

Salal

Salal is a common understory plant in Northwest forests. Its shiny deep-green leaves remain beautiful throughout the year and are a valued addition to floral arrangements. Salal berries are loaded with energizing nutrients including vitamins, minerals, antioxidants and even good quality fats.



Other names: *Gaultheria shallon*. Whulshootseed: ʔaqa

Identifying Salal: Salal is an evergreen shrub that grows in lush thickets. Plants grow to about 5 feet or 2 meters tall. Leaves are thick, dark green on top and waxy. Spring flowers look like little white bells and are slightly sticky and hairy. Berries are a dull blue-black color when ripe and are also slightly hairy. They have a 5-pointed star shape on the underside.

Where it grows: Salal thrives in shady conifer forests and in sunny areas with moisture and good drainage. They will grow from nurse logs and produce more berries when they have partial to full sun.



When and how to harvest: Gather berries in June-August when they are deep blue, plump and tasty. The easiest way to harvest is to pull the entire pink stem of ripe berries off the plant, place them in a bag or basket, and then process them all at once. Pop the berries off by pinching them with your thumb and pointer finger instead of trying to pull them off. Gently rinse in a colander if the berries are dusty.

Gather green healthy looking leaves in late spring to summer. Cut stems and bundle them with rubber bands. Hang in a dry warm place out of sunlight. When the leaves are crackly when crushed, strip them off the branches and store them in a glass jar or plastic bag for later use. Before making tea, crush or cut the leaves. Use about one heaping tablespoon per cup of hot water and infuse for 20 minutes.

Eating Salal Berries: Salal is one of our most common and overlooked berries.

The flavor varies from delicious to bland and boring, depending on soil and sun conditions. Taste the berries before you gather them, and if they do not suit you, try traveling to a different area. Berries can be eaten fresh, frozen, canned, added to smoothies, pies, jam, fruit leather and baked desserts.

Salal berries are high in antioxidants, vitamins and minerals. The seeds even contain protein and Omega 3 fatty acids. While they are mealier than many other types of wild berries, people feel satiated when they eat even a small amount.

Salal berries are highly prized among Coast Salish People. They were a common staple food that could be mashed, dried into cakes and then stored and eaten in the winter months. The berries were mashed and sometimes cooked, then poured into wooden frames or cakes on cedar boards or skunk cabbage leaves (also called Indian wax paper). These were dried near a fire and then stored in boxes for later use. According to Erna Gunther in *Ethnobotany of Western Washington*, the Lower Chinook People's salal loaves weighed as much as 10-15 pounds! Many people preferred to rehydrate the cakes in water or dip them into seal, whale or eulachon oil. Salal is still a beloved berry among many native families and is made into jam, fruit leather and desserts. If you add even 25% salal berries to fruit leather it will increase the shelf life.

Salal Leaf Medicine: Salal leaf has a long history as a medicine for healing wounds and easing coughs, colds and digestive problems. The Klallam, Bella Coola and Quileute People have chewed salal leaves and placed them on burns and sores. The Samish and Swinomish People have used the leaves in tea for coughs and tuberculosis, while the Quinault People have used them for diarrhea and flu-like symptoms. In his book *Medicinal Plants of the Pacific West*, herbalist Michael Moore says that, "The tea is astringent and anti-inflammatory, both locally to the throat and upper intestinal mucosa, and through the bloodstream, to the urinary tract, sinuses and lungs." Salal leaf is a common and easily accessible medicine that can be useful for many ailments.

Ecological relationships: Humans are not the only ones to enjoy salal berries. Many pickers say they are accustomed to sharing the harvest with bears, chipmunks, squirrels and birds.

Growing tips: Plant several salal starts to form a lush thicket. Once established, they will spread. Salal is easy to find in Northwest nurseries and is commonly planted as a shrub in city parks and on roadsides.



Additional Resources:

<http://wildfoodsandmedicines.com/salal/>

Wild Berries of Oregon and Washington by T. Abe Lloyd and Fiona Chambers

References:

Derig, E. and Fuller, M. (2001). *Wild Berries of the West*. Mountain Press.

Henderson, R. (2000). *The Neighborhood Forager*. Chelsea Green.

Krohn, E. (2007). *Wild Rose and Western Red Cedar*.

Moore, M. (1993). *Medicinal Plants of the Pacific West*. Red Crane Books.

Turner, N. (1995). *Food Plants of Coastal Northwest Peoples*. Vancouver: UBC Press.

Photos by Elise Krohn

Text copyright Elise Krohn, Copy Commons

Salal Berry Fruit Leather

I prefer to use about one-third to one-half salal berries to other types of tasty berries such as thimbleberry, strawberry, wild blackberry, huckleberry or blueberry. Salmonberries are too juicy to make fruit leather. Place berries in a blender and blend until smooth. Add honey to sweeten and a little squeeze of fresh lemon juice to bring out flavor. Fit wax paper over a cookie sheet with sides. Pour blended berries onto the sheet and use a spatula to smooth them out to an even consistency of about a quarter inch. The berries can be dried in the sun or in the oven.



Sun drying: If it is hot and dry, place the pan in the full sun, preferably in a windy spot. If there are flies or bugs, you can put cheesecloth over the berries. One friend places her fruit leather either on her car dash or in her greenhouse to amp up the heat and has great success. It will probably take 2-4 days to dry completely, so bring the berries in at night to prevent them from gathering dew. After the berries are mostly dried turn them over. Carefully peel the old wax paper off and let the other side dry. When it is the consistency of fruit leather, cut the berry sheet into strips and store in plastic bags to prevent it from drying out completely.

You can also make beautiful little berry cakes in a traditional Salish manner by drying them on skunk cabbage leaves. Skunk cabbage is also called “Indian wax paper” and it does not impart its strong smell onto food at all.

Oven method: Place the berries in the oven on the lowest temperature (usually about 170 degrees) and leave the oven cracked so that water can evaporate off the berries. It will take 6-10 hours for the berries to dry. Flip the whole thing over when it is mostly dry. Carefully peel off the wax paper and continue drying until it reaches a dry, yet pliable consistency. If you have to leave, simply turn your oven off and place the fruit leather in a warm spot in the house with cheesecloth or a paper towel over it. Continue drying.

Variation: Some people choose to cook their berries gently on the stovetop until they are reduced to a thick paste. While this helps speed up the drying process, it also compromises nutrients like Vitamin C in the berries.

