

Nisenan Uses of Manzanita

The California Heritage: Indigenous Research Project (CHIRP) is a nonprofit organized by tribal members to preserve, protect, and perpetuate Nisenan culture. Their efforts include restoring heavily degraded landscapes through cultural burns. Manzanita is a native plant that is benefited by such regularly applied fire. In “History of Us: Nisenan Tribe of the Nevada City Rancheria,” Tribal Chairman Richard B. Johnson shares nuanced uses of Manzanita among an extensive compilation of natural medicine. I highly recommend you seek out a copy of this book, and learn more about the efforts to return homeland to Nisenan stewardship:

<https://chirpca.org/homelandreturn>

From “History of Us: Nisenan Tribe of the Nevada City Rancheria” compiled by Tribal Chairman Richard B. Johnson (Comstock Bonanza Press, 2018):

- Manzanita berries were ground and sifted through a basket lined with shredded tule or wiregrass fibers to capture the powder. This was mixed with water to create a sweet refreshing drink (p. 84).
- Its dense burls were carved into temporary smoking pipes, but these didn’t last very long (p. 76)
- As a medicine Manzanita had several uses (pp. 86 - 90).
 - Berry teas were consumed and chewed leaf poultices applied as lotions for poison oak rashes
 - Berries and leaves were chewed and eaten as a stomach, gastric, kidney, and bladder remedy
 - Leaves were boiled into a dark extract used as a wash to relieve certain headaches
 - Leaf teas also aided headaches and rheumatism
 - Flower blossom teas treated coughing and colds
 - Dried bark was brewed to cure tuberculosis and pneumonia
- The book’s disclaimer reads: “Warning: No-one should consume wild foods based only the information in this book, nor should anyone eat any part of a plant without being absolutely sure of its identification and how to prepare and safely consume it. Nature plays tricks on man. Plants sometimes look alike, but one may be safe to eat and the other may be deadly to humans.” (p. 91)

From “The Ethnobotany of the California Indians” by George R. Mead (University of Northern Colorado, Occasional Publications in Anthropology Ethnology Series, No. 30, 1972, p. 20):

- Nisenan gathered berries half-ripe before drying and breaking them up, placing them in a porous basket, and passing water through the powder. After letting the mixture stand a few hours, the cider was ready to be drunk.

From “Tending the Wild: Native American Knowledge and the Management of California’s Natural Resources” by M. Kat Anderson (University of California Press, 2013, pp. 277- 278)

- More than any other beverage, crushed manzanita berry cider quenched the thirst in Indian homes across California. Slicks were used for mashing manzanita berries and separating the hard seeds. The fruits were mashed with mortars into a dry pulp and gathered in basket colanders. Water was then poured into the large mass, with liquid drained into another watertight basket. It looked as delicious and tasted as cooling as apple cider. Each woman had her special manzanita shrubs that would provide the best berries.

From “Fire in Sierra Nevada Forests: A Photographic Interpretation of Ecological Changes since 1849” by George E. Gruell (Mountain Press, 2001, pp. 202 - 205)

- Nisenan performed intentional burns in late fall to reduce the number of young trees and maintain the boundary between conifer forests and the oak-grasslands that provided edible acorns, basket materials, and hunting ground. Even as high as Placerville (2200 ft.), they ensured that timber stands around permanent settlements were much sparser. The gold rush caused mass clear-cutting for timber then unregulated regrowth. The pollen profile in the surface soil samples from the American River foothills reveal a three-thousand year record that trace the change from pre-European/American settlement grasslands to the dense pine/oak woodlands we see today.