



It is difficult to imagine this little guy as a weather forecaster, but he does have an uncanny accuracy, more so than the weather service. (Mark Rackay/Special to the Montrose Daily Press)

Ethnobotany with kids

Learning about traditional Ute plant knowledge

By Anita Evans
Friends of Youth
and Nature

Plants — we all have a relationship with them. This bond with nature is an integral part of the cultures of many indigenous people, and the use of native plants by the Ute People of Western Colorado is particularly engaging. This traditional use of plants for medicinal, cultural, and culinary purposes by native peoples is called ethnobotany.

The Ute people thrived for thousands of years in the harsh climate conditions of Western Colorado by moving from ecosystem to ecosystem as food became available. Many of plants they relied on are still commonly found on local public lands and are still used in traditional Ute Ceremonies.

One such plant seen along the lower elevations of Grand Mesa and the Uncompahgre Plateau is the banana yucca. Its fruit, flowers, and stalks are edible and fibers stripped from the leaves were braided and made into twine. Every part of the common Utah juniper also had a use. The Utes used its bark for sandals, thatching, woven bags, and rope. The leaves and berries are high in vitamin C, offering a natural boost to immune systems.

The coyote willow grows commonly along many of the creeks and rivers here in Western Colorado. Ute people made willow bark tea for headaches, fever, pain, and inflammation; it contains salicylic acid, the main ingredient of aspirin.

Another plant historically used by the Ute people was the piñon pine, which offers both high calorie, nutritious nuts in the fall and pitch used for waterproofing water baskets. A common desert bush, Mormon tea, was used as a medicinal drink to treat a cough or cold and also as a stimulant similar to caffeine. And of course, the big sagebrush was used as a medicine for stomach problems and infection, and as a cleansing incense during spiritual ceremonies.

It is a joy to share this special plant knowledge with young people, and there are several places on the Western Slope that provide easy access to learn about traditional uses of native plants: The Ute Museum in Montrose, the Ute Learning and Ethnobotany Garden in Grand Junction, and Colorado Canyons Association, the local education team for the Bureau of Land Management.

The Ute Museum, located at 17253 Chipeta Road, Montrose, was established in 1956 near the ranch of Chief Ouray and his wife Chipeta. Open seven days a week, it has many award winning indoor and outdoor exhibits, virtual field trips, and “History Take Out” where their educational coordinator can bring lessons to the classroom. Included in the outdoor exhibits is a native plant garden that combines the plant knowledge of the Mountain Ute Tribe, Southern Ute Tribe, and the Ute Indian Tribe of Uintah and Ouray Reservation in Utah. More about the Ute Museum can be found at historycolorado.org/ute-indian-museum.

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Signs of the season



Tips from the Posse

By Mark Rackay

Late summer into early fall is a great time to be in the north woods. Anyone who has ever visited northern Minnesota, Wisconsin, the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, or the Canadian Provinces to the north knows exactly of what I speak. I spent a number of my childhood years in the north, before my grandparents made the trek to Colorado.

One particular morning, we were head-

ing out on the lake to try some late season walleye fishing. The air was crisp and clear, blowing in from the northwest. Small whitecaps were slapping at the side of our aluminum vessel as we ventured on. The spot my grandfather chose to fish was only 100 feet from the shoreline.

I remember staring at the hardwood trees along that shoreline because they were just beginning to turn color, signaling the coming of fall and the color explosion that the north is known for. Along the shore was a line of 3-feet high weeds with a bright red flower on their tops.

My grandfather said they were fireweed. He went on to explain that the fireweed showing the red flowers was a sign that winter was 10 weeks away. I never forgot that bit of old country weather lore and the old man who truly believed it.

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A father and daughter investigating a plant along the trail. (Courtesy photo/Anne Janik)

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Wrapping up the gardening season



Gardening A to Z

By Linda Corwine McIntosh

Would I be correct in saying this has been one unusual gardening season? I think most of us are ready to call it a year, but don't stop just yet.

I imagine your irrigation systems will be getting blown out within the next few weeks. Before that happens, give your lawn, trees, shrubs and perennials a good soaking. If this dry summer and spring are any indication of things to come, your landscape will appreciate the drink. Keep your hoses handy because you may need to water around Thanksgiving, or sooner, if we don't receive any significant moisture.

I bet you've noticed, there are some great values on trees and shrubs in the garden centers, and fall is a great time to plant. Just keep in mind that these plants will need to be watered about once a month if we have a dry winter.

You may be tired of mowing the grass, but keeping it mowed to a height of 2 1/2 to 3 inches will help keep your lawn healthy. Long turf will mat down over the winter months, leading to lawn problems next summer. Short, "scalped" grass will dehydrate during the winter months.

If you dread the annual fall leaf-raking ritual, why not try mowing the leaves from the grass instead of raking. This will give you a perfect mixture of grass clippings and leaves that can be used in compost, or as mulch in perennial beds. You can even add it to your vegetable garden and work it into the soil for a great start to next season's garden. Whatever you choose to do, don't let the leaves lay thick and matted on the grass or flowerbeds during the winter. This can suffocate and kill your lawn and perennials.

Fall is the most important time of year to fertilize your lawn. This will help ensure a healthier, greener, lush lawn next summer. The fertilizer needs to be watered in, so be sure to do this before you shut



As seen here, pine trees will shed their inner needles, or older needles, about every three to five years. Spruce hold their needles for five to seven years during the needle drop season. Depending on the amount of stress that the trees have gone through, it might be more noticeable some years. (Linda McIntosh/Special to the Montrose Daily Press)

off the irrigation for the season. One to two pounds of nitrogen per 1,000 square feet is recommended. You may also want to consider core aerating the lawn if it has thatch, disease or is compacted.

It's time to time to wrap newly planted or young deciduous trees to protect them from winter sunscald, also known as southwest disease. This is a condition that occurs when the heat of the bright winter sun warms, stimulating bark tissue on the south and west sides of trees or sunburns the tissue.

Thin-barked trees such as honeylocust, maple, hawthorn and ash are more susceptible to

this problem. The brown crepe paper commercial tree wrap should be wrapped from ground level to the first lower branches of the tree. The wrap can be secured with electrical tape. Remove the tree wrap in the spring when it is no longer needed.

A lot of people are worried that their evergreen trees are dying because the needles towards the inside of the tree have turned brown. Rest assured, your tree is probably just fine.

Pine trees will shed their inner needles, or older needles, about every three to five years. Spruce hold their needles for five to seven years and aren't as conspicuous as pines during the

needle-drop season. Depending on the amount of stress that the trees have gone through, it might be more noticeable some years. When you stand back and see this browning uniformly in the interior, at this time of year it's usually not a concern. Brown tips of the branches or towards the top are another story. I bet if you look around your neighborhood you will probably see other evergreens that look similar to the natural browning that your trees may be experiencing.

Bulbs, such as dahlias, cannas, gladiola, and tuberous begonias should be dug and stored in a cool dry location. They can be left in the ground until frost has

darkened the top foliage. However, you'll want to dig them before the rhizome or tubers freeze.

Pruning shrubs and rose's in the fall can cause them to dehydrate more during the winter months. So limit the amount you want to remove to make the plant look good for winter. This is especially true for arborvitae.

Smokey as it may be, it's still a great time of year and nice to be out enjoying fall right in your own backyard. So enjoy the autumn days before they're gone.

Linda Corwine McIntosh is an ISA certified arborist, commercial pesticide applicator and advanced master gardener.

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Knowing what weather to expect was and is vitally important to farmers, ranchers, and to outdoor people who venture off the beaten path. Farmers can't cut hay if they won't have a couple of days for it to dry and you don't want to plant your corn just before a week-long flooding rain.

There has been a National Weather Service in the United States since 1870. My grandfather did not have any confidence in them back in his day, and I have very little faith in their predictions now. After spending many years in the crosshairs of hurricanes, I have learned you are better off to roll the dice rather than listen to the experts.

I realize there are all sorts of factors that influence weather, such as changing pressure systems and mountains, but c'mon folks. The law of averages should give them a 50/50 shot, right?

Weather lore is what the old-timers believed in and many still do. There is some scientific fact to back up their claims. Take for example the old saying, "Mare's tails and mackerel scales make tall ships carry low sails."

This is true because

mackerel scales are cirrocumulus clouds that are being influenced by shifting wind directions and high speeds and are typical of an advancing low-pressure system. High cirrus clouds that have been shaped by upper winds cause mare's tails. Cirrus clouds can signal an approaching front.

Many of these old time predictions exist in an attempt to predict the harshness or mildness of an upcoming winter. In merry old England, they believe that winter blooms mean death. Flowers that normally in the summer were viewed as bad omens when they bloomed in the winter.

Trees that break into an unseasonable bloom meant that a hard winter with much sickness and death was at hand. These days, late season blooming flowers and trees are most likely a product of climate change, and with that thought, the old omen holds some truth.

We have all heard about squirrels and their nest building giving us a clue as to the severity of the upcoming winter. It is also thought that squirrels gathering nuts early indicated an early and harsh winter. Problem with that omen is that I have never been able to locate a squirrel nest when I needed a forecast, and all the squir-

rels I see are gathering nuts the year round.

For us locally, many believe that the wetness and severity of our monsoon season will determine the amount of snow we will have over the winter months. Wetter fall is supposed to mean a wetter winter. I have seen it go both ways over the past couple decades here. We have had a wet fall and a bone-dry winter and a wet fall and a very snowy winter, so I don't put much faith in that one.

The Farmers Almanac is full of signs of nature that can predict a harsh winter ahead. When the farmers report a thicker than normal onion or cornhusks, it is a sign of a cold and harsh winter.

Another is the size of the orange band on the woollybear caterpillar. According to folklore, if the caterpillar's orange band is narrow, the winter will be snowy. A wide orange band means a mild winter. Fuzzier-than-normal woollybear caterpillars are said to mean that the upcoming winter will be very cold.

A good friend of mine relayed an omen to me that he learned from his grandmother. "The date of the month that you have the first snow, one that is deep enough to track a rabbit,

indicates how many snows over the winter you will have that are deep enough to track a rabbit."

I reasoned that to mean that if we got a tracking snow on Nov. 18. We would have 18 tracking snows over the course of the winter. I tried testing this one out one year when it snowed on Nov. 26. That year we had a bunch of little snowstorms, an inch or two, and I lost count because I was too busy shoveling snow.

I really have no idea what to expect this upcoming winter. We don't have any fireweed around here to look at and I can't find a squirrel anywhere. I hope we get enough moisture that we can forget the whole drought thing for next year. C'mon squirrels, get busy building them nests.

Mark Rackay is a columnist for the Montrose Daily Press and avid hunter who travels across North and South America in search of adventure and serves as a director for the Montrose County Sheriff's Posse. For information about the posse call 970-252-4033 (leave a message) or email info@mcspi.org.

For outdoors or survival related questions or comments, feel free to contact him directly at his email elkhunter77@icloud.com.

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The Ute Learning Garden, also called the Clifford Duncan Memorial Garden, in Grand Junction is located at the CSU Extension office for the Tri-River Area at 2775 U.S. 50. It is designed to familiarize students and visitors with native plants used by the Ute people, the movement of the Utes through various life zones, and the relationship between the Utes and the land. Working with the Ute Museum, the Ute Learning Garden was established in 2009 as part of the Ute Ethnobotany Project, seeking to preserve the traditional plant knowledge of the Ute people. A brochure about the Ute Learning Garden can be found at <https://tra.extension.colostate.edu/gardening-hort/>.

Colorado Canyons Association (CCA), in cooperation with the Bureau of Land Management, is developing a "Junior Ranger Program" for the Gunnison Gorge National Conservation Area and the McInnis National Conservation Area. Learners of all ages can earn badges by completing questions in the information packets, based on age. Each packet provided resources to use along the trail while learning about native plants, geology, and animal as well as human impacts on these public lands. More information can be found at cca.org.

So, gather your young ones and share some valuable time together learning more about the original inhabitants of the Western Slope, the Utes, and their use of native plants through these amazing local resources!

Friends of Youth and Nature is a non-profit that promotes opportunities for youth and families to get outside, experience outdoor activities, and explore nature. To learn more, visit: www.friendsofyouthandnature.org.