



# SUNSHINE VALLEY

## Homes & Gardens



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# ARROWLEAF BALSAMROOT - Finding and Preparing the Medical Root

by John Dowd

Of the many medicinal remedies that could be useful in modern times, there is one that trails its use long into man's history. Arrowleaf balsamroot, or the Oregon sunflower, grows prolifically in the west from northern Canada down into Mexico, and as far east as the great plains.

Found in fantastic numbers blooming in the spring, these brilliant yellow flowers are often seen blanketing hillsides in vast numbers. They are considered one of the three great flowers of the Montana, among lupine and Indian paint brush. When the three are seen growing together, the blue and red of the formers, mix with the yellow of the balsamroot, and together they create a tapestry of color difficult to surpass anywhere and anytime in the Rocky Mountains..

First recorded by the Lewis and Clark expedition, the two venturers recounted in their journals the Native Americans eating the stems with no preparation. Likely what they were eating were the young plant stems raw, as the older ones can become bitter. From personal experience I would stick to the young roots as well, as there is a chemical citrus taste that grows with age in these flowers.

However, that chemical taste carries with it some impressive medicinal properties. Impressive properties, even among many other wild medicinal plants, and the use of these properties is simple and easily prepared.



The major medical use by native tribes including the Nez Perce, Salish, Flathead, Kootenai and more, stemmed from the antibacterial, expectorant, and respiratory stimulation effects that root sap carries. Together, these properties prove a very effective treatment for colds, flues, and any ailments that detriment breathing. Made as a tea, native peoples and pioneers ingested it to treat inflammation and ease coughing. As a poultice or balm, the plant has similar effects when used topically on the chest or throat to a lesser degree. It was also used as to salve wounds and fight off infection.

In early spring these plants grow in vast clusters, which helps to easily identify them. They have large light green leaves shaped like the tip of a triangular arrow, hence their name. They will sprout clusters of large vibrant yellow flowers on tall stems. Each plant will grow no more than a foot and a half from the ground, and each plant is no bigger around than about a tennis ball. This small size can deceive from its girthy root system, which can be difficult to harvest. They also tend to favor rocky soil, and the taproot can reach depths of nearly three feet. As the plants grow in age, their taproots grow larger and much deeper.

As mentioned, harvesting can be difficult because not only the nature of where and how they grow, but because the outer bark on the roots can be easily cut off by accident, leaving the inner root to collect dirt which difficult to remove from the sticky sap.



Balsamroot is easy to peel once the bark has been soaked, dried, then cracked open. wearing gloves can help mitigate the sticky sap that will inevitably cover one's hands during the process.



Arrowleaf Balsamroot flowers often grow in great numbers on hillsides in the west. bright yellow, and commonplace in the summer, they often define wild spaces.

The best method for harvesting is to pick young plants or to dig about six inches away from the root around the base of the plant, and to work down, slowly uncovering the root to then be pulled out.

Care should be taken when harvesting, because the plants play an important role in maintaining embankments with their deep strong roots and vast numbers. It should also be discerned weather or not their harvest is legal in the area in which they grow. In many national parks, the harvest of anything natural is illegal. In some national forests, the harvest of anything in a substantial quantity may require a license.

Once home, the roots should be left to sit in the sun and dry overnight. This process is optional, however, makes bark removal easier. After this they should be soaked in water for a few minutes while washing them of dirt and rocks. Once set in the sun to dry a second time for only a few minutes, they will rehydrate and soften in their outer bark. They can then be smacked between two flat rocks to crack open the bark. That outer sheath of bark will then peel off much like the outer layers of a carrot, leaving a clean lightcolored core.



## Arrowleaf Balsamroot Finding and Preparing the Medical Root

Balsamroot was traditionally dried in the sun on wicker mats or on gravelly riverbanks. The plant was steamed by the Cheyenne, a cloth or hide was put over the patient's head, and their head was placed over the steaming liquid in a pot. hot rocks heated in the fire would be put into the solution to stone boil it, further releasing steam to be inhaled directly into the lungs. this increases its effectiveness. Besides humans, deer, elk, bison, bighorn sheep and other ungulates and hooved animals feed on the plant.

These roots can then be dried in the sun for prolonged storage or used fresh. One way to make an effective tea is to cut the root pieces into smaller chunks and to boil or simmer them in water until they are fragrant, which is the more traditional way of preparation. The longer they steep, the more potent the tea will be. However, they do not have an offensive smell or taste.

It is important to do more research on these, as well as any other wild medicinal or edible. Picking and consuming or even touching the wrong thing can cause anything from a mild stomachache to coma, hallucinations, lifelong sickness, or even death. Many experts will suggest taking like "walkabout" lessons, where an expert or traditional and knowledgeable person leads a hike, or venture. These are important to gain firsthand knowledge about wild plants, to mitigate the risks of misidentification. Though there is always a risk, the knowledge of these kinds of plants, as well as what one can and cannot eat, is invaluable. &



It is best to get the water at a low simmer, rather than a boil. this will prevent the possibility of breaking down medicinal chemicals and proteins. as for dosage, there are no hard and fast rules. since balsamroot is an untamed and undomesticated plant that grows wild, concentrations can vary wildly. some plants will be quite strong, while others much less so. The best gauge is in the aroma when it is close to being done. it should be quite strong, and if it is not, one can always add more root. this plant, in natural concentrations, is very unlikely to cause an overdose.



When the tea is ready it should have a dull yellow color and smell lightly of pine sol. Sugar can be added for taste, but it is actually quite refreshing. the effects can often be felt instantly as the consumers airways should start to loose swelling and breathing will become easier.