WILDFLOWERS OF MONTANA

CLAIRE VLASES

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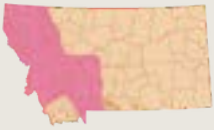
ARROWLEAF BALSAMROOT

Balsamorhiza sagittata

These vibrant yellow flowers are usually four or five inches across and stand one to two feet tall. They are found in sunny grasslands, sagebrush steppe, valleys, and montane regions up to 8,000 feet in elevation. It is an important food source for bighorn sheep, deer, and elk. Indigenous groups used balsamroot leaves as a poultice for burns, wounds, cuts, and bruises. Some communities boiled the roots for a medicinal tea to treat headaches and arthritis.

BEARGRASS

Xerophyllum tenax



This sweet-smelling plant gets its name because bears often chew on the stems and use the leaves for nesting in their dens. It is a mature plant that takes a few years to fully establish. The stalk can grow up to five feet tall. Beargrass grows on sunny slopes with moist soil. The plant is fire-resistant and often flourishes the season after a burn. It is used by indigenous peoples for basketry and weaving. When dried, the flower stalk can be used for a fire starter.

BIG HUCKLEBERRY

Vaccinium membranaceum

Big Huckleberries have a special place in many people's hearts (and stomachs). Wild huckleberries are usually found in areas with low canopy cover, on moderate slopes, or around lake basins. These shrubs commonly grow alongside Beargrass. The plant is valuable to many indigenous groups who have traditions surrounding gathering, storing, and consuming huckleberries. Some communities use the berries in pemmican or sun cakes, or even to make lavender dye. They are rich in antioxidants, iron, and vitamin C. Huckleberries are difficult to cultivate so mid to late summer, many people collect them. They are also enjoyed by black and grizzly bears and are known to be a large part of their diets in the summer. As temperatures warm, the habitat of these berries is predicted to decrease significantly, which will have lasting impacts on ecosystems that rely on them.

BITTERROOT

Lewisia rediviva

The Bitterroot is Montana's state flower. The Bitterroot Mountains, the Bitterroot Valley, and the Bitterroot River are all named for this flower. The plant's Latin name means "revived, reborn," referring to its ability to regenerate from seemingly dead roots. Bitterroot grows close to the ground, at low to moderate elevations. It can be found on rocky or gravelly soils in grassland, bushland, and forest. The flower has significance to multiple indigenous groups. For example, the Lemhi Shoshone believe that the red core of the root has the power to stop a bear attack. It is also used in traditional medicine for nursing mothers and as pain relief. The thick roots can be peeled, boiled, and eaten. In many indigenous cultures, the bitterroot is eaten as a special delicacy.

CHIVES

Allium schoenoprasum

The perennial Chive grows up to ten inches high and produces edible violet flowers. They are found in wet meadows along streams, lakes, or rivers. Chives bud early in the spring. A member of the onion family, the plant has a distinct smell. They can be used like domestic chives, for flavoring or cooked. The chopped leaves lend their delicate onion odor and flavor to many foods. Wild Onion is also native to Montana and looks similar to chives, but has white flowers. Indigenous communities use chives for traditional medicine, treating coughs and colds. The juice is also somewhat antiseptic and can be used to dress wounds.

FAIRY SLIPPER

Calypso bulbosa

This orchid is named for its delicate shape resembling the shoe of a fairy. They grow in coniferous forests, valleys, and montane, but are also often an indicator of wetlands. Fairy Slipper will usually bloom in May to late June. Indigenous groups enjoy the stems, which occasionally have a rich, butter-like flavor. It is also used as a treatment for convulsions or mild epilepsy. Known to have particularly fragile root systems, these flowers are susceptible to disturbances in their environment. There is concern for their viability in some regions.

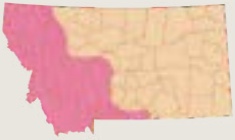
FIREWEED

Chamaenerion angustifolium

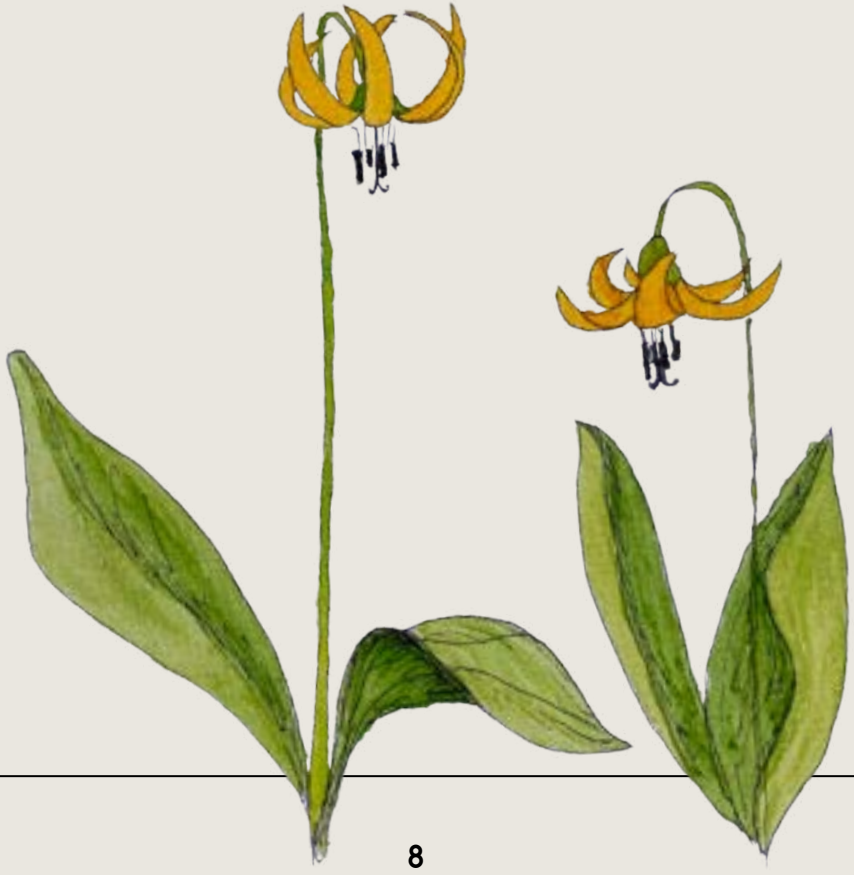
Fireweed can be found on open slopes, stream banks, avalanche chutes, and forest edges, from the valleys to subalpine regions. Fireweed's name originates from its ability to quickly grow over burned areas, bringing bright color to otherwise desolate landscapes. A hardy perennial, fireweed stems grow from three to six feet high. Each stem blooms up to 50 flowers from June to September. When the flower seeds, it produces tufts of silky hairs which are used by indigenous peoples as fiber for weaving and padding. The fireweed shoots are high in vitamins A and C, which can be eaten as a spring vegetable or made into tea. Today, people make fireweed honey, jelly, and syrup. It belongs to the Evening Primrose family.

GLACIER LILY

Erythronium grandiflorum



Glacier Lilies bloom right after the snow melts, typically from late April through June. They follow the melting snowline from the valleys up to the subalpine zone. Glacier Lilies are found in rich, moist soil along stream banks, shaded woods, and subalpine meadows. Some indigenous communities dig up the bulbs of Glacier Lilies, which can be boiled or dried to eat in the winter months. They are also a food source for wildlife; bears, deer, elk, and bighorn sheep eat the bulbs and seed pods. Ground squirrels also dig up the bulbs and store them for the winter.

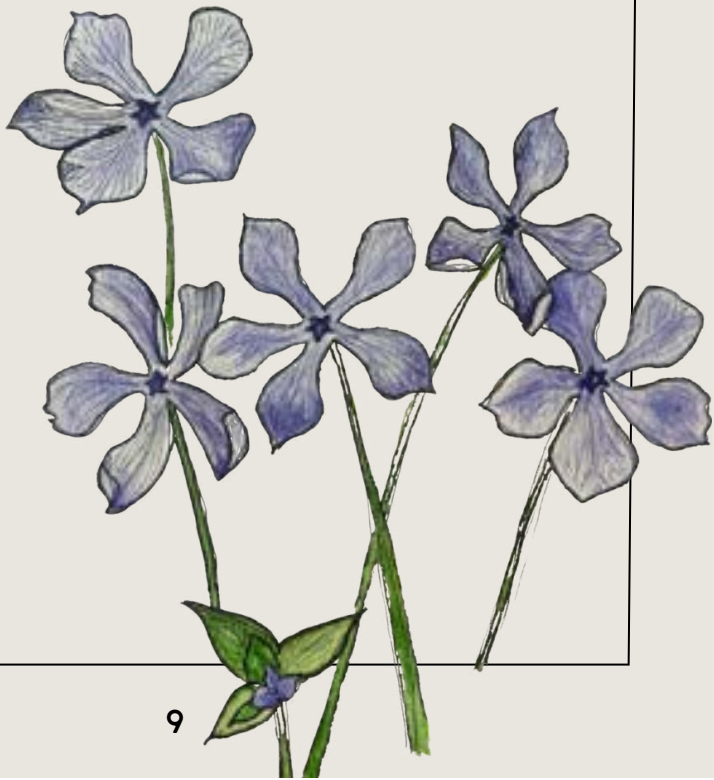


HOOD'S PHLOX

Phlox hoodii

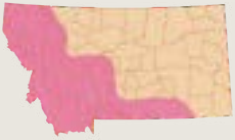
Hood's Phlox blossoms after an early snowmelt, usually in May. It is an important nectar source for early-season queen bumblebees. Hood's Phlox is found on rocky, high-elevation mountain slopes. It is common on glacial moraines and grows best on the upper parts of southern slopes. In the fall, usually in November, Hood's Phlox will go dormant until next spring. It is known to regenerate quickly after a fire. The Blackfoot Tribes use Hood's Phlox to make a yellow dye. The plant works medicinally as a mild laxative for children and to treat chest pains. The Shoshone Tribes make an infusion of the plant for anemic children and babies with stomachaches. The roots can be rubbed over the body for colds and aches and the leaves can be applied on boils and stings. It is often nibbled on by deer and elk.

There are several varieties of Phlox in Montana.



MOUNTAIN BLUEBELLS

Mertensia ciliata



Mountain Bluebells, also known as Tall Fringed Bluebells, grow one to three feet tall. They flower in the spring and early summer. Usually found in wet areas, these flowers can be spotted in grasslands, meadows, and woodlands. Even though they belong to the Asapagus family, Bluebells are poisonous to humans, dogs, horses, and cattle. There are many folklore tales surrounding Bluebells and dark fairy magic. Their sticky sap was once used to glue feathers to arrows and bind pages of books. In the language of flowers, the Bluebell is a symbol of humility, constancy, gratitude, and everlasting love. Bluebells take four to five years to finally flower, so they are particularly susceptible to habitat disturbances. Several variations of Bluebells grow in Montana, including Leafy Bluebells, Alpine Bluebells, and Obscure Bluebells.

OLD MAN OF THE MOUNTAIN

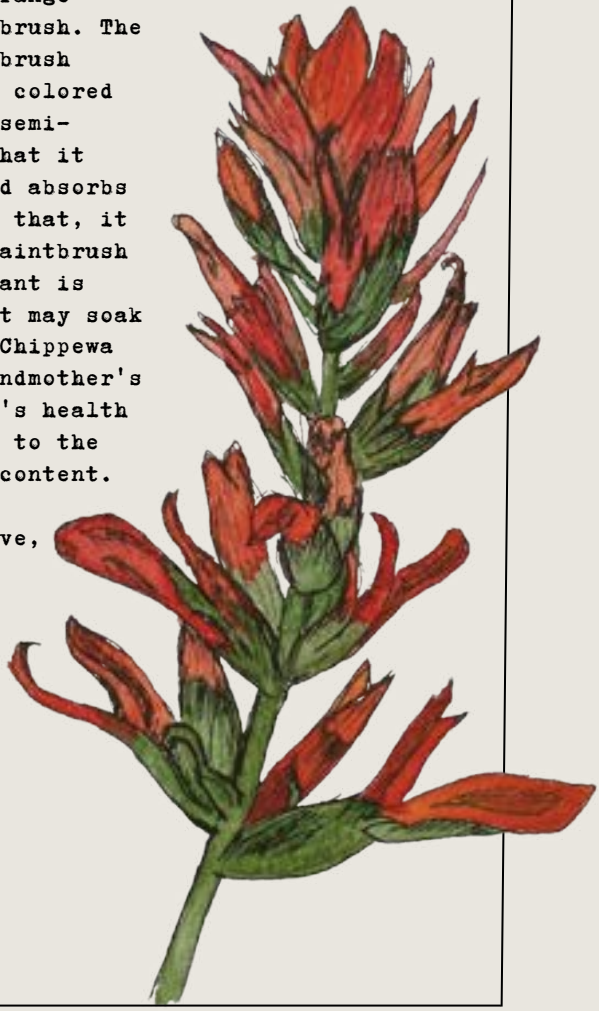
Hymenoxys grandiflora

Old Man of the Mountain gets its name from long wooly hairs that cover its stem and soft feathery leaves. It grows in meadows and tundra in upper subalpine and alpine regions, above the treeline. These flowers always face east, which can be a useful guide to a wandering hiker. It blooms between the spring snow thaw and the first frost of fall, so usually between June and August. The early blooms are only a few inches tall, but later in the summer, the plants can reach up to a foot in height. Old Man of the Mountain flowers grow through cold winds, dry soils, and the strong sun rays of high mountain altitudes.

PAINTBRUSH

Castilleja miniata

Also known as Indian Paintbrush or scarlet Paintbrush, this flower can be found in sunny mountain meadows and along stream banks. The top of the stems look like they have been dipped in bright red, yellow, or orange paint, hence the name Paintbrush. The "painted cups" of the Paintbrush aren't true flowers but are colored flowerlike-bracts. It is a semi-parasitic flower, meaning that it attaches to other plants and absorbs their nutrients. Because of that, it is difficult to cultivate Paintbrush outside of the wild. The plant is edible and tastes sweet, but may soak up toxins in the soil. The Chippewa Tribe calls Paintbrush "Grandmother's hair" and uses it for women's health and rheumatism, perhaps due to the plant having high selenium content. Other indigenous groups use Paintbrush as a contraceptive, hair oil, and red dye.



PLAINS PRICKLY PEAR

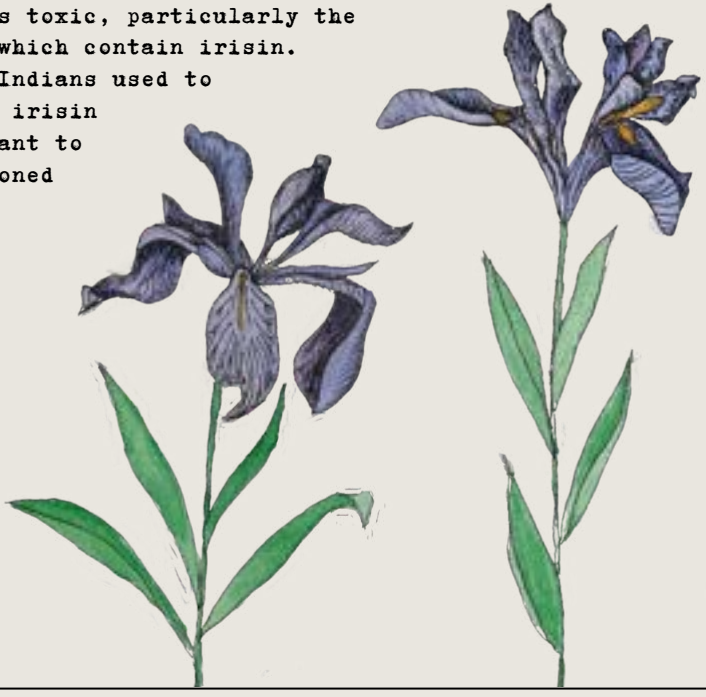
Opuntia polyacantha

The Plains Prickly Pear is a cactus with large yellow blooms appearing in early to mid-summer. The flowers become more red as time passes, attracting a wide range of pollinators. This cactus has shallow roots and water storage in the pads of the plant, allowing it to survive excessive periods of heat, drought, and even cold temperatures. Prickly Pears are named for their sweet fruits called "tunas," which resemble pomegranates in taste, color, and texture. Tunas are used in juices and jams. The pads of the cactus, called naples, are also eaten in native cultures. Indigenous groups use Prickly Pear medicinally to treat sores, infections, and backaches.

ROCKY MOUNTAIN IRIS

Iris missouriensis

Rocky Mountain Iris has an extensive ecological range, spanning from low-elevation valleys up to 10,000 feet in Montana. The Iris needs extremely wet soil before flowering, and then almost desertlike conditions for the rest of the summer. It often grows in large populations, sometimes covering hundreds of acres. It usually blooms from late spring to mid-summer. Indigenous communities use this plant for medicinal purposes, including treating toothaches, as an emetic, and to increase the strength of newborns. The plant is toxic, particularly the rootstalks which contain irisin. The Plains Indians used to extract the irisin from the plant to create poisoned arrows.



SAGEBRUSH BUTTERCUP

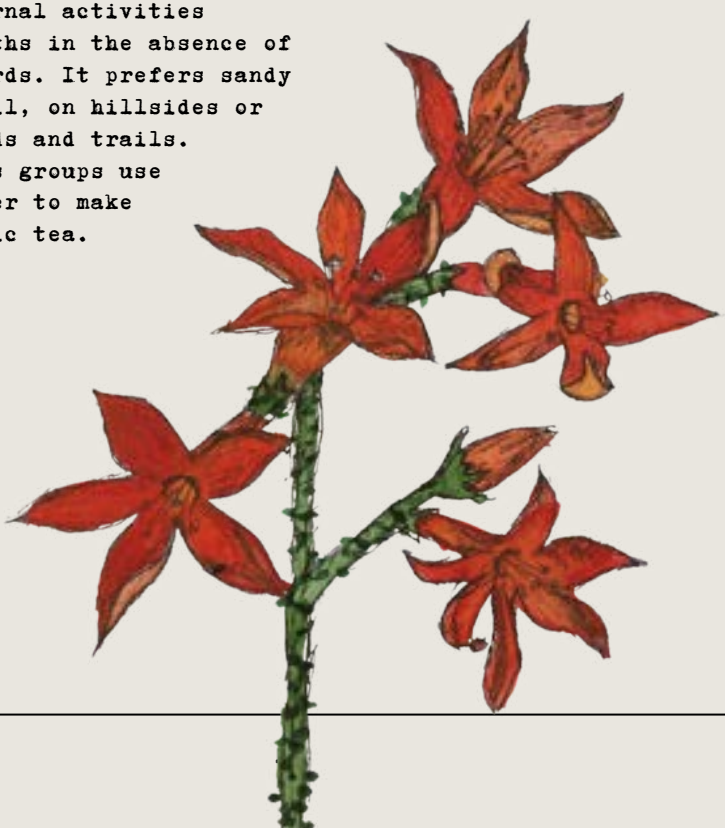
Ranunculus glaberrimus

One of the first blooms of spring, Sagebrush Buttercup can flower as early as February or March. The shiny yellow flowers can seemingly reflect the sunlight. It is poisonous to humans and livestock, but the leaves can be boiled or dried, and then eaten. Some indigenous groups used the plant as poison for arrowheads or to catch coyotes. Sagebrush Buttercup flowers prefer moist, damp ground ranging from sagebrush flats to sunny forests. The flower is an important spring food for blue grouse and early pollinators.

SCARLET GILIA

Ipomopsis aggregata

Scarlet Gilia's Latin name Ipomopsis comes from Greek words for "striking appearance" This flower especially attracts hummingbirds because the long floral tube is suited for pollination by long-beaked or long-tongued animals. The flowering period for Scarlet Gilia can last several months, beginning in mid-summer and continuing through the fall. During that time, it will produce dozens of flowers. As the flowers age, they may fade to white. The change in flower color corresponds with the migration patterns of hummingbirds. Hummingbirds are drawn to the dark red color of the flower, whereas hawkmoths prefer lighter flowers. If the hummingbirds do not migrate, the flowers stay dark red. The flowers also shift their nectar production to better match the nocturnal activities of hawkmoths in the absence of hummingbirds. It prefers sandy or dry soil, on hillsides or along roads and trails. Indigenous groups use this flower to make a cathartic tea.



SHAGGY DAISY

Erigeron pumilus

Also known as fleabane, these small white flowers with yellow centers bloom in late spring and summer. The leaves are slightly fuzzy. Part of the daisy family, it is a crucial pollinator plant for many insects. Shaggy daisy prefers sandy or stony soil. It often grows near sagebrush and yarrow. This flower is found in dry grasslands and open woodland habitats. It is known to grow quickly after a fire. The Lakota used a concoction of boiled Shaggy Daisy to treat rheumatism and stomach issues. Other tribes used an infusion of its roots as an eye tonic or wash.

SILVERY LUPINE

Lupinus argenteus

The name "lupine" is derived from the Latin word lupus, which means wolf. Like wolves, lupines are dangerous to sheep and other livestock. Silvery Lupine can be found in grasslands, woodlands, on rocky prairie hillsides, and on subalpine ridges. They help stabilize nitrogen in the soil, thereby increasing soil fertility and plant diversity. Part of the pea family, the flowers each have a banner, two wings, and a keel. The banner has a white spot on it, which is an indicator for pollinators, especially bees. As the plant ages, that spot turns red in color, signaling that the bee should skip this flower and go instead for younger flowers with ample nectar. The silky-haired leaves give off a silvery sheen, which may explain the origin of this plant's name. There are five varieties of Lupine across Montana. The Shoshone people used Lupine as a diuretic. The Blackfoot used Lupine to relieve indigestion and stop hiccups. They also used lupine as incense in the Ghost Dance, a common indigenous ceremony.

THIMBLEBERRY

Rubus parviflorus

Thimbleberry plants have small five-petal white flowers that produce red berries in the late summer. The berries are shaped like thimbles, resembling a raspberry. They may be eaten raw, but are tart. They are often made into jelly or cooked with other food items. Thimbleberries grow in the mountains, in places that are shady, moist, and cool. They are found in open woodlands, meadows, or at the forest's edge. Even though they belong to the rose family, thimbleberries are not thorny. The leaves of a thimbleberry plant are soft and fuzzy and may grow larger than a person's hand. Indigenous communities used the leaves to line baskets. Dried, powdered leaves were applied to wounds and burns to prevent scarring. The leaves could also be boiled into a tea to treat stomach issues. The bark can be boiled and used to make soap. The shoots of Thimbleberry can be eaten raw or cooked as a vegetable.

WILD BLUE FLAX

Linum Lewisii

Wild Blue Flax grows best in dry soils in full sunshine. They are found anywhere from prairies to alpine ridges, in meadows, woodlands, sagebrush, and open fields, at all elevations. Wild Blue Flax blooms between May and July. The flowers range in color from white to deep blue. Indigenous communities eat Wild Blue Flax seeds for their flavor and nutrients. They also make tea from the stems and leaves to treat various medical problems such as eye infections, stomach disorders, and swelling. Some groups use Wild Blue Flax to make strong rope. Today, cultivated Flax is grown for its linen-like fiber and linseed oil. Livestock experience a state of drowsiness when feeding on Wild Blue Flax. Other common names include Lewis Flax and Prairie Flax.

WESTERN TRILLIUM

Trillium ovatum

Nicknamed “birth root,” the Western Trillium plant contains chemical compounds called sapogenins that have been used for thousands of years as a sacred female herb to help facilitate childbirth. They grow in moist to wet forests in lower-elevation valleys. Trillium can be found in coniferous and mixed coniferous-deciduous forests, alder thickets, and shrubby areas. They sport a large white flower above the leaves that change to pink, purple, and even red with age. Flowers typically bloom from late February through April. A single Trillium plant may be seven or eight years old before it produces its first flower. They are slow to develop, which means that they are particularly vulnerable to habitat loss and harvesting. If left undisturbed, Trillium can create a carpet of early spring flowers on the forest floor. They live for decades, so an undisturbed colony of flowering Trillium could easily be 50 years old.

WOOD'S ROSE

Rosa woodsii

Wood's Rose is commonly found on riparian and wetland sites but also occurs on bluffs, dry grassy slopes, prairie sandhills, and forest clearings. Wood's Rose has an extensive range; it grows anywhere from 2,000 to up to nearly 12,000 feet in elevation. It takes around two to five years for a plant to flower. Wood's Rose is a good source of energy and protein for many animals, including deer, coyotes, squirrels, porcupines, and bears. Many birds and mammals are sustained by the persistent dry hips even during the winter. Thickets formed by Wood's Rose provide shelter for small animals. The plant is effective in erosion control, and the species has been used to promote the regrowth of disturbed sites along road cuts and eroding streambanks. Indigenous communities used Wood's Rose for food and therapeutic materials. The bark and roots were boiled to cure stomach ailments and a tea was made from the bark to treat muscles. Today, the hips are a source of vitamin C and are dried for use in flavoring teas, jams, and baked goods.