

# HOW TO FORAGE

## CREATE A BETTER RELATIONSHIP WITH OUR FORESTS



**M**any people instinctively have a connection to nature, but what does that look like? The Forest Capital of Canada 2024 Board would like to encourage everyone to expand their forest knowledge, which is why we talked to two local forest educators who are learning and teaching others about foraging in the boreal forest.

**Gale Hayday**, 60, is a retired school teacher from the Rocky Lane area, approximately 60

km east of High Level. Since 2022, she has been with the Northern Lights Forest Education Society (NLFES). John Thurston encouraged Hayday to join the organization.

“John Thurston and I worked together for years. He and other volunteers have kept NLFES going since the early 2000s,” said Hayday. “I began as a volunteer and I served as vice president for the board. It’s an amazing time to be involved.”

Recent grant funding from the Forest Resource Improvement Association of Alberta has allowed NLFES to hire forest educators and serve the Mackenzie Region even better. They have provided outdoor programming year-round outside communities such as High Level, La Crete, Rocky Lane, Bushe River, Meander River, Chateh and Rainbow Lake.

As a Grade 3 teacher at Rocky Lane School, Hayday often took her students outside to enjoy the trails and the forest.

“I spent my whole career here. There’s so much curriculum to touch on while working with kids outside,” said Hayday. “The forest is such a powerful thing for our health and our happiness, and it’s so accessible to us here. The work we’re doing means a lot to me.”

**David Asher**, 37, is a fellow forest educator for the NLFES. He relocated to High Level from Kitchener, ON, last year and was the Town’s planning and

development officer for a short time.

“I met John Thurston when I was working at the Town. I did a map for him. Later, they had a job opening, and I had the background,” said Asher. “I have a degree in environment planning from the University of Waterloo with a geography environment management minor.”

Asher grew up with a major passion for the outdoors. As a kid, he was a boy scout, achieving chief scout awards. Later, he would teach skiing and snowboarding to adults and children with disabilities.

“Teaching has always been a passion for me, especially outdoors. When I found out about the Northern Lights Forest Education Society, I was like, ‘Well, this is exactly what I want to do with the rest of my life,’” said Asher.

According to Asher, the NLFES team has worked with about 1,500 kids and adults since February, and they’ve reached 2,745 people since last July.



JOHN THURSTON, GALE HAYDAY AND DAVID ASHER

**PHOTOS:** Yarrow, plantain, chickweed, pineapple weed, Alberta Wild Rose, chaga & spruce tips photos by **Toniese Gamblin Fontaine** Rose hips, morel mushroom, Saskatoon & bunch berries, choke & pin cherries photos by **Sharon Krushel** | Group photo & bramble berry photos by **David Asher**



# Useful Plants and Fungi of the Boreal Forest found in the Mackenzie Region



The young leaves of the **yarrow** plant are edible both raw and cooked and are sage-like in flavour. When the leaves and flowers are made into tea, it's traditionally used for colds and flus and to help bring down a fever. Yarrow is also used topically for its wound healing properties.



Known as our “northern chamomile,” **pineapple weed** leaves and flowers can be made into a tea. It's known to be soothing to both your digestive and nervous systems. The young flower heads are also edible raw.



**Plantain** is used to treat bug bites and stings. It's known to be cooling and moistening to mucous membranes, lungs and gut. Young leaves are edible both raw and cooked.



**Chickweed** leaves are succulent and edible—a tasty wild green.

Chickweed can also be used topically to relieve skin irritation and itch.



**THE ALBERTA WILD ROSE FLOWER PETALS** are edible and delicious. In addition to being eaten raw, Alberta Wild Rose petals make a lovely, fragrant and relaxing tea. They can also be bruised and added to room temperature water to create rose water. The petals are also known to be antiseptic and to aid in wound healing.

*Note: if all the petals are taken, a flower may not attract pollinators, so it won't be able to produce rose hips. It's recommended to just take a couple petals and move on to another flower.*



**Alberta Wild Rose hips** are best when harvested in August and September—once the flower petals are gone and after they've been germinated. That's when they start to make their fruit (the hip). The red fruit appears close to where its flower petals were. Generally, as long as the rose hips are red, it can be eaten, even in the winter.

Importantly, rose hips are called “itchy bum berries” because when the seeds inside of the rose hip are ingested, it's hard on the digestive system. However, they are good if only the outside fruit flesh is eaten. They will make a nice tea, and they are a source of Vitamin C.





BRAMBLE BERRY



SASKATOON BERRIES



BUNCH BERRIES

**BERRIES**—Whether it's Saskatoon berries, wild raspberries, strawberries, bramble berries or bunch berries (which have been found by Hutch Lake), the Mackenzie Region's boreal forest has them.



PIN CHERRIES



CHOKO CHERRIES

**Pin cherries and choke cherries** are both edible—but be careful. All non-fruit parts of these plants—including the seeds—contain toxins and are inedible. The choke cherry pit contains arsenic.

**Dandelions** greens are often used in salads. The roots can be used to make tea. David Asher makes his own puppy food and uses dandelion greens because he says they have lots of micronutrients that you wouldn't get from lettuce and other greens.



**Morel mushrooms** can be found in the Mackenzie Region, often following a wildfire that was not particularly intense.

Intensely hot fires can burn the mushroom spores out of the ground, so it's harder for the mushrooms to come up, especially not right away.



**Chaga** (mushroom) grows on birch trees and has been used medicinally for hundreds of years for a variety of reasons such as to strengthen one's immune system, reduce inflammation and aid the liver. It's used in teas, powders and extracts.

Chaga has been found in the areas of Sandhills and Rocky Lane (in Mackenzie County). Though it grows on birch trees, it can eventually kill the tree—in which case the chaga shouldn't be harvested. The tree needs to be reasonably healthy.

The black bumpy growth should also be about the size of a grapefruit before it's harvested. Once you cut into it, it will be a reddish rust colour on the inside and quite hard. It is not easy to cut it off, even with a hand saw or hatchet.

Once harvested, it can be broken into chunks or powdered in a coffee grinder, so it can be more easily boiled into tea. Let it cook for awhile until it turns dark, like strong tea or coffee. It can be sipped hot or cold.



**Spruce buds/spruce tips** are found at the tip of a spruce tree's new little branches. There's often a brown cap on it, which holds all the needles together. They are edible raw (best when small, tight and tender—which is usually between May and early July) or cooked (often as a tea) and have a lemon-like flavour.

**Pitch (coniferous tree sap)** can be collected and used to as a fire starter, as it burns like a candle. It can also be ingested or used topically on wounds for its antiseptic/antimicrobial qualities. If it's old and dry, it won't be as sticky, which means it will be easier to transport.

**App Recommendation:** David Asher uses the **Flora Incognita** app to help him identify plants with confidence.

*Disclaimer: This information was collected from multiple sources. As such, the Forest Capital of Canada 2024, the Northern Lights Forest Education Society and Move Up Magazine cannot guarantee the information found here.*