

Outdoor Awareness

Know your plants & berries

POISONOUS PLANTS

PUSHKI



Alaska has no poison ivy or oak, but it does have cow parsnip, also known as Pushki or wild celery. It can be found in open woods and around most houses in Valdez. It grows to about 9 feet tall and has small white flowers arranged in an umbrella-like cluster. The bruised leaves of this large perennial can leave a chemical on the skin that makes it very sensitive to the sun, causing a blistered burn in a short while. Not everyone is sensitive but those with other allergies should be cautious. The reaction is easy to prevent - wear long pants and long sleeves when hiking around cow parsnip, especially on sunny days. Should you touch the plant, be sure to wash your skin thoroughly with soap and water.

BANE BERRY



Baneberry is found in wetlands and commonly grows to three feet tall. It has a lacy leaf that is distinctive, as is the berry. Though the berry may be red or white, it always has a groove from stem to stem on one side, similar to that of a peach. Be sure your children know how to identify and avoid this plant. All parts of this plant are poisonous if eaten, but the roots and berries are especially toxic. While death from baneberry poisoning is rare, symptoms can be extremely uncomfortable and include vomiting, delirium, and stomach cramps lasting up to three hours. Symptoms may be worse for children than adults. The berries of the baneberry plant are bright and colorful and are especially attractive to children. Baneberry was used as a medicinal plant by American Indians.

GOOD ALASKA BERRY PICKING

Berry picking is akin to beachcombing. It is very addictive. If you've ever had a blueberry pie made with fresh blueberries then you know what I mean. Blueberries, Salmonberries, Raspberries and many other berries are all over Alaska. With nearly 50 types of berries in Alaska, most of which are edible, it is no wonder that the fruit has been a mainstay of the Alaska Native diet for centuries. Berry picking brings out Alaskans in droves to their favorite spots. In Alaska there are plenty of berries to go around and you can pick all you want. Remember, bears also love berries and they have the right-of-way. Sing, make noise or wear bear bells so they hear you coming! **Very Important!** I would advise anyone who has never been berry picking in Alaska, to get a book with pictures of berries that include the leaves. Alaska has many similar berries that are poisonous. Leaf identification helps very much so. You'll also want to avoid all white berries. Every white berry in Alaska is poisonous.

Many Types of Berries: The edibility of some depends upon the maturity of the plant. Highbush cranberries are tastier before maturity, while others, like northern red currant, are tastier afterward. Crowberries and alpine bearberries are among the berries that look tasty all the time, but, in fact, never are -- at least not off the plant. Keep in mind that doesn't necessarily mean they aren't good to eat. Crowberries, for instance, are good for pies and jellies, and bearberries can be mixed with other berries as an "extender" in pies. This is worth noting because crowberries, which grow on a low, green, shrub-like plant, are often plentiful and untouched in the Anchorage area. They are also said to be best when picked after a good frost.

BLUEBERRY



The picking season is anywhere from late August to late September. Very sweet in taste they are far superior to their cultivated cousins. Wild blueberries are an excellent source of vitamin C, niacin, manganese, carbohydrates, and dietary fibre. They also contain little sodium or fat. Generally higher elevation produce sweeter berries. Blueberries get very dark (near black) when they are ripe and about to fall. That is the best time to pick due to taste and sweetness.

SALMONBERRY



Salmonberries ripen in early August. On moist, sunny slopes in Alaska, the Salmonberry plants can form impenetrable thickets. They are a close cousin of the raspberry. The juicy fruit, which looks like a yellow or orange blackberry, is a welcome trailside snack, though too bland for some tastes. Native Americans ate not only the berries but also the tender young shoots. Numerous birds and animals also feast on the fruits, which may be abundant in good years. The deep pink flowers are distinctive and may occur along with the fruits.

RASPBERRY



The Raspberry is a plant that produces a tart, sweet, red composite fruit in late summer or early autumn. The fruit is not a true berry but a cluster of drupelets around a central core. Very small, but very tasty.

CROWBERRY



Crowberries are common in bogs and alpine meadows. Very bland raw, but sweetened in a pie, incredible! The crowberry is similar in appearance to a blueberry. It is a light green, mat forming shrub which grows in areas similar to that of the partridgeberry. The Inuit, of which these berries are a staple, call them, "Fruit of the North". Their flowers, male, female, or both sexes are purple-crimson, inconspicuous, and appear May to June. The season usually begins in July and lasts until the first snow. They are almost completely devoid of natural acid and their sweet flavor generally peaks after frost. Crowberries are extremely high in vitamin C, approximately twice that of blueberries.

HIGHBUSH CRANBERRY



Just follow your nose to find Highbush Cranberries. But besides being tasty, highbush cranberries can be gathered until after the snow flies. They have a very distinctive smell. It's the smell of fall, a musty fox smell. Beware of Baneberries! Baneberries, similar in looks to highbush cranberries, can be found interspersed in a patch of waist-high, highbush cranberry foliage. But baneberries have some subtle but noticeable differences from the highbush cranberries. The baneberry's seed is different from the highbush cranberry. It has a little, black crescent-shaped seed inside and a tiny, poppyseed-like black spot on the outside.

LINGONBERRY



Lingonberries ripen in August and are red, tart and smaller than cranberries but with a finer flavor. The jewel-like, ruby-red lingonberries with small, shiny oval-shaped green leaves are much smaller than commercial cranberries. They are found on slender stalks, sometimes in clusters, low to the ground in woods, thickets, mountain slopes and tundra. Lingonberries are an extremely versatile and valuable food source and also have a high level of antioxidants.