

## The Salish Seasonal Round

### By Julie Cajune

#### Spring

Everything was waking up at this time of year. Wildflowers were blooming and migratory birds were returning from their wintering grounds. The songs of red-winged blackbird and meadowlark were the music of spring. The first thunder is heard during spring and the Coyote stories would be put away until the next winter. All of the hibernating animals would be coming out.

People would be fishing and plant harvesting would begin. All the plants would be welcomed back. Buttercups, one of the first spring wildflowers, were used as a medicine. Other wildflowers such as yellowbells were used as a fruit. "Indian celery," or cow parsnip would be eaten when the stalks were young and succulent. Can you imagine what a treat these first fresh foods would be after a long winter?

In April or May the bitterroot would return. The bitterroot was one of the most important food plants of the Salish. From the time the bitterroot plant was first gifted to the Salish people. It has returned every year in spring when the waters are running deep. Bitterroot is dug before the plant blooms. People made a digging tool out of hardened wood with a slightly curved tip. An antler was often used as a handle. The antler would be soaked until it was softened and then a hole was made so the top of the wooden stick could be pushed through. Roots that were not eaten fresh were dried and stored for later use.

#### Summer

Plant gathering continued through the summer season. Tipi poles would be cut in late spring or early summer. Lodgepole pine was used for tipi poles because of its straight growth and small diameter. Other pine trees were used for food. Underneath the bark is the cambium layer and during spring and early summer it is sweet and moist. Scarred trees show this past tradition of peeling the inner bark for a treat. Cedar bark would also be collected in spring and early summer to make bark baskets.

Camas was another important food for the Salish. The camas plant usually blooms in June. After the bloom is gone, the bulbous roots were at their best to dig. Camas bulbs were baked for several days in an earthen oven. Baking camas required knowledge, skill, and labor. Tree moss would be collected and cleaned for baking with the camas bulbs. A pit would be dug and lined with rocks and a fire built over them. After the fire burned, the rocks would be sufficiently heated. Alder logs would be placed over the rocks, and alder branches and then skunk cabbage leaves. The cleaned camas bulbs and washed, wet moss were then layered over the skunk cabbage leaves. Skunk cabbage leaves and bark were then layered over the camas and moss. In the middle of the pit, a long piece of wood was

stuck standing up above the ground. The pit would then be carefully covered with dirt. The stick was removed and water poured into the hole that it left. Another fire was built on top of the pit and allowed to burn down. This would usually be done for three days to sufficiently bake the camas.

When the wild rose bloomed in early summer, the Salish knew that the buffalo would be fattened up. This signaled the time for the summer buffalo hunt. The Salish depended heavily upon the buffalo and “going to buffalo” was a large part of the Salish economy.

Other plants harvested during summer included many varieties of mint teas and a favorite – mountain tea. Serviceberries and huckleberries began to ripen. If the huckleberries were plentiful, people could pick enough to last all winter and spring. Huckleberries were also used as a medicine; the bushes were used to make a tea for backaches and kidney ailments. Other berries collected during this time were foam berries, thimbleberries, and raspberries.

Chokecherries were also an important berry crop and the bark from the chokecherry tree was used as a medicine for stomach illness. Chokecherries were pounded and made into patties and then dried. Dried chokecherries could later be made into soup. Oregon grape would also be collected and eaten fresh or mashed and dried. The roots were used as a medicine and also made a brilliant yellow dye.

Plants are powerful friends. Many modern medicines were originally made from plants. Some plants have poisonous look a likes and great care should be taken when using plants for food or medicine. Salish knowledge of the botany and pharmacology was extensive and developed over generations. Plant harvesting also involved spiritual traditions and these traditions were essential to how plants were harvested and prepared. Utilizing plants without the proper knowledge and care could cause harm or even death if a plant is misidentified or not properly prepared. Additionally, the over harvesting of a plant in particular area can cause irreparable harm to that plant community.

## Fall

This was the time for hunting big game such as elk and moose. Different hunting methods were used in the old days. Deer were run into a corral made of tree branches. After enough deer had been killed, the corral was taken down and the rest of the deer would be let go. In hunting elk, sometimes an elk whistle was used to call elk during their mating season. The whistle was made from the hollow stem of cow parsnip.

After hunting trips were over and enough food stored for the winter, the weather would bring people inside. Men repaired tools and weapons and women made and repaired clothing and household items. After the snowfall, the Coyote stories would be brought out, and people would gather for storytelling. Some stories described and explained how the world came to be as it is. Stories might provide a lesson for proper behavior and relationships among human beings and with the natural world. Coyote showed the good and bad traits of human beings, and his actions could be that of a hero or a fool.

## Winter

During the winter months, the fur bearing animals have their thickest coats. In winter people would trap martin, mink, otter, and beaver. People would also “go to buffalo” during the winter. The buffalo have their best hides for robes during this time. Hair from buffalo was also used to make ropes.

Winter was an important time of thanksgiving and prayer. People would come together to pray and sign. One song that they would sing is the Shake Hands song. During these gatherings the people would greet one another, giving thanks for seeing each other and living another year. This was a sacred and happy time as families came together for the Jump Dance. People would sing and dance for good health, successful hunting, plentiful plant harvesting, and protection of their children.

Coyote stories would continue throughout the winter season. Long ago there were many songs that accompanied the stories. Many of these songs have been lost.