves when young and tender. Watch of the seeds to start forming and pick while still small. Sue both within a few days but you can blanch and freeze if wanted.

Mesquite: Pick in an area away from highways, toxins, pollution, construction. Taste the pods before you pick them, avoid chalky, bitter or burning flavor. Pick from the tree, not the ground (dirt, rodents, bird droppings). They should pull off the tree easily. Pods should be dry, brittle and snap easily. Shiny pods may taste good but are not dry enough for milling and can be used for other purposes. Spread pods out on a tray or screen to check for leaves, twigs, rocks and other tree debris. Remove these before roasting or storing. To avoid bruchid beetles, dry in



oven at 200 degrees for 1 hour or in a Solar Oven at low temps, <300 degrees for 30-40 minutes. If pods burn they are still usable but the flour will be darker and taste different. Store them in a clean dry food safe container until milling time. Close lid tightly as the pods will absorb moisture in the air if humidity is present.

Oaks: There are many kinds of oak trees out there. The acorns are all edible, but some are better than others. The Emory and Southern Live Oaks produce a milder acorn that does not need much leaching. Acorns contain tannins that can taste very bitter. Leaching removes some of these tannins to make the acorn more palatable. For the milder acorn soak in water for 24 hours or less. Change the water when it becomes cloudy or yellow. Tasting will tell you when it is enough. If you find a very bitter acorn then leach with boiling water. Place in a bowl, pour boiling water over it and let sit till cool. Drain and repeat until it is edible. When done dry well. I put in an oven at 250 degrees until nice and dry and a little toasty as I like the toasted flavor. Acorns are high in fat so store as you would any tree nut.

Ocotillo: Pick the blossoms when open. Watch for thorns. Use within 24 hours.

Palo Verde: The Palo Verde is a legume. Think shelling peas. You can pick the fruit as soon as the pod starts to swell. You do not eat the shell. The peas will be sweet and very tender but small. You can pick them all the way up until the pods are beige and very dry. If still very green cook as you would peas or lima beans depending on the age of the peas. Blanch and freezer for later use. For dry shell and store in the freezer. I find the center stays green for a long time and so do not want to take the chance they will mold if stored at room temperature. For the dry peas soak and cook as you would dry peas.

Prickly Pear: It would be better to show you then try to describe. Both the fruit and pads are edible and good for you. Use tongs and hard sided containers for collecting as the prickly pear is generally full of tiny thorns that are miserable if they get you. The pads should be collected when no bigger than your hand. You are looking for the newest growth. Older pads have tough fiber that makes them less palatable. Fruit is picked when it is fully ripe. The color of the ripe fruit should run all the way to the bottom of the fruit. Most will be a beautiful magenta but there are varieties that are green, orange of pink. I find if I put the pads or fruit in water and swish vigorously it helps remove a lot of the thorns. Using tongs, a knife or thick rubber or polyurethane gloves hold the pad on one end and using the point or sharp edge of a knife scrape the glochids off the pad. You do not need to peel the pads for most recipes. Rinse well to be sure the thorns are all gone, cut and use as directed in any recipe. The pads can be bought commercially. Both the pads and the fruit can also be treated with flame to burn off the thorns. Place on a fire proof surface. The grill from a barbecue works well for this. I used a garden dragon but there are several hand-held flame producers that can be used. Be sure to turn the pad or fruit using tongs so you get all sides evenly before trying to touch them. For the fruit if you do not want to use a flame thrower then depending on the use of the fruit the following. If you are looking for juice, place the ripe fruit in doubled grocery bags in the freezer of 24 hours, remove from the freezer and put in a strainer in a bowl to thaw. Once thawed squeeze the juice out. I put them in a potato ricer and squeeze. Store the juice in the freezer for long term storage. It will keep in the refrigerator of a week or so. For the fruit using heavy gloves such as you would use for furniture refinishing. Hold the fruit in your palm cut off the flower end. Cut in half. Using a grapefruit spoon or regular spoon scrape out the seeds and discard. Starting at the blossom use the spoon to scoop out the fruit meat from the peel. Enjoy as is freeze, make jam, or can. I use the Ball Blue Book of canning recipe for extra light syrup and



boiling water canning method for 20 minutes. I do find that adding some citric acid or lemon juice helps to brighten the flavor of the prickly pear fruit.

Purslane: Low growing, prolific green found in many areas once the monsoons start. Use the leaves and tender stems. The main stem tends to be too tough. This is a good hardy green that can be eaten fresh, cooked in stews or sautés. It will hold up well to blanching and freezing for later use in cooking. NOTE this is a low-lying leaf so wash well before using. Think spinach.

Tepary Bean: This plant does grow wild and if you are lucky enough to find it great. However, it can be grown in your garden or purchased commercially. It can be eaten when young and tender. If you buy it commercially it will be dried. Use the boil and soak for an hour, drain and cook method. Length of time needed to cook will depend on the age of your beans. They will double in size when cooked. Store in airtight containers when dry refrigerate or freeze when cooked.

Yucca: There are two common types of yucca in our area, Soaptree and Banana. The flower petals from both are edible and can be used in wine making. Pick when fully open as they will be at their sweetest. Watch the leaves as you do this as there are points on the leaves and sometimes barbs that will cause you to bleed if you are not careful. Pick the flowers, wash, and remove the petals. The petals are good right off the plant but are firm enough that they hold up well to cooking and can be blanched and frozen for later use. The Yucca does not produce fruit every year. IF you have a good year you will seed lots of fruits. The soaptree yucca fruit is upright on the branches. Harvest while still green, simply pull down the flower stalk and using clippers cut the fruit off. The fruit is edible but is considered a subsistence food as it is full of fiber that man find unpalatable. However, the seed inside the fruit is a treasure. To harvest cut the stem end off, using a knife cut into the pod open at one of the indentations. Pull the fruit open and you will see pockets full of seeds. Pull them out and put on a cookie sheet. With your fingers loosen up the seeds. You will see there are many thin seeds all stuck together. You do not need to loosen them all up but run them thru your fingers and loosen up most of them. A thin layer. No more than two seeds thick on the cookie sheet is good. Put in a 300-degree oven for about an hour. If you have a solar oven you can use it. When the seeds are dry and the white ones are starting to turn brown remove form the oven, cool and grind. I use a coffee grinder set on fine. Sift and they are ready to use. Store unused portion in an airtight container. The banana yucca fruit hangs down on the branch and is larger. It is sweeter and meatier and the seeds are not as flavorful.