American Indians—Gathering, Preparing, and Preserving Plants
Unit: Plants (Middle and High School)

1. Within the deep canyons of the traditional Nimi’ipuu [Nez Perce] land, the people relied on the rivers, mountains and prairies for sustenance. They practiced a seasonal subsistence cycle, living with the seasons, not by the month. In early spring, the women traveled to the lower valleys to dig root crops. The men traveled to the Snake and Columbia rivers to intercept the early salmon runs. The men still hunted, but much less during the salmon runs. In mid-summer all the people of the village moved to higher mountainous areas setting up temporary camps to gather later root crops, fish the streams, and do more hunting of the big game. By late fall the people settled back into their traditional villages along the Snake, Clearwater, and Salmon rivers. Salmon and other fish, game, dried roots and berries provided winter foods for storage. However, hunting parties would travel to the hills and river bottoms where the deer and elkwintered.

The basic roots gathered for winter storage included camas bulb (kehmmes), bitterroot (thlee-tahn), khouse (qawas), wild carrot (tsa-weetkh), wild potato (keh-keet), and other root crops. Fruit collected included service berries, gooseberries, hawthorn berries, thorn berries, huckleberries, currants, elderberries, chokecherries, blackberries, raspberries, and wild strawberries. Other gathered food includes pine nuts, sunflower seeds, and black moss.

www.nezperce.org/History/FrequentlyAskedQ.htm

2. VIDEO
“Well, the season has opened up and the different areas have their different times of root feasts. And it’s like Thanksgiving and when they have a root feast it’s the taking of the roots for the first time and that opens the season for the digging. I went Saturday and they had the new foods then. And so we’re allowed, the ones that took that for the first time are allowed to dig now. We all went as a group, not just one or two people.”
—Cecilia Bearchum, Nez Perce

3. VIDEO
“And we gather and process and harvest and store, begin storage starting in the spring and through the fall, and live on those supplies through winter. And so they’re stockpiling supplies to get them through until the new foods come back in the spring. And there’s a lot that Lewis and Clark don’t understand, they do their very best, but they don’t understand…. They don’t understand about the nutritional value of the kinds of varieties of foods we eat. And they don’t really have much of an appreciation or a palate for our foods, of different kinds of roots.”
—Bobbie Conner, Cayuse-Nez Perce
4. “Among the Nez Perce, only women harvested plant foods; a man doing so risked derision and contempt. Just as women were prohibited from touching men’s weapons and fishing tools, boys and men could not touch root-digging implements, baskets, or root ovens. Women setting out to harvest cleansed themselves and abstained from sexual relations beforehand. They said there should be ‘no man smells on women before digging, or the roots will go away.’”

5. “A Nez Perce woman’s year was structured around plants. Spring began with the appearance of the wild potato. This was followed by cous roots in April or May. Berries began to ripen in June; then in July and August, bands from all over the land gathered at the camas meadows. Every time a new food plant matured, its arrival was welcomed in a first fruits feast (ke? ú-yet). A respected leader with an affinity for the plant presided at the feast and was the first to start the harvest. A modern-day Wenatchee woman expressed the spirit of this thanksgiving ceremony: ‘Plants and creatures were offering their very lives for the nourishment of the Plateau people. In humble respect, the people acknowledged this gift.’”

6. “Nez Perce women’s relationship to the plants they gathered was personal and intimate. One of the important moments of life passage was a little girl’s first berry picking or root digging, marked by a feast at which people gave speeches of praise and encouragement. Older women gave the girl their strength and blessed her work, and her family gave gifts to everyone present. The Nez Perce word for this feast, talaposa, was the same as their word for ‘worship.’”

7. “Gathering plants was done in reverence. A little girl’s first berry picking or root digging was marked by a feast where older women gave the girl their strength and blessed her work, and her family gave gifts to everyone present.”

8. “Nez Perce women had a very personal relationship to plants. They led planting and first harvest ceremonies. They prepared feasts to honor the plants for offering their lives to nourish humans. They acquired special affinities and knowledge about plants through prayer, fasting, study, and proper actions.”

9. “The camas harvest was a plant related event in which everyone participated. It was highly organized. All the villages on the Clearwater went to Weippe Prairie, where Lewis and Clark found Broken Arm’s village. Each family camped separately in its own spot and dug in its allotted area. To trespass on another family’s spot was considered greedy. ‘Each group should be in its own place,’ people said. ‘The general attitude is one of enjoyment,’ one eyewitness said, ‘although it is hard, hot work. Everyone is
cheerful, takes pride in her work, and enjoys herself. Camas digging is not treated as
grim but necessary labor; rather is it hard but pleasant work."

10. “‘The Camas Prairie was named because the plant was so abundant,’ Carter says,
recalling summers as a little girl spent gathering the ripe roots in the traditional digging
area. ‘I know my grandmother and aunts went digging as children, and I learned from my
mother.’ The plant is in full bloom now, its bright blue flowers spread out over the
wetlands. A digging stick, usually a three-foot metal probe with a handle, is used to pry
the root from the ground. The stem is severed from the bulb and placed back in the
ground. The bulbs range in size from a thimble to a golf ball. They are baked in an
outdoor pit for about three days with driftwood, bear grass, moss and seasoning. But
what was once a dietary staple is now consumed only at pow wows, festivals and other
special occasions.”
From Canku Ota, June 1, 2002

11. “The Nez Perce describe how camas was prepared for immediate use and baked for
use in later months. Camas roots were baked and steamed in a large pit for a few days
and never eaten raw. For immediate consumption, the cooked roots could then be
made into a porridge or boiled in water. When the cooked roots turned from white to
brown, the taste became sweeter.”
From Caroline James, Nez Perce Women in Transition, 1877-1990, 1996, p. 17

12. William Clark, June 11, 1806
“Soon after the seed are mature the peduncle and foliage of this plant [camas] perishes,
the gournd becomes dry or nearly so and the root increases in size and shortly become fit
for use; this happens about the middle of July when the natives begin to collect it for use
which they continue untill the leaves of the plant obtain Some Size in the Spring of the
year. when they have Collected a considerable quantity of these roots or 20 or 30 bushels
which they readily do by means of Sticks Sharpened at one end, they dig away the
surface of the earth forming a cercular concavity of 2 feet in the center and 10 feet in
diameter; they next collect a parcel of dry split wood with which they cover this bason
from the bottom perhaps a foot thick, they next collect a parcel of Stones from 4 to 6 lb.
weight which are placed on the dry wood; fire is then Set to the wood which burning
heats the Stones; when the fire has subsided and the Stones are sufficiently heated which
are nearly a red heat, they are admusted in such manner in the hold as to form a Surface
as possible, a small quantity of earth is Sprinkled over the Stones, and a layer of
grass about an inch thick is laid over the Stone; the roots which have been previously
devested of the black or outer coat and radicles which rub off easily with the fingers, are
now laid on in a circular pile, are then covered with a layer of grass about 2 or 3 inches
thick; water is then thrown on the Summit of the pile and passes through the roots and to
the hot Stones at bottom; Some water is also pored around the edges of the hole, and also
find it’s way to the hot Stones. they cover the roots and grass over with earth to the debth
of four inches and then build a fire of dry wood all over the Conical mound which
Continue to renew through the course of the night or for 10 or 12 hours, when the earth
and grass are removed. And the roots thus Sweated are cooled with Steam or taken out,
and most commonly exposed to the Sun on Scaffolds untill they become dry. when they
are black and of a Sweet agreeable flavor. these roots are fit for use when first taken from the pitt, are Soft of a Sweetish taste and much the consistancy of a roasted onion; but if they are Suffered to remain in bulk 24 hours after being cooked they Spoil. if the design is to make bread or cakes of those roots they undergo a Second preparation of baking being previously pounded after the first baking between two Stones untill they are reduced to the consistency of dough and then rolled in grass in cakes of 8 or 10 pounds, are returned to the Sweat intermixes with fresh roots in order that the steam may get freely to those loaves of bread. when taken out the Second time the Indn. Woman make up this dough into cakes of various Shapes and Sizes, usually from _ to _ of an inch thick and expose it on sticks to dry in the Sun, or place over the smoke of their fires.”