

**An Ethnobotany Lesson: Plants and Trees used for Medicinal Purposes
by Tribes of the Wabenaki Confederation**

As found on preserves owned by Royal River Conservation Trust, The Cumberland Chebeague Land Trust,
and the Towns of Yarmouth and North Yarmouth

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Introduction: The Abenaki, Malecite (Maliseet), Micmac (Mi'kmaq), Passamaquoddy and Penobscot Tribes combined form the Wabenaki Confederacy. Their ancestral homelands are Newfoundland, Canada to the Merrimack River Valley in New Hampshire and Massachusetts. The Indigenous Peoples appreciated and respected the interconnectedness of all living things and used trees and plants for medicinal purposes. Many can be found on the trails managed by the Royal River Conservation Trust, the Land Trust, and the Towns of Yarmouth and North Yarmouth. The following is a list of some ethnobotanical trees and plants used by the tribes and trails on which they can be found; it is not a comprehensive list of specimens or trails.

Disclaimer: Many of the sources relied upon in this document utilized information from the 17th and 18th centuries and in many cases details are incomplete. As a result readers should not try these remedies based upon the information provided. While tribe members continue to use some of these remedies they have an expertise in doing so.

Definitions:

Decoction: boiled to a concentrated essence
Infusion: steeped in water
Poultice: soft, moist mass of material

Format: This document is formatted so it may be cut into 4 x 6 cards (use card stock for longer use) and be more readily useable in the field. A hole could be punched in the top corner of each card so the cards could be kept together on a ring or piece of string.

WILDFLOWERS

Canada Thistle: *Cirsium arvense*



Abenaki use: decoction of roots given to children for internal parasitic worms

Description: 1-3' high; small (1") numerous purple or white flower heads in larger head; prickly, spiny, deeply lobed leaves

Habitat: weed found in pastures and waste places

Trails: Bradbury-Pineland Corridor; Littlejohn Island Preserve

Common Plantain: *Plantago major*



Abenaki use: poultice of leaves applied for pain; also applied to foot for rheumatism or swelling

Description: 6-8" high; flower stalk long, spike-like and slender, greenish white; leaf grows only from base, is long stalked and mostly egg-shaped, edges are even and unbroken

Habitat: abundant weed of lawns, waste places and roadsides

Trails: Bradbury-Pineland Corridor; Chandler Brook Preserve; Fels-Groves Farm Preserve; Knight's Pond Preserve; Littlejohn Island Preserve; Skyline Farm



False Solomon's Seal: *Maianthemum racemosum* (originally named *Smilacina racemosa*)

Abenaki use: decoction of leaves used (mostly by men) to stop internal bleeding and cause one to spit up blood

Malecite and Micmac use: leaves and stems used for rashes and itches

Description: 1-3' high; small white flowers in branches or racemes (flowers attached to a long stalk by a short stem at equal distances); fruit is a speckled or striped green berry turning a dull red; leaves lanced-shaped, smooth edges

Habitat: moist meadows and woods

Trails: Fels-Groves Farm Preserve and Knight's Pond Preserve



Goldthread: *Coptis groenlandica*

Abenaki use: decoction of plant for colds and coughs, gargles for sore throats; stem used for cankers, sores on gum or mouth

Malecite use: unspecified (no further information)

Micmac use: roots chewed for indigestion

Description: 3-5" high; flowers are 1/2" wide, 5-7 petal-like structures (sepals), usually white; 3 leaves grow from the base only and are 3-parted, shiny and have rounded teeth edges

Habitat: moist woods and bogs

Trails: Fels-Groves Farm Preserve; Bradbury-Pineland Corridor



Lesser Burdock; *Arctium minus*

Abenaki use: moist poultice of leaves applied to head to relieve headache

Micmac use: roots used for boils and abscesses

Penobscot use: poultice of mashed, heated root applied to boils and abscesses

Description: 2-4' high; flowers are 1/2-1" wide in bristly, pale purple heads producing clinging burs; leaves are egg shaped, with smooth edges; leaf stalks are hollow

Habitat: coarse weed in fields

Trails: Fels-Groves Farm Preserve; Bradbury-Pineland Corridor



Wild Sarsaparilla: *Aralia nudicaulis*

Abenaki use: root used to make a tonic to strengthen the blood

Micmac use: root made into tea for cough medicine

Penobscot use: infusion of powdered root taken for coughs

Description: 6-15" high; flowers are greenish white in 3 bunches at top of naked stalk; fruit is purplish-black berry; green leaf is umbrella like over the flowers, divided into groups of 3-5 leaflets; leaf ages with yellow spots in fall

Habitat: woods

Trails: Littlejohn Island Preserve; Skyline Farm



Common Yarrow: *Achillea millefolium*

Abenaki use: infusion of whole plant given to children for coughs and fevers; used to treat influenza

Malecite use: liniment for bruises and sprains

Micmac use: dried, powdered stalk or green leaves rubbed over swelling for bruises, sprains and rheumatism; leaves made into herb taken to cause a sweat for colds

Description: 1-3' high; pink or white flowers in flat-topped head, each flower having 4 to 6 rays that are 3-toothed; leaves are lance-like in outline and finely divided

Habitat: fields and roadsides

Trails: Bradbury-Pineland Corridor; Fels-Groves Farm Preserve; Skyline Farm

FERN



Rock Polypody (Common): *Polypodium virginianum*

Abenaki use: decoction of whole plant given for stomach aches

Malecite use: infusion of pounded roots for pleurisy

Micmac use: infusion of plant used to increase flow of urine; roots used as pulmonary aid for pleurisy

Description: blade is long and narrows to a thin point; pinna (leaf on blade) is oblong and deeply cut, almost to stem; seeds on back (sori) are elongate

Habitat: boulders, rocks and cliffs Trails: Knight's Pond Preserve

CONIFEROUS TREES

Balsam Fir: *Abies balsam*



Abenaki use: gum used as ointment for slight itches and as antiseptic; needles and wood stuffed into pillows for good health

Micmac use: buds, cones and inner bark used for diarrhea; gum used as dressing for burns, frostbite, sores and wounds; gum used for colds; cones made into tea for colic; buds as laxative; gum for fractures; bark for gonorrhoea

Malecite use: juice used as laxative; infusion of bark used for gonorrhoea

Penobscot use: sap used as salve over burns, sores and cuts

Description: 12-20" diameter, up to 60-70' tall; needles 1" long, dark green and shiny, turn up in full sun but otherwise flat; cones are 2-4" long, erect and dark purple before maturity

Habitat: damp woods, and well drained hillsides; often in thickets

Trails: Bradbury-Pineland Corridor; Fels-Groves Farm Preserve; Littlejohn Island Preserve

Eastern Hemlock: *Tsuga condenses*



Abenaki use: infusion and/or decoction of leaves for rheumatism and mild itches

Malecite use: infusion of bark and buds or cones for diarrhea; infusion of boughs used for colds; outer layer of dried bark used as powder for prickly heat and chafed babies; infusion of boughs to increase urination

Micmac use: bark used for diarrhea; bark and stems for cough medicine and influenza; inner bark for chapped skin; parts of plant used for bowel, stomach and internal troubles; roots and stems to promote urination and help with bladder troubles; inner bark used for scurvy

Description: 2-3' diameter, 60-70' tall; needles are flat, tapering, 1/3 -1/2" long, arranged so branch appears flat; leaves are shorter as progress toward tip of branch; cone is 3/4" long, light brown

Habitat: moist cool sites. Trails: Bradbury-Pineland Corridor; Chandler Brook Preserve; Fels-Groves Farm Preserve; Knight's Pond Preserve; Littlejohn Island Preserve



Eastern White Pine: *Pinus strobes*

Abenaki use: decoction of bark and another plant used as cough medicine

Micmac use: decoction of dried bark, leaves and stems used for colds, coughs and influenza, also made into tea; sap applied to chest for respiratory problems, to sores and swellings, and to stop bleeding and itching; inner bark made into paste for sores and swellings; plant parts for kidney trouble; bark, inner bark and leaves for scurvy

Description: 1-3' diameter; 70-80' tall; needles in whorls of 5, 3-5" long; flexible, papery sheath at base of needle; cone is 4-8" long borne on a long stalk

Habitat: moist location, uplands, sandy and well-drained soils

Trails: Bradbury-Pineland Corridor; Chandler Brook Preserve; Fels-Groves Farm Preserve; Knight's Pond Preserve; Littlejohn Island Preserve; Skyline Farm

DECIDUOUS TREES



Quaking Aspen: *Populus tremuloides*

Abenaki use: infusion of bark taken to destroy parasitic worms

Micmac use: bark used as cold remedy; bark used to stimulate the appetite

Penobscot use: infusion of bark taken to induce sweating for colds

Description: 60-75" high, 10-16" diameter; young bark is smooth, marked by horizontal wart-like markings, pale green areas waxy to touch; older bark is ash gray and divided into broad, flat ridges; leaves are 1.5 -3" long, rounded and then sharply pointed, dark green and shiny; flattened petiole (stem)

Habitat: best growth on sandy, moist soils

Trails: Chandler Brook Preserve; Littlejohn Island Preserve

Striped Maple: *Acer pensylvanicum*



Abenaki use: bark and leaves brewed for tea for bronchial troubles

Micmac use: tea of wood and leaves to stop the spitting up of blood; bark used for cold and cough medicine, influenza; wood used to aid kidneys; plant parts applied to sore limbs; infusion of plant taken for gonorrhea

Penobscot use: infusion of plant taken to stop spitting up of blood; poultice of steeped leaves applied to swollen limbs; taken to increase urine (kidney troubles); infusion of plant taken for gonorrhea

Description: 25' high; 8" diameter; bark is reddish-brown (dark green for younger tree) and marked by thin white lines running vertically; leaves are 3-lobed, resembling a goose foot, pale green, 5-6" long and broad

Habitat: rich, moist soils or rocky slopes Trails: Littlejohn Island Preserve



White Ash: *Fraxinus americana*

Abenaki use: infusion of bark taken by women to provoke menses

Micmac use: leaves used for cleansing after childbirth

Penobscot use: strongly steeped leaves taken after childbirth for cleansing

Description: 60-70' high, 15-30" diameter; bark is like woven basket, deep furrows; leaves are 8-12" long, consisting of 5-9 (usually 7) leaflets; leaflet is 3-5" long and lance-shaped on a short stalk, smooth edges

Habitat: best growth on rich, moist soil on low hills Trails: Fels-Groves Farm Preserve; Skyline Farm



White Oak: *Quercus alba*

Micmac use: nuts used to induce thirst so as to drink water and make one beautiful; plant parts made into poultice applied to hemorrhoids

Penobscot use: nuts used to induce thirst so as to drink water and make one beautiful

Description: 60-70' high, diameter of 3-4'; bark separated into thin, irregular flakes; leaves usually have 9 rounded lobes with smooth edges, 4-7" long; acorn is 3/4" long

Habitat: sandy land, gravelly ridges and moist bottomland but best growth on rich, heavy upland soils

Trails: Littlejohn Island Preserve

Others to Explore:

American Basswood: *Tilia americana*

- Malecite use: infusion of roots and bark for worms
- Micmac use: roots used for worms; bark used for wounds discharging pus

American Elm: *Ulmus americana*

- Penobscot use: infusion of bark taken for bleeding lungs

Black Cherry: *Prunus serotina*

- Malecite use: infusion of bark, beaver castor (brown substance from preputial follicles of beaver) and gin for colds, coughs and consumption
- Micmac use: bark used for colds, coughs, consumption and smallpox; fruit taken as tonic to induce vigor
- Penobscot use: infusion of bark taken for coughs; infusion of berries taken as tonic

Chokecherry: *Prunus virginiana*

- Micmac use: bark used for diarrhea
- Penobscot use: infusion of bark taken for diarrhea

Northern White Cedar: *Thuja occidentalis*

- Abenaki use: poultice of powdered leaves applied to swellings; leaves made into pillows and used as panacea
- Malecite use: dried under bark pounded and mixed with grease and applied to burns; infusion of boughs used for coughs; gum used to fill cavities and for tooth pain; infusion of bark used for consumption
- Micmac use: stems used for headaches; inner bark, bark and stems used for burns, coughs and consumption; leaves used for swollen feet and hands; gum used for toothaches
- Penobscot use: poultice of bark used on cuts in painful areas to treat pain; poultice of leaves applied to hands and feet; poultice of bark applied "for all kinds of trouble"

Pin Cherry: *Prunus pennsylvanica*

- Malecite use: outer layer of dried trees used as powder for prickly heat; infusion of bark used for erysipelas (acute infection of skin); outer layer of dried bark used for chafed babies
- Micmac use: wood used for chafed skin and prickly heat; bark used for erysipelas (acute infection of skin)

Speckled Alder: *Alnus incana*, ssp. *Rugosa*

- Abenaki use: for slight itching

Staghorn Sumac: *Rhus hirta*

- Malecite use: infusion of roots or berries used as a blood purifier; used with blackberry roots, mountain holly, lily roots and mountain raspberry roots for coughs, fever and consumption
- Micmac use: berries and roots used for loss of appetite; parts of plants used for sore throats

Tamarack: *Larix laricina*

- Abenaki use: decoction of plant and bark combined with another plant used for persistent coughs
- Malecite use: infusion of bark taken for colds and consumption; infusion of bark used to strengthen if general debility; infusion of bark, spruce bark and balsam bark taken for gonorrhea
- Micmac use: bark used for colds, wounds discharging pus, general physical weakness, consumption and gonorrhea

Yellow Birch: *Betula alleghaniensis*

- Micmac use: wood used as hot water bottle

Sources:

- Maine Forest Service. 2017. *Forest Trees of Maine*. Maine Dept. of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry.
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