

FEATURE

ARTICLES

CONIFERS AND LICHENS

With the first snowfall, many of the wild plants you have enjoyed through spring, summer and into late autumn disappear. But don't overlook that clump of evergreens from which you selected your Christmas tree.

Although wild edibles may be less varied during this season, both conifers and lichens can be used as a unique addition to a wintry meal or, if need be, in a survival situation. An outing on snowshoes or cross-country skis can provide an excellent opportunity for gathering winter edibles.

Conifers can be used in a variety of teas as diverse in flavour as there are evergreens. The basic ingredients for conifer tea are 1/4 cup fresh stem tips, with leaves, per cup of hot water. Simply pour boiling water over the leaves and stems, cover, and steep for five minutes. The tea will have its own unique flavour depending upon the type of conifer used. Although no additives are required, the tea may be too astringent for most tastes: try sweetening it with a teaspoon of maple syrup or maple sugar.

Spruce tea is best sweetened with one teaspoon of honey and a thin slice of orange. Squeeze the oil from the orange rind and add the juice from the pulp into the tea. Stir in one teaspoon of honey until dissolved and serve piping hot.

Cedar tea tends to have a bitter taste and may be improved by reducing the amount of leaves and stems to 3/4 of a teaspoon per cup of water, and adding one teaspoon of maple syrup.

Raw sugar can be used to greatly enhance the taste of white pine tea. Use one or two teaspoons, depending on your sweet tooth. White pine can also be an easily accessible source of sugar and starch should you be stranded in the woods; or you may simply want to try White Pine Chew. White pine is generally preferable to other conifers because of its sweetness. Choose a large tree with few branches. These are less resinous than smaller trees with numerous branches. Separate the inner bark from the hard outer bark and eat fresh. The inner bark is chewy and sweet and the fibrous part may be discarded after chewing for a few minutes.

Lichens are also edible and may be made into a delicious jelly. Reindeer Moss is a very common lichen. To prepare a unique and nutritious jelly, add the juice of one lemon and 3/4 cup honey to four cups water, then simmer a handful of moss in the water. Strain and allow to set.

Try the jelly with hot muffins and conifer tea - the perfect ending to a day on skis or snowshoes collecting winter edibles.

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