

A closer look at our relatives, ts'aqw'a', xum'xum', qwa'pulhp

By Sally Hart

This paper focuses on the use of a few specific plants that are of importance to First Peoples in Cowichan Territory on Vancouver Island and neighboring areas. I was inspired by Nancy J. Turner's Plant Technology of First Peoples in British Columbia published in 1998 by the Royal BC Museum. This particular publication was the third of three handbooks that the RBCM commissioned. I was particularly interested in the information in this third publication because it is formatted differently from Turner's first two handbooks. Specifically, when referencing a particular plant, Turner included information relating to **all** first peoples who used the plant, where the plant was used, and for what purpose, because often plant distribution was widespread and overlapped territories. Consequently, as a reader, I could envision a "mental map" to locate and connect the plant and its users within the province of British Columbia and compare how it was used from one area to another in the same reference.

There are at least 16 plant references pertaining specifically to the Cowichan people and plant use in this handbook. They occur on the following pages: pp. 76, 77, 107, 126, 128, 135, 148, 166, 171, 172, 181, 182, 189, 203, 218, and 219. However, in this particular paper it is necessary to narrow my focus and look at just a few plants used in Cowichan Territory and on Southern Vancouver Island. However, because of the aforementioned plant distribution, I found it fitting in some cases to include First Peoples' practices in other adjoining areas such as Haida Gwai, Washington State, and Alaska.

ts'aqw'a'

Skunk Cabbage, or Swamp Lantern, or Yellow Arum

Latin name: *Lysichiton americanum*

This plant is an herbaceous perennial with thick, fleshy rootstocks and large clustered, oval, bright green, waxy leaves that measure from 40 to 100 cm long. It flowers in early spring and the bloom is a bright yellow sheath up to 20 cm long and surrounds a yellowy green club-like flower stalk. The seeds can be seen embedded in a white pulpy tissue when the plant is mature and the stalk breaks open. This plant likes to grow in swamps, bogs and other moist sites such as muddy ground under conifers. However, if it is too shady, it will not flower. When it does flower, it produces a strong, unpleasant odor much like the scent produced by an agitated skunk. The leaves were also used for lying on drying racks under the food. When the drying process was done

The leaves of a skunk cabbage are not edible, but they are really useful when preparing and serving food, kind of like our "waxed paper" Because the leaves are water-repellent, they were formerly used for lining steam pits, berry baskets, oil baskets, and storage pits. Although the leaves do not smell good, they do not seem to leach their flavor into the foods they come in contact with. , the food was easily peeled off the leaves (Coastal and Interior Salish). The edges of the large leaves could be pinned together to make a make-shift berry container. Other uses were for sun-shades (the larger leaves), coiling them up for a make-shift drinking cup, and for toys spears (Nuxalk, Ditidaht).

Oral Presentation

I am thankful for the following information from my late respected relative, Ellen White, and those who interviewed and translated what she generously shared. The following material is to be orally shared or read in Hul'q'umi'num' as a Language Lesson. It is not for printed distribution.

From an interview with our late relative, Ellen White.

ts'aqw'a' - Skunk Cabbage

- 1 niilh tl'uw' ni' kwthu shun'ut-s kw'nu si'lu tthu sts'aqw'a'.
There was another name that my grandfather used to call that skunk cabbage.
- 2 nem' ulh ts'u tl'uw' q'eptum' 'ukws miis wun'a tuw' yu qw'iqw'ulas
They used to gather them in the early springtime.
- 3 'i' ni' 'uwute' ___
when there wasn't other [food].
- 4 hwuw'ete' nan 'uw' tuw' xew's s'ulhtuns tthu mustimuhw
The people used to use it as their first food in the springtime.
- 5 hwuw'ete' 'u tthey' speenhw 'i' tthey' xut'ustuhwut tuw' sqewtheen
That's before the camas and others, and the one that's like potatoes,
- 6 st'e 'u kw' tuw' 'unyuns 'uw' stemus.
like onions or whatever.
- 7 tl'uw' xut'ustum' tthey' huqwamtsulhp.
They used to call that huqwamtsulhp, "stink plant".
- 8 'uw' niis huqwamlheen 'uw' niis huqwamtsulhp nu sht'eewun'
Whether the leaves smelled, I think they used to call it smelly plant.
- 9 st'e 'uw' yath neesulh tuw' xut'ustuhw hwhuqwa'mul'nuts.
They used to say that it was always stinky bottom.
- 10 'i' niilh ts'u 'uw' lhey'xtum' tthey' kws wulh wun'a.a.as m'i wil',
And they did used to eat that only when it was first coming out.
- 11 tl'lim' ch nem' 'uw' sisuxwum' hunum' 'u tthey' qa' kwus sqwuqwis
And they would go right into the water to pick it.
- 12 'i' ni' 'uy'uy'mut tthey' st'e 'uw' niis p'uq' tthey' nii st'ee 'uw' niis s'ulnutss.
And its root would be very white.
- 13 hays 'al' 'uli'uy'mut tthey' s'ulnutss tthey' ts'aqw'a' p'ep'q' tl'lim' 'uw' p'ep'q'
The skunk cabbage roots were very beautiful, very white. White, really white.

- *14 'i' ha' ch nem' tl'lim' 'uw' sixwum, tl'uw' hwun' xuy'tl'
It's still very cold, and you go and pick it, wading into the water
- 15 'i' wulh nem' ch kwukwun'ut.
to get those roots.
- 16 tl'lim' 'uw' hwun' tum'xuytl' 'i' 'uw'ulh haqwum tthuw'nilh.
It would still be winter. There would already be a smell to it.

xum'xum'

Common Horsetail

Latin name: *Equisetum arvense L*

Horsetails are primitive plants that are closely related to ferns, although they do not look particularly alike. Their ancestors of hundreds of thousands of years ago actually grew a hundred feet high.

There are actually three types of this plant used by First Peoples of British Columbia. The two that grow in coastal areas from Washington through BC to Alaska are the common horsetail (*Equisetum arvense L*) and the scouring plant (*E. hyemale*). They are widespread and found in meadows, in moist soil, and often occur in populated areas as a garden weed. This plant produces bushy-looking, branched segmented stems. They are generally light green and produce separate brownish, un-branched stems that bear the reproductive spores.

Downriver Halkomelem and Island Halkomelem peoples used horsetail as a polishing agent for nails, bone, wood, and so they are commonly referred to as "Indian sandpaper". The black rhizomes that grow on the underside of the branch were used for patterns and interwoven in basketry designs by the Tahltan people, and likely others. Horsetail was also used to make whistles.

My gardening experience at Kwa'mutsun Xats'a' revealed that the roots go as deep as three feet making it very difficult to control or eliminate in a tended garden. I was unaware of the traditional uses of the plant during the time I lived there.

The third type, Giant Horsetail (*E. telmateia*), grows further away from the coast in Upriver Halkomelem territory, and is a much taller version of horsetail. The people of that area used the young shoots and cones as food. See additional names for these plants listed on the Halkomelum Ethnobotany Website by D. Gerds & B. Compton.

The following story told by Stitumaat, Ruby Peter, transcribed by Donna Gerdts, about harvesting xum'xum' for food for the elders in her family, supports the data available about First Nations peoples consuming the young shoots of the cone for food in the springtime.

Commentary on Horsetail by Stitumaat, Ruby Peter

1. yathulh 'uw' q'apthut tthunu shhwum'ne'lukw, nu sul'si'lu, ni' 'u tthu lelum's tthunu shhwuw'weli.
My parents, my family, my aunts and uncles were always coming together.
2. kwus wulh tus 'u tthu wulxuw lhq'el'ts 'i' hwu saay' tthunu men kws tl'shunups, wulh yaays 'u tthu tumuhw.
My father was ready to do some plowing. (just after the passing of March).
3. wulh nilh suw' tl'shunups theytus tthu tumuhw kws punum's 'u tthu s'ulhtuns tse'.
And he would start plowing for planting.
4. 'i tst 'uw' hwun' mumun'lh st'ul'iqulh 'i' tst 'uw' xwan'chunum' 'ul' hiiw'alum' ni' 'u tthu spulhxun.
We were just still small children. And we would be just be running around in the fields.
5. suw' xut'ustaal'ut 'u lhu ten tst, "'nem' aluxut kw' the'thqi' 'i' kw' xum'xum'.
And our mother told us to just go find some salmonberry shoots and some horsetails.
6. ni' tst 'uw' shtatul'stuhw tthu shni's tthu qux tthu lila'.
We knew the place where there were lots of salmonberries.
7. sutst nem' 'uw' xwchenum 'i' tthunu shuyulh nem' hwlhq'a'thum nem' 'u tthu spulhxun, 'ulxe'um' 'u tthu the'thqi' 'utl' lila', shni's kwus qux tthu xum'xum'.
And then me and my brother ran across and went looking for some, going to the little field where there was a lot of horsetails.
8. 'ulxe'um' nuw'ush 'u tthu skw'a'wus kwutst yu 'a'luxut.
And we would put it in a container, bucket. And we were looking for salmonberry shoots, we knew there were lots of salmonberry bushes.
9. hay 'ul' qux stutes 'u tthu shelh.
There were lots by the road.
10. ni' [tst] yu hul'kwut tthu the'thqi'i' sutst 'uw' luts'ut tthu te'luw' tst.
Then we broke all the shoots and filled up our arms with them,
11. kwus wulh hwu qux tthu the'thqi'i' sutst 'uw' nem'ustuhw 'u tthu s'ul-hween tst, 'al'mutsun' t'am'mut 'u tthu xum'xum' 'i' tthu lila', the'thqi'i'.
breaking the shoots and where we had a lot of salmonberry shoots, we filled up our arms and brought it to the elders who were waiting for us to come home with that.

12. nilh hay 'ul' ni' 'uy'st-hwus tthu s'ul'eluhw kwsus nilhs 'ulhtun.
That was their treat, what they snacked on.
13. sutst 'uw' 'a'must tthu'ne'ullh 'u tthu[w' mukw] ni' 'aluxutut.
So we gave it to them.
14. tun'ni' sht'es tthu xum'xum' 'i' ni' st'e 'u tthu na'tu.
The horsetail when you peel it it's like the corn that you have to peel out the separate parts.
15. ni' tst kw'ulutth't 'i' tuw' q'et'um'amush tthu'nilh, 'i' nilh niilh 'uy'st-hwut.
You peel it and then you peel it off before you eat it.
16. tthu xum'xum' 'i' tuw' 'uwu te' shnu'e'luqups. [tth'ewum no taste]
'i' nilh thulh kws hays 'ul' 'uy'st-hwus tthu s'ul-hween [tst].
The horsetails were kind of bland but the elders really loved it.
17. nilh tst 'uw' lhuyxt tthu xum'xum' 'i' tthu the'thq'i's [tthu lila'].
We used to eat it too.
18. nilh hay 'ul' 'uy'st-hwut tthu the'thq'i'. tthu the'thq'i's tthu lila' 'i' hay 'ul' 'uy'.
The salmonberry shoots, that was the best that we ever had.
19. ni' tst kw'ulutth't 'i' tuw' q'et'um'amush tthu'nilh, 'i' nilh niilh 'uy'st-hwut.
We peeled the skin off and it was really sweet like how celery tastes.
20. qux tthu ni' nemust-hwut 'u tthu s'ul-hween 'i' nuw' 'uw'qtus tthu ni' nemust-hwut
kwus hay 'ul' 'uy'st-hw 'eelhtun.
We brought lots to the elders and they really loved it and ate it all.
21. nilh tst tl'uw' hay 'ul' 'uy'stuhw tthu the'thq'i' 'utl' lila'.
And we really loved having it too.
22. nilh niilh hay 'ul' 'uw' s'i'lhtun's 'u kwsus wulh m'i yu kw'akw'usthut, wulh tsulel 'i'
tum'qw'i'lus.
That's all what we used to eat in the springtime, when the thetqi came out.
23. nilh yath nuw' nu s-he'kw' kwthey' nilh sht'e tst nilh sul'uthut tst. Hay ch q'u.
And I always remember that. Thank you.