

CEDAR HILL PARK AS HOME TERRITORY FOR STRAITS SALISH PEOPLES

Nancy J. Turner - September 24, 2017

Cedar Hill Park is a beloved landmark of the Municipality of Saanich. With its golf course, ponds, garry oak woodlands, perimeter walking and jogging trail, and buildings in the central part and the south end, this 133-acre (54 hectare) park is known to and used by Saanich residents and many visitors as well. This year we are celebrating its 50th anniversary as a Saanich park. Prior to its status as a park, the area was used as a dairy farm, established by pioneer George McRae, a history embodied in the name for the road on the southern boundary: North Dairy Road. In the late 1910s and early 1920s, parts of the property were leased out as a golf course, which expanded over time, until 1967, when the entire property was acquired from the McRae family by the Municipality.

Long before the area was a dairy farm, however – going back thousands of years – these beautiful lands, encompassing the headwaters of Bowker Creek in the southern park and of Colquitz Creek through Blenkinsop Valley in the northern part, have been cared for and supported by countless generations of ancestors of the Lekwungen (Songhees and Esquimalt) and W̱SÁNEĆ (Saanich) Coast Salish First Nations. Evidence of their use and occupancy of these lands can be seen in the very character of the vegetation, shaped by use of landscape burning to maintain the expansive prairies among the picturesque garry oak woodlands. The early European newcomers saw the similarity between this landscape and that of the English oak parklands. In 1843, James Douglas, in viewing the scenic oak savannahs of the area now part of Beacon Hill Park and Ross Bay cemetery (a southern extension of those of the Cedar Hill area), commented, “The place itself appears a perfect ‘Eden’ in the midst of the dreary wilderness of the North... one might be pardoned for supposing it had dropped from the clouds into its present position” (letter to James Hargrave, February 5, 1843, G. P. de T. Glazebrook, ed. *The Hargrave Correspondence*, p. 420).” Yet, Douglas and most other newcomers to southern Vancouver Island were unaware of the profound role of the Lekwungen and W̱SÁNEĆ peoples in creating and maintaining this landscape.

Evidence of ancient human use of the Cedar Hill Park is seen not only in the landscape itself, but in archaeological features documented from the area: stone knives, arrowheads, and hand mauls and other tools dating back in some cases

thousands of years, indicate places where people camped and harvested and processed their food (Darcy Mathews, pers. comm. 2016). One of the main items of their traditional diet were the bulbs of two closely related species of edible blue-flower camas, common camas (*Camassia quamash*) and giant camas (*Camassia leichtlinii*), still present and abundant in parts of Cedar Hill Park. These bulbs were a staple carbohydrate food for all of the Coast Salish peoples of Vancouver Island, and were also eaten, sometimes as a trade item, by the Ditidaht and Nuuchahnulth peoples of the West Coast of the island, and the Kwakwaka'wakw of the northeastern side. Few people today remember how important they were, but at least one knowledge holder, Sellemah (Joan Morris) of the Songhees Nation, who was born and raised at Tl'ches (Chatham Island) off Oak Bay, remembers going with her grandmother to harvest camas bulbs around Oak Bay, the Uplands and Ten Mile Point.

Families used to camp out near the camas grounds, and spend a week or more digging the bulbs – up to 100 kg or more per family. They used a pointed digging stick made of yew wood (*Taxus brevifolia*) or other hard wood such as Pacific crabapple (*Malus fusca*) to penetrate the ground around a group of camas plants and leverage a piece of turf until it could be upturned to aside, allowing the larger, deeper-growing bulbs at the bottom of the hole to be picked out. The turf would then be flipped back into place, leaving the younger bulbs, in the upper layers of the soil, to continue to grow and work their way deeper into the ground over time. That harvest spot could be revisited after a few years, to repeat the process. This method of camas bulb harvesting and production was sophisticated, and was accompanied by clearing away rocks and brush from the best patches, and by periodic burning to maintain the prairie habitat. Since the bulbs were usually dug in early summer, after the plants had flowered and the seed capsules had ripened, during the harvesting process the small black seeds of camas would be spread over the loosened soil to grow and regenerate the patch in a perpetual cycle, even with literally thousands of bulbs being harvested from a given area [Note: there is another flowering plant called camas – death camas (*Zigadenus venenosus*) – that sometimes grows together with the edible camas, so people were very careful not to confuse these bulbs with the edible ones; a mistake could be deadly.]

The major carbohydrate produced in the edible camas bulbs is not starch, but rather a complex sugar, inulin, which is neither sweet tasting nor easily digestible for humans. The technique for processing the bulbs, however, through slow steaming and roasting in an underground pit, promotes the conversion of inulin into its component units of fructose, which is sweet and digestible. The cooking pits

were often dug near the camas meadows. Their size would vary with the quantities of bulbs to be cooked, but they could be around 60 cm deep and a meter or more across. As described by Pacheedaht (Ditidaht) elder Ida Jones, who as a young girl participated in the harvest and cooking of camas bulbs and other root vegetables, they would light a hot fire in the bottom of the pit, then heat up dense, rounded volcanic rocks until these were red hot. Positioning a post in the centre, they would then pile in wet vegetation – such as salal branches and fern fronds – over the rocks, followed by the camas bulbs, and then more vegetation overtop. At this point, the post would be pulled out and water poured through the channel left. When the water hits the red-hot rocks, huge clouds of steam billow up from the pit, which is then covered over tightly with a cedar or cattail mat (or later, with canvas) and soil piled on to prevent any steam from escaping. The pit is left over night – for as long as 24 or 36 hours, and when it is opened, the camas bulbs, originally white inside, have become a brownish colour and, due to the high proportion of fructose from cooking, are sweet tasting, somewhat akin to a roasted chestnut in flavor and texture. The cooked bulbs can be eaten immediately but many were dried to be stored for winter or to use in trade with neighbouring groups. In fact, next to salmon, camas bulbs were said to be the most commonly traded food product of the Salish Sea area. They were often served at potlatches and feasts.

Other root vegetables also grow in Cedar Hill Park, and would have been dug in the past along with the blue camas. Taper tip onion (*Allium acuminatum* – also known as Hooker's onion) grows in several patches along the northwest side of the park. Other lilies with edible bulbs include chocolate lily (*Fritillaria affinis*), harvest brodiaea (*Brodiaea coronaria*) and false onion (*Triteleia hyacinthina*). The bulbs of white fawn lily (*Erythronium oreganum*) were apparently not eaten, although the bulbs of related species (*E. grandiflorum*, yellow glacier lily; *E. revolutum*, pink fawn lily) were eaten by First Peoples elsewhere in B.C. All of these plants are too rare now, especially in urban areas, to think of them as food, and, of course within Cedar Hill Park, they are protected species. Formerly, an edible-rooted plant in the celery family known as wild caraway or yampah (*Perideridia gairdneri*) also grew in a few places along the trail, but were destroyed some years ago when the trails were widened. Around King's Pond at the north end of the park, Pacific silverweed (*Potentilla anserina* ssp. *pacifica*) still grows; its roots were formerly pit-cooked and eaten, sometimes along with camas bulbs.

Several species of edible fruits would have been harvested from the Cedar Hill Park area in the past. In particular, there were salmonberries (*Rubus spectabilis*), thimbleberries (*Rubus parviflorus*) and trailing blackberries (*Rubus ursinus*), all

native relatives of cultivated raspberries and blackberries. [More recently, the introduced and very invasive Himalayan blackberry (*Rubus armeniacus*) has taken over many areas of the park where native species would have grown originally.] There are also saskatoon berries (*Amelanchier alnifolia*) in places along the trail – not to be confused with the poisonous berries of privet (*Ligustrum vulgare*), which is another invasive introduced shrub.

Other edible native fruits of the park include: Nootka rose (*Rosa nutkana*), whose bright orange hips can be made into jelly, syrup or tea (but whose seeds should not be consumed because of their sharp irritant hairs); black hawthorn (*Crataegus douglasii*), which has edible black fruits with large seeds [related but not the same as the red-berried English hawthorn (*Crataegus laevigata*) another invasive species of the park]; bird cherry, or June plum (also known as Indian plum – *Oemleria cerasiformis*), one of the first plants to leaf out and flower, as early as February, and one of the first fruits to ripen, in May and June, with large stones and thin but palatable purple flesh; Oregon-grape (*Mahonia aquifolium*), which has tart but edible blue-purple berries in clusters; and Pacific crabapple (*Malus fusca*), which grows in wet areas, especially at the north end, and produces clusters of small, tart long-stemmed fruits. These can be stored under water and tend to become sweeter and softer after the first frost. At one time, there would have been wild strawberries (*Fragaria vesca*, *F. virginiana*) in the meadows as well, but these would have been destroyed in the early 1900s by the dairy cows. Settlers' accounts describe how people used to pick large quantities of wild strawberries from throughout the Victoria area; now one is lucky to see just a few plants here and there.

There are also edible greens that First Peoples would have eaten in the springtime. In particular, the young, tender shoots of salmonberry and thimbleberry are snapped off, peeled and eaten as a green vegetable. Also, the tender shoots of giant horsetail (*Equisetum telmateia*) – especially the ones with the cone-like spore-bearing structure at the tip – are edible and would have been enjoyed by the Lekwungen and W̱SÁNEĆ people, who call this plant *sxám'xəm'*. When the horsetail plants are mature, however, they become inedible and potentially toxic; they can only be eaten at the young sprouting stage. Cow-parsnip (*Heracleum maximum*) is another plant in the celery family whose young bud-stalks and leaf-stalks can be peeled and eaten in the spring. However, it is a relative of the larger, more robust invasive species called giant hogweed (*Heracleum mantegazzianum*), which is notorious for causing severe skin irritation, blisters and long-lasting discoloration of the skin, reactions due to phototoxic compounds (furanocoumarins) in the plant's tissues. The same compounds also occur in cow-parsnip, which is why it must

always be peeled before being eaten, and should only be eaten at its young, pre-flowering stage. In addition, there is a potential of it being confused with other, toxic plants in the celery family, especially poison hemlock (*Conium maculatum*), another European weed that occurs in the park. Poison hemlock has smooth (not hairy) stems, and finely divided leaves, with multiple flower heads that are smaller than those of cow-parsnip but also umbrella-shaped with small, white flowers. Another introduced plant in the same family that is common in the park is the true wild carrot (*Daucus carota*), also often called Queen Anne's lace. This is a wild form of the garden carrot, and although its roots are white, not orange, they are edible when taken from the first-year plants. Wild carrot is shorter than fully mature poison hemlock, and its stems and leaves are covered with short stiff hairs. These are plants that most people should just leave alone though, to avoid any problems with mis-identification.

As well as harvesting camas and other plant foods, the Lekwungen and W̱SÁNEĆ would have been hunting for deer and waterfowl in the area we now call Cedar Hill Park. The part of Bowker Creek on the south end, alongside where the Cedar Hill Recreation Centre is today was also a place for spawning chum and coho salmon. There would also be harvesting dozens of other plants, as materials for basketry, mats, clothing and various implements, and for medicinal use and in spiritual practices. Many of the trees growing in the park, from grand fir (*Abies grandis*), to red alder (*Alnus rubra*), to arbutus (*Arbutus menziesii*), have medicinal applications. The liquid pitch from the bark blisters of grand fir, for example, can be mixed with animal fat and used as an antiseptic salve for cuts and infections. The bark of red alder is used to treat tuberculosis, and the leaves of arbutus are chewed to treat colds and sore throats. The barks of trembling aspen (*Populus tremuloides*), Pacific willow (*Salix lucida* spp. *lasiandra*), garry oak (*Quercus garryana*), snowberry (*Symphoricarpos albus*), and red-osier dogwood (*Cornus stolonifera*) as well as of saskatoon berry, bird cherry, and several other trees and shrubs are all used medicinally as described in Saanich Ethnobotany*. The brown fruiting heads of oceanspray (*Holodiscus discolor*) were used to treat diarrhea and dysentery. The rhizomes (underground stems) of licorice fern (*Polypodium glycyrrhiza* – growing on the rocks on the northwestern part of the park) can be chewed and the juice swallowed for colds, coughs and sore throats. The leaves of yarrow (*Achillea millefolium*), seen in some of the rocky outcrops, can also be used to treat colds, and were pounded up and used as a poultice for cuts and scrapes. The fleshy leaves of stonecrop (*Sedum spathulifolium*) were similarly crushed and rubbed on cuts and wounds to help heal them, as were the leaves of broad-leaved plantain

(*Plantago major*), called “frog’s blanket” by the W̱SÁNEĆ people.

Many of these same plants also had practical applications in technology. Oceanspray, for example, is often called “ironwood” after its straight, hard shoots, which can be hardened even more by heating them over a fire. These were used for arrows and digging sticks, and for needles to sew tule (*Schoenoplectus acutus*) stems or cattail (*Typha latifolia*) leaves into large soft mats, suitable for use for drying berries on, as mattresses, as “room dividers” in houses, and as covering for temporary summer dwellings. Red-osier dogwood branches could be used to make drying racks. Snowberry and hardhack (*Spiraea douglasii*) branches were employed as spreaders for smoke-drying salmon and as skewers for smoking clams. Thimbleberry leaves, big, soft and maple-like, were used as a surface for drying berries, as well as to make small berry baskets. Willows, especially the tree-sized Pacific willow (a native willow which has darker bark than the introduced European golden willow, *Salix alba*), were once used for their fibrous bark, which was twisted into cordage and used to make reefnets by the W̱SÁNEĆ. Reefnets are called *sxwələʔ* in SENĆOŦEN, the language of the W̱SÁNEĆ people, and willow is called *sxwələʔ-íłch*, the suffix *-íłch* meaning ‘plant/tree’.

Today, even in the park itself, many of the plants to be seen are introduced from elsewhere and have taken over much of the habitat, even in the more “natural” areas. Among the worst of the invasive species is English ivy (*Hedera helix*), which smothers much of the ground in areas with otherwise mainly native vegetation. English holly (*Ilex aquifolium*) also predominates in parts of the park, especially on the east side. Daphne-laurel (*Daphne laureola*) and Scotch broom (*Cytisus scoparius*) have also been invasives of concern, although the work of the Friends of Cedar Hill Park Society has helped to reduce their numbers considerably. Invasive grasses such as cheatgrass (*Bromus tectorum*), and other weeds such as Scottish thistle (*Cirsium vulgare*), cleavers (*Galium aparine*) and climbing nightshade (*Solanum dulcamara*) are even more difficult to eliminate, since they are well adapted to spreading and taking hold wherever the ground is disturbed.

Above are only a few examples of how plants of Cedar Hill Park supported the lives of First Peoples of the region, and these people, in turn, helped to support the plants by maintaining the meadows and wetlands. Today, the park serves as a refuge for these native plants, which were once much more plentiful. In a time when, all over the world, we are homogenizing our environments and species, and suppressing their differences, we need to recognize and celebrate the species that exemplify a place and its history. Cedar Hill Park is a Saanich treasure, both typical

of past landscapes of southern Vancouver Island, and unique in its location, configuration and particular combination of species, watersheds and history. Its more natural areas with its giant oaks, native shrubs and camas meadows are particularly precious and will be even more so for future generations. Their maintenance should be undertaken with care, understanding and sensitivity, in order to retain and promote as many of the park's native plants and habitats as possible.

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*Some of the information cited in this article is from:

Turner, Nancy J. and Richard Hebda. (2012). Saanich Ethnobotany: Culturally Important Plants of the W̱SÁNEĆ' People. Royal B.C. Museum, Victoria.

Readers interested in more details on the plants mentioned (photos, descriptions, distribution maps) can consult E-Flora BC (Electronic Atlas of the Flora of British Columbia): <http://ibis.geog.ubc.ca/biodiversity/eflora/>