An Introduction to the Seminole People of South Florida and Their Plants

Part II: Seminole Plant Use

by Bradley C. Bennett

NOTE: Because of limited space, this article has been presented in two parts. In Part 1, History and Ethnology, published in the Summer/Fall 1997 issue of The Palmetto, Dr. Bennett described the arrival of Seminole people in Florida and their subsequent struggle to remain here. In this second half, Bennett describes plants used by the Seminoles for a variety of purposes.

When they arrived in southern Florida in the mid-1800s, the Seminoles encountered a botanical world very different from that of their ancestors. Those familiar with Florida's flora are aware of the profound floristic differences at the state's southern tip. Temperate hammocks in North Florida are more similar to the broadleaf forests of the Southeastern U.S. than they are to the tropical hardwood hammocks of South Florida. The words of Neamaltha, spokesman for the Seminoles in the early 1800s, are informative. He was not willing to accept land in Central Florida because it "did not have hickory nuts, persimmons, acorns, or much fertile land." (Covington 1993) This reveals two things. First, the Seminoles were typical of other southeastern peoples, gathering fruits of common temperate species. Second, they practiced extensive agriculture. Within a few decades, mastic, cocoplums, and pond apples replaced hickories, persimmons, and acorns. During the wars, the Seminoles abandoned much of their horticultural practices and reverted to a hunter-gatherer mode.

When they arrived in tropical southern Florida, the Seminoles adopted new plants. How they learned to use the tropical flora is a mystery. By the time the Seminoles arrived, all the original inhabitants were gone. Some of the Creeks had contact with Cuba, but the nature of the exchange is still a mystery. One piece of linguistic data, in particular, is intriguing. The Creek name for cocoplum (*Chrysobalanus icaco*) is *hikako*, a cognate of *icaco*. Linnaeus selected the epithet *icaco* based on the plant's Arawak name. Somehow the Seminoles learned of a traditional Caribbean name for a plant new to them, but from whom?

Many of today's Seminoles live in houses indistinguishable from ours. They drive Broncos and Blazers and fly around the world in the Tribe's corporate jet. Yet many of them use plants the same way that their parents and grandparents did. Except for Sturtevant's (1955) dissertation on Seminole medical practices, there has been no systematic work on the Seminole ethnobotany. In large part, this is due to their independence and resentment, fostered by 200 years of persecution. Much of the ancient wisdom already has been lost. Each death of an elder is analogous to the loss of a volume from a set of encyclopedias.

I began work with the Tribe in 1994 on several projects. Together with an undergraduate anthropology student at Florida International University, Madeleine Fortin, we helped the Tribe identify and describe plants in a medicinal plant video they had made. We also worked with Mikasuki and Creek speakers at the Tribe's Swamp Safari, an ecotourism facility where we helped trained guides. During the past year, I interviewed a dozen Tribe members at the Ah-tha-thi-ki Museum. My goal was to record ethnobotanical lore and prepare interpretive material for the Tribe. All interviews were conducted in English. The Seminole collaborators included Creek and Mikasuki speakers from the Hollywood, Big Cypress, and Brighton Reservations.

The information provided here is only a glimpse of the total Seminole plant knowledge. Some of this wisdom is considered private – not intended for the outside world. What you read is information deemed suitable for Seminoles and non-Seminoles alike. I discuss examples of construction, craft and fiber, fishing and hunting, food, medicine, and miscellaneous plant use. The Mikasuki (*Hitchiti*) and common names are provided ialong with scientific binomials and Creek names in Table 1.

Construction

After immigrating to southern Florida, the Seminoles adopted the *chickee* as their principal dwelling. The chickee is well-adapted to a subtropical climate. Made of readily available material, cabbage palm fronds for thatch and cypress for framing, a well-constructed chickee can last several years. It offers protection from Florida's abundant precipitation but allows cooling breezes to pass through. The elevated floor keeps occupants dry and precludes the entry of some swamp critters that otherwise would inhabit the dwelling. Indigenous people throughout the tropics construct similar palm-thatched structures. Before nails were available, the Seminoles lashed the cypress frames with the roots of strangler figs

or the stems of rattan vine. Cabbage palms are sometimes used for the main posts but they do not last as long as cypress. Before airboats and automobiles, the Seminole's primary form of transportation was the dugout canoe, also made of cypress. As late as the 1960s, it was not an uncommon site to see a family of Seminoles poling a canoe along the Tamiami Trail. Today, few Seminoles remember the art of canoe making.

Craft and Fiber

Perhaps the most versatile of all Seminoles plants is rattan vine. (Bennett and Hicklin) Seminole women fashion baskets and sieves from palmetto leaf stalks. Fronds function as fire and ceremonial fans. The famous Seminole dolls are made from fibers collected from the base of the leaves. Once a minor fiber crop in the Southeastern U.S., Spanish moss also was used as camp bedding by the Seminoles. During the Seminole Wars, when cloth was not available, women may have fashioned skirts from the plant's fibers as did Florida's pre-Columbian inhabitants. Seminoles carve sofkee spoons from cypress, pond apple, pop ash, and willow. [Sofkee is a traditional drink made from corn. *–Ed.*] Willow was also used to make stick ball rackets.

Fishing and Hunting

Sturtevant (1955) reports the Seminole use of cabbage palm as a fish poison but provides no details of its use. I have found no other references to the use of hunting or fishing poisons. The Seminole make gigs for fish and frogs from cypress poles. They make bows from the strong, limber stems of myrsine. Stems of pond apple can be employed for the same purpose. Several species are a source for arrows including cocoplum, strangler fig, pop ash, marlberry, and red maple.

Food

By the time the Seminoles arrived in southern Florida, their mode of subsistence had changed dramatically. Early explorers noted large Creek towns in northern Florida, with hundreds of inhabitants and large fields of corn. The Seminoles continued their horticultural practices in southern Florida but on a much smaller scale. They cultivated small patches of corn, pumpkins, bananas, sugar cane, sweet potatoes, and beans, but also harvested many wild foods. Their most important starch source was coontie. They also ate the fruits of saw palmetto, huckleberry, muscadine grapes, and strangler figs. They ate the young buds of some ferns including the leather fern. They ate tubers of alligator flag and ground nut. Alligator flag leaves were used to make tamale-like dishes stuffed with corn meal, meat, and fat. The Seminoles ate live oak acorns either roasted or in sofkee. Greenbrier roots, once a major starch source, were replaced by coontie in southern Florida. Young greenbrier tendrils and shoots also were eaten.

Medicine

Plant medicines are considered sacred by the Seminoles and Miccosukees. Most Seminoles believe that medicines hold little power until a medicine man infuses it with his spirit. Breathing into the medicine through

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Table I. Species Mentioned in the Text

Common name	Binomial	Family	Mikasuki (Hitchiti) Name	Creek (Muskogee) Name
alligator flag	*Thalia geniculata* L.	Marantaceae	shongike	shogike
black root	*Pterocaulon virgatum* (L.) DC.	Asteraceae	pechekche alahke aayek	yanashiliswa
black-eyed susan	*Rudberkia hirta* L.	Asteraceae	haash thahe	–
button snakeroot	*Eryngium yuccifolium* Michx.	Apiaceae	pashe	pasha
cabbage palm	*Sabal palmetto* (Walt.) Lodd. ex Schultes	Arecaceae	taal choobe	taala thlaku
cocoplum	*Chrysobalanus icaco* L.	Chrysobalanaceae	hikake	hikako
coontie	*Zamia pumila* L.	Zamiaceae	conteke	coonti hatki
cypress	*Taxodium distichum* (L.) Richard	Pinaceae	ashuit	ashawi
frost weed	*Verbesina virginica* L.	Asteraceae	epte aape	ito aape
greenbrier roots	*Smilax laurifolia* L.	Smilacaceae	bakche lonche	coonti chakli
ground nut	*Apios americana* Medicus	Fabaceae	okaahi	ahakliwaha
huckleberry	*Vaccinium myrsinites* Lam.	Ericaceae	olak aape	chafakana
laurel oak	*Quercus laurifolia* Michx.	Fagaceae	ashak heskoposhke	mishcolabi
leather fern	*Acrostichum danaeifolium* Langsd. & Fisch.	Pteridaceae	taapente choobe	taapente thalku
live oak	*Quercus virginiana* Mill.	Fagaceae	okecheske	–
marlberry	*Ardisia escallonioides* Schlect. & Cham.	Myrsinaceae	akcon ahake ap'looche	uchi apaga
muscadine grape	*Vitis rotundifolia* Michx.	Vitaceae	chokoche	chalushwa
myrsine	*Myrsine floridana* A. DC.	Myrsinaceae	akchon akahke aphutki.	tuki shaklwee
pond apple	*Annona glabra* L.	Annonanceae	totakwe	totakwa
pop ash	*Fraxinus caroliniana* Mill.	Oleaceae	hikaape	tohatka
rattan vine	*Berchemia scandens* (Hill) K. Koch	Rhamnaceae	chokoshe logne	istinokwanaya
red bay	*Persea borbonia* (L.) Spreng.	Lauraceae	toole	toola
red maple	*Acer rubrum* L.	Aceraceae	ashak homeche.	hino
royal fern	*Osmunda regalis* L.	Osmundaceae	yatahuwashi taapente	taapente
Spanish moss	*Tillandsia usneoides*	Bromeliaceae	ashome	–
strangler fig	*Ficus aurea* Nutt.	Moraceae	hachelope	hilokhaga
willow	*Salix caroliniana* Michx.	Salicaceae	oke bakshe	akawana

Landscaping Ordinances ...

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If you've read all the way to the end of this article, here's a challenge! Notice projects under construction in your community. If you don't see large trees with protective barricades on building sites or many young trees planted on completed projects, then your town may not have adequate ordinances. Citizens serving on the Tree Advisory Board, the City Beautification Board, the Planning Board and the Development Review Board are instrumental in protecting Gainesville's urban forest. You could do the same. Call your City Commissioners. Be a volunteer!

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EDITOR'S NOTE: The author, Meg Niederhofer, gave a wonderful and inspiring presentation at FNPS' 1997 conference in Gainesville, and I subsequently invited her to document the content of her presentation for readers of The Palmetto. We'd like to hear from more members about municipal ordinances – both those that protect vegetation and those that negatively affect our vegetative cover. Send in your letters and articles!

Seminole Plant Uses ...

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a special tube, together with the recitation of sacred songs, transforms mere plants into healing herbs. The descriptions here intentionally are brief, in respect of the Seminoles' desire for privacy.

Red bay is one of the most important Seminole plants, forming the base of most remedies, including those used to treat fever. The plant also provides medicines used in purification rites and other ceremonies. The Choctaw and Creeks used the closely related swamp bay (*Persea humilis*) to treat fevers and dropsy. Another important medicine is willow. Willow bark and roots have a variety of medicinal applications including the treatment of menstrual ailments, fever, and sore throats. It is considered a "cooling" medicine. The Creeks bathed in an infusion of willow bark to ward off fevers. The Alabamas drank and bathed in an infusion of willow roots to cure fevers. Strangler fig bark is an ingredient in a woman's remedy. Button snakeroot, *pashe*, is another important medicinal plant and like red bay, it is added to many remedies. Button snakeroot is a well known emetic and probably replaced yaupon (*Ilex vomitoria*) as the source of the ceremonial black drink in southern Florida. Pashe entered into every phase of Seminole life. Warriors, for example, drank pashe before going into battle. (Covington 1993) Members of the composite family particularly are valued as medicines. For example, the Seminoles employ black root to relieve menstrual bleeding, black-eyed susan to treat sun stroke, and frost weed to reduce fever.

MISCELLANEOUS

The Seminoles employ plants for a variety of other purposes. During Florida's pioneer period, they traded muscadine grapes and huckleberries. Until recently, royal fern roots were collected and sold to nurseries to use as a substrate for growing orchids. Cypress and live oak remain the preferred fuel woods. A traditional Seminole camp maintains a fire in the cooking chickee with four logs, each oriented in the cardinal directions. The fire is extinguished only during the annual Green Corn Dance. Seminole women make a decoction of Spanish moss to wash their hair. They also rub the plant on the heads of newborns, in the belief that it will produce a curly-haired youngster. Galls on laurel oaks are considered to be the home of the "Little People" and, for that reason, are never disturbed. Traditional Seminoles burn red bay leaves to protect their homes from evil spirits. Scores of other plant uses have yet to be adequately documented. ✷

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EDITOR'S NOTE: As noted in Part I of Dr. Bennett's article, the Seminoles are attempting to preserve the wisdom of their ancestors through efforts such as the Ah-tah-thi-ki Museum. For more information on the museum, please call (954) 792-0745. For information about Billie Swamp Safari, write HC 61, Box 46, Clewiston, FL 33440, or call (800) 949-6101. Information about the Seminole Tribe is also available on the World Wide Web at http://www.seminoletribe.com.