

Listening Gardens an Indigenous reflection by Maura Shaw

The information contained will be a working document that will evaluate the deep wisdom, knowledge and understanding of the spiritual significance of the plants, rocks and art that will be selected for the listening gardens. All nations in treaty 7 must be represented fairly, ensuring that their stories can be heard, through nature. The main stakeholders in this project are the indigenous communities that the gardens are meant to represent. This is a working document that will be added to and edited based on elder and storyteller feedback.

In contemporary ecology, we sometimes see, the idea that the best way to conserve nature is to keep people out, but this does not recognize the integral connection between human communities and their ecosystems. We often learn in ecology that it is our duty to be good land stewards, that we are in control of the earth, as opposed to apart of it. The idea that we are “land stewards”, speaks to our lack of connection with the earth, our own ego, and need to control and exist in the moment - as opposed to the reality. A reality that indigenous communities have adopted long ago, and that is we are equal and apart of nature. The notion that we are not “in charge” of the land, but one with the land, will greatly impact the approach on how we interact with ecosystems.

Indigenous understanding of ecology hinges on the idea that we exist with nature, and maintaining a reciprocal relationship with nature is key in having healthy ecosystems. Reciprocity on all levels, emotionally, physically, intellectually and spiritually. Many indigenous communities

will give tobacco to the earth when they forage or hunt an animal.

Traditional ecological knowledge does not look at protecting nature from people, we conserve nature for people, because we are part of it. The current environmental movement fails to understand or underestimates that there is a huge population that has a unique relationship with our landscape, and this relationship dates back over 10,000 years. The fact that indigenous populations have existed within nature for 10,000 years, at a minimum, without overusing the lands resources is almost unheard of in history. Existing in an ecological environment, without affecting the ecological services, takes a lot of scientific method, observations and years of trial and error that have already been completed. These indigenous populations have lived sustainably with the environment for generations. Negating to seek the elder advice in both large- and small-scale projects would be a big loss to any designer.

Several progressive Western studies that we see occurring within ecology, are adopting practices that the indigenous populations have been upholding for thousands of years. We see the depth of knowledge in Traditional Ecology Knowledge or TEK, which are concepts that we finally see coming to fruition in some projects in the Western dominated fields. It is not about looking only through the lens of TEK but also combining TEK with Western Scientific methodology.

TEK goes deeper than empirical data, its understanding weather patterns from year to year, season to season. TEK is not gauged by dates on a calendar. For example, we don't look at March and say, "the spring salmon will be coming down the Miramichi River". This type of ecological activity is

gauged on the dogwood blooming which varies greatly from year to year. We manage our earth by benefiting ALL creation. The earth is OUR mother. Having the humility to stand back and learn from another culture is key.

While The Listening Gardens will double as an educational space for many action items, grassland restoration, native trees, shrubs, plants and the traditional medicinal applications reflected in urban setting. We must not lose focus that the main purpose is to teach all walks of life about Traditional Ecological Knowledge. The main purpose of the garden is Treaty 7 and educating all people on not just indigenous ecology, but also customs, beliefs, stories and traditions. The idea of the gardens is unity, reconciliation and understanding. There is a reason, that against all odds, through all the adversity, these sacred practices of the tribes in Treaty 7 have stood strong. It is because the day has come where all people must draw on this wisdom to heal ourselves, and in turn heal our mother earth.

The Listen Garden initiatives are dedicated to biodiversity preservation, long-term sustainability, and the restoration of organic species. The health of our ecosystems is directly connected to the vitality of our lands, waters, and communities. Investing in this work not only protects threatened and native species but also ensures the revitalization of soils and landscapes critical to future generations.

This effort is not solely about environmental recovery but about renewing the relationships between people and the land. Indigenous cultural practices demonstrate that true sustainability is rooted in reciprocity --taking care of the land so that it can, in turn, take care of us. Revitalizing native plants, healing soils through organic and traditional

methods, and fostering balance among ecosystems are practices that restore both natural diversity and cultural connection. Funding in this area will promote long-term resilience by:

- Supporting projects that restore soil health and natural systems.
- Reviving native and organic species critical for ecosystem balance.
- Honoring Indigenous knowledge and land-based practices that contribute to sustainable traditional ecosystem care.
- Strengthening relationships between communities, the land, and future generations.

Nakoda: Bearspaw, Chiniki, Wesley

Tabacco is a very scared gift. Tabacco is a gift given to us by the shape shifting white buffalo calf woman. She was given the tobacco, the pipe, ceremony, teachings, medicines, rights of passage and things of this nature. They were given to her by the creator to teach to the Sioux people.

To be a whole person and to heal means there is a focus on your relationship to mother earth and yourself. You cannot offer what you don't have, so loving yourself is key, as you are created. You must purge guilt, shame, fear, anger through ceremony.

4 Main Smudging Materials:

Buffalo sage

Sweetgrass (how to pick, when to pick, how to store it) it is braided in 3 to represent mind, body and spirit.

**Fungus from diamond willow
Cedar**

Reason for Smudge: cleanse your spirit, grounding yourself: to be present and focused, antibiotic, cleanse negativity.

There is a belief that there are 4 parts to everything: to a person, plant, rock etc.

1-Spiritual: Inhale the aroma

2- Emotional: Smudge over your heart

3-Physical: Smudge over your body

4- Intellectual: Smudge over you head

Rat root (sweet flag)- is known to Nakoda as a cure all, anything that ails you. There are different grades of rat root – you can simply chew it or brew in a tea.

Muskag Tea: tonic tea for digestive tract, sedative in large amounts.

Mint mixed with cedar Tea: calming digestive system tea tonic.

Blackfoot: Siksika, Kainai, Piikani

Naapi is the creator, he made the earth. He gave rivers, he gave the buffalo. He made roots, plants and berries for animals to eat. He gave flowers to help beautify the land and calm the spirit. He gave medicinal plants to help his children in times of illness.

Buffalo berry seeds were used for necklaces.

Naapi dropped his berries in the water and declared the people shall hit the bushes knocking berries onto the ground

after first frost. The Blackfoot still harvest berries this way, laying canvas on the ground to collect berries as it makes them sweeter.

Saskatoons were used for piped, and making arrows.

Alder shavings were used to smoke fish and other wild game.

Tsuut'ina: Sarcee

Tabacco is given to the earth for clean air, clean water.

The first crocus seen marks the end of winter. Signifies new growth and new change. Medicinally, this plant provides a boost of energy.

Plants are an integral part of the culture, spirituality, medicine and survival.

There is a deep focus on aquatic habitats as we are people of the Beaver. Well versed on how to live in harmony and balance the challenge that may arise with the Beaver. Beaver was the main survivor after the flood; he builds the earth back when the mud hen and muskrat could not.

Supernatural gift of water; all the water animals, all the water birds, water plants, water insects, which offered protection; and then came a great separation.

Connection to the spirit guides help to connect to the earth and understand dangers.

They have large areas of nature that belong to mother earth, they do not build or touch it. Corridors go into Calgary, and even those are protected to increase biodiversity. They have buffalo that live free. The viewpoint is that the Buffalo have taken care of us; it is our turn to take care of them – signifying reciprocity.

ROCKS:

Indigenous people and rocks

Indigenous peoples have a deep connection with rocks, viewing them as ancient teachers and spiritual guides. They believe that rocks hold stories, wisdom, and teachings that are passed down through generations. These teachings are often referred to as 'gifts' from the Earth and must be used with respect and care. Indigenous peoples honor rocks as 'Grandfathers' and consider them to be the wisest of all Earth's elements, having been around for millions of years. They study rocks to learn about the Earth's history and to gain valuable lessons about living in harmony with nature.

There is also a belief in medicine and anxiety with rocks. If you select a small rock from the ground, and focus on your negative energy, rolling the rock in your fingers – the rock spirit will draw the anxiety out of your fingertips. The rock is taken in exchange for tobacco.

Bob Miracle reflected the importance on the idea of a rock exchange at the bird statue – small, blessed rocks could be placed in a container as gifts for those going through mental anxieties with an explanation of the belief.

Working Plant List

Larkspur (*Delphinium elatum*)



The Blackfoot used the flowers as light blue dye for quills. First Nations people have deemed this plant unsafe to ingest in teas as large quantities can be dangerous.

Iriquois used it as a love medicine. Other tribes would dry the roots and smoke them in a pipe as there was a belief it would attract wild game. Other medicinal uses by First Nations would include a remedy for fevers, and rejuvenation for the skin. The mucilage from the root was also sniffed to clear nasal passages – the astringent root would cause the expulsion of mucous which would relieve pain and reduce elevated body temperatures. Poultices were also used by First Nations to treat headache, diarrhea and fever.

Wester Blue Flax (*Linum perenne*)



Wild flax seeds are rich in oil. Some were gathered by tribes and ground down to make flour. Flax leaves are often boiled to treat heartburn. Flax seeds contain essential fatty acids that are proven to lower blood fat and cholesterol levels and reduce clotting. Flax also contains lignans that help prevent prostate, breast and colon cancer. The stems are often used to make baskets, nets and fishing lines. The petals were often boiled to make face wash as well.

June Grass (*Koeleria macrantha*)



Seeds were crushed and made into flour. This plant was also used as paint brushes by First Nations people.

Shrubby Cinquefoil (*Dasiphora fruticose*)



The roots of this plant were a food staple for First Nations of Alberta. In fall the women would dig up the roots of these plants with digging sticks to gather enough for the winter. Nothing was ever wasted – it was discovered that root juices were a good remedy for inflamed eyes.

Snowberry (*Symphoricarpos albus*)



First Nations believed this bitter berry was the ghosts of past people and not to be eaten or consumed. First Nations saw these as part of the spirit world.

Silverberry (*Elaeagnus commutata*)



Silverberry is rooted deep in Metis heritage. The seeds were often made into beads to make necklaces. They would use the plant to make clothing, blankets and rope.

Indian Paint Brush (*Castilleja miniata*)



Much like the name, this plant was used by first nations as a paint brush. The flowers were also used to make shampoo.

Yarrow (*Achillea millefolium*)



Yarrow is one of the most widely used medicinal plants due to its capability to stem bleeding as the alkaloids reduce clotting times. This plant was often used after birth to reduce bleeding.

Saskatoon (*Amelanchier alnifolia*)



Cree, Metis and Blackfoot had saskatoon as a major food source. The plant was also used for crafting pipes and arrows. Saskatoons were also used as a mild laxative – the juice was also used as ear drops.

Purple Oat Grass (*Schizachne purpurascens*)



These grasses were often used to make blankets, they were also used for shelter, fire starter and used as chewing gum due to its sweet nature.

Anise Hyssop (*Agastache foeniculum*)



Often used in essential oils but can also be eaten raw or used in salads. Medicinal qualities include gastrointestinal as well as bronchial. This herb has been used to treat asthma, coughs, bronchitis, colds and respiratory infections. The plants were gargled to reduce tonsil swelling. Tea was derived and injected for gastrointestinal pain relief. The plant has been used as a blood regulator, increasing circulation and reducing blood pressure. This plant is also a companion plant to others as it reduces plant bacteria.

Little Blue Stem Grass (*Schizachyrium scoparium*)



The Lakota used this grass by rubbing it together to create soft fur-like insulation for their shoes, blankets and homes.

Blazing Star (*Liatris ligulistylis*)



The roots were ground out by indigenous people and used as medicine for heart issues, arthritis and headache. It is also good for fluid retention reduction.

Northern Blue Flag/ Bearded Iris (*Iris germanica*)



Some indigenous peoples placed northern blue flag rhizome on tooth cavities or gums to kill pain. Poultices of northern blue flag were used to reduce swelling and soothe burns and sores.

Sweet Grass (*Hierochloe odorata*)



Strong vanilla scent – was is often used for perfumes. Sweet grass smoke was inhaled as a dry bath to relieve coughs. Some women wove the grass into their hair to repel insects. It was commonly braided and burned in ceremony as a means of purification, protection and blessings. Interwoven strands are a symbol to someone's life growth and renewing powers.

Wild Bergamot (*Monarda fistulosa*)

This is the plant that gives Earl Grey tea its distinctive taste. First Nations would sprinkle dried parts of this plant on to meat and fruit to keep bugs away. This plant was often consumed to expel intestinal worms also to treat pneumonia as well as kidney problems. Many first nations would perfume their favorite horses – it was also burned in smudges to keep insects away.

Prairie Crocus
Prairie Smoke

Shrubs and Trees:
Buffalo Berry
Gooseberry
Wolf willow
Wild Raspberry
Alder
Red Osier Dogwood
Paper Birch
Spruce
Lodge Pole Pine
Dimond Willow
Cedar

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