

NEW MEXICO

Herbs and Edibles

By Linda DeVine

In those first days after my trek here from New England, I encountered the fierceness of New Mexico – mosquitoes. I was walking near an irrigation ditch when I felt it. I looked to the back of my legs and discovered a sizable swarm of mosquitoes hovering hungrily. I panicked. I ran. Later I dabbed salt on over fifty little red welts. I consulted my herbal manuals to create a serious repellent for future adventures. Then I slid into appreciation mode. The mosquitoes here are wonderfully adapted to the climate. They are small but aggressive compared with the mosquitoes back east. They flourish within their opportunities, and I was a tasty one.

In my two years here I have met many people who feel discouraged and are leaving. They wonder how I managed to feel welcomed and why I speak lovingly about this place. The answer is simple and essential: I embraced New Mexico, filling myself with gratitude and immersing myself in its natural environment. I extended my studies of herbs and edibles in to the desert.



Broom dalea

If I were to choose a desert plant analogous to the mosquito, it would be the goathead (puncture vine, tribulus terrestris, terror of the earth). I have heard people wonder aloud why God would create the goathead (or the mosquito). Indeed, I have experienced more painful goathead punctures than mosquito bites in New Mexico.

What a marvelously adapted plant! Those little goatheads travel on the

creatures they puncture, and they are sure to be cast off hastily somewhere else. They are a seriously sensual reminder of the fierceness of this place. Yes, the painful seed pods do have a medicinal function, which is for the cardiovascular system.

For more delightful sensual experiences consider broom dalea and feather dalea. They will not seem like much from a distance, but up close they are delightful. Most of the year broom dalea looks like a dead shrub of skinny, green sticks.

It does yield pretty little yellow flowers in its season, but its major blessing is in its scent. Fragrance medicine! The plant is all over the place on seemingly barren desert terrains. Break off a twig, scratch away some of the green, and smell it - so sweet and floral. Sometimes when walking in the desert after the rain, you can catch drifts of the scent wafting by in gentle waves of pure delight.

The feather daleas I have seen are quite small, but once spotted you will find the cutest little flowers in shades of white,

lavender, and purple. They are medicine for the eyes, but only for those willing to see the desert as pleasant and wander amongst its many denizens.

Then there are the sages. There are so many that I have not yet learned to name and differentiate them. But, oh, the smell! On a walk with my step-father we each plucked a piece and kept bringing it to our noses for the entire walk. Sage was so effective for uplifting our spirits that we failed to notice how tired we became ascending the arroyo.

From the barbed to the delightful, the desert abounds with sensual experience. I deepened this experience by pursuing its edibles. The abundant prickly pear cactus is highly edible and you have to learn how to deal with the needles. You can eat the pads and the fig-sized, reddish fruit called tunas.

The pads seem most palatable to the American taste when cooked with other ingredients like corn meal, but the tunas are quite sweet and tasty by themselves. As with many unfamiliar things, it takes experimentation and practice to make prickly pear cactus palatable as a wild edible. As medicine, prickly pear heals skin, acts as an anti-inflammatory, and provides diabetic-friendly nutrition.

Teas from local plants reach my table hot or cold all year round. Mormon tea (joint-fir), cota (green thread, Indian tea), and lemonade bush (squaw bush, three-leaf sumac) are all found in the



Prickly pear cactus

desert and make very pleasant teas. The Mormon tea plant seems to prefer the southern slopes of hills, but the twigs can be harvested most of the year. As a tea it provides bio-available calcium.

The spindly cota plants with their little barrel-shaped flower heads show up late spring and summer. The fuzzy, pea-sized, red fruits of the lemonade bush show up later in the summer and into the fall. You can make tea from fresh or dried plant. All three teas are pleasant with or without sweetener. They all provide nutrients and their actions are nutritive and tonifying.

A few other abundant desert plants have a long history of use by native people. Those little, scrubby tufts of yellow you see all over the desert might be snake broom. Make a tea from a bunch and put it in a bath to recover from sore muscles. Do the same with the sunflower plants dotting the landscape. Break off a long stem of sunflower and put the whole thing in a pot of tea for adding to a relaxing bath.

In my desert wanders I have met many mesquites and some chaparrals. Native people put both of these plants to a myriad of uses: tools, foods, dyes, and medicines. Mesquite leaves, twigs, bark, and pods are all used for making internal and external cleansing washes. Chaparral (creosote bush) has miraculous antimicrobial uses, but the tea tastes horrible.

Over and over people tell me I transformed their idea of the desert from an image of barrenness to one of beauty and gratitude. My words relate my intent to embrace the desert. I nurture my attitude through books, classes, wanders, hunts, and experiments. I merge into the desert's flow rather than resisting it as a barbed and inhospitable place.

Linda DeVine seeks spiritual unfoldment in the wilds of New Mexico, where she lives in a small house with human, feline, and canine companions among pion, juniper, yucca, cholla, prickly pear, snake broom, and other native plants.