



BACKYARD BOUNTY

FELING HUNGRY? Take a closer look at your lawn. “People need to stop before they decide to get rid of weeds. Many of our weeds are our most important edible and medicinal plants,” says Marla Bull Bear, executive director of Lakota Youth Development. Consider the dandelion, which can be used to make coffee, salads, jelly — you can even deep-fry the flowers. “The entire plant is edible. I don’t know how much money we spend trying to get rid of that thing, and all it wants to do is feed us.”

At Lakota Youth Development’s harvest camps, held at Tiwaha Wicooti campgrounds near St. Charles in the Milk’s Camp community of the Rosebud Reservation, Native teens deepen their connection to the land as they gather, preserve and prepare wild foods from

the prairie — *timpisla*, or prairie tur-nips, dandelions, grapes, chokecher-ries, buffalo berries and plantain. “We talk about the cultural significance and our relationship to the plant and ani-mal nations that share themselves with us,” Bull Bear says. “We teach how to be good relatives and good stewards, being respectful of our plant nation relatives.”

Practicing good etiquette is an im-portant part of that stewardship. Camp-ers learn to give tobacco offerings, say prayers thanking the plants being har-vested and that they must not take more than they need. “Many plants live in a family. If you harvest more than half, you diminish that family,” Bull Bear says. “The youth understand that this is a living thing, and this is not to be taken lightly.”

After their harvest, students use both

Native youth learn to gather wild plants at Lakota Youth Development’s harvest camps.



traditional and modern techniques to preserve their finds. Historically, the Lakota relied on drying foods, storing them in rawhide boxes as they traveled and reconstituting them as needed, but at camp, the teens use dehydrators as well as drying racks. "Our ancestors would think it was silly to have a dehydrator and not use it. We do both," Bull Bear says.

Hot, dry days are best for food dehydrating. Meat, squash and other vegetables should be cut into paper-thin slices. Food will take between 24-48 hours to dry, so in the old days, elders and small children would watch the racks to shoo away flies and other creatures that might spoil the harvest.

The campers enjoy learning more about their foods and the world around them. After the camp's first wild turnip harvest, Bull Bear remembers some

of the kids calling her to ask, "Can we borrow a spade? We found turnips in our backyard." Perhaps your yard holds its own culinary surprises. "In actuality, Grandmother Earth conspires to help us survive if we just take a look," Bull Bear says.

Many of the campers' favorite foods involve chokecherries. Youth learn to make wasna, a mixture of chokecherries and dried meat, wojapi, a chokecherry pudding, as well as chokecherry jelly. Chokecherry pits contain hydrocyanic acid, so the Lakota crush whole fruits and dry them into patties, which neutralizes the poison. Traditionally, the berries were ground by hand using stones inside a large rawhide bowl, but a meat grinder will also do the trick.

WOJAPI

about five chokecherry patties
1/4 cup water, plus more for soaking
1-2 tablespoons cornstarch
sugar or honey

Soak chokecherry patties in water overnight. Pour the patties and water into a sauce pan the next day and bring to a boil over medium heat. Boil for one hour, stirring frequently, until the patties break apart. Reduce heat to low. Mix cornstarch and 1/4 cup water together thoroughly. Slowly add cornstarch mixture to chokecherries, stirring constantly, until the wojapi reaches pudding consistency. Sweeten with sugar or honey to taste.

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