

Devil's Club

Family Name: Ginseng
Family Name: Araliaceae

Latin Name: *Oplopanax horridum*

Common Names: Devil's walking cane, devil's club, Tlingit aspirin (5: online). It is sometimes marketed under the misleading, and now illegal in the United States, common names of "Alaskan ginseng," "wild armored Alaskan ginseng," and "Pacific ginseng (2:online)."

Native American Names:

Related Species: Eleutherococcus, Acanthopanax and Kalopanax (Moore, p.125) Devil's club is related to a number of widely known medicinal herbs including Asian ginseng (*Panax ginseng*), American ginseng (*P. quinquefolius L.*), eleuthero (*Eleutherococcus senticosus Maxim.*, formerly called Siberian ginseng), and small spikenard (*Aralia nudicaulis L.*, or sarsaparilla) (2:online).

Body System Affiliations:

1. Respiratory
2. Immune
3. Lymphatic
4. Nervous

Botanical Description:

Habit: Understory shrub

Size: Stems grow from 3 to over 10 feet tall

Arrangement: Alternate

Leaves: Large green umbrella-like leaves that vaguely resemble large maple leaves. Leaves are 4—14" (10—36 cm) wide; palmately 7—9-lobed, toothed; with thorny petioles and veins. Its giant leaves are adaptations to the dim light of its environment (1:online).

Flowers: Tiny egg shaped panicle clusters that are green through the spring (Moore, p. 125).

Fruit: The tiny egg shaped panicles clusters that are green through the spring turn into bright red berries growing in clusters in the late summer (Moore, p. 125).

Bark: Inner and outer bark covered in grayish-yellow spikes.

Twigs: Grow upward from spreading rootstock. Alternate stems at top of main stems.

Underground parts: The roots are partially fallen stems from previous growth as well as true roots and long rhizomes (Moore, p. 125).



Ecology:

(Map source: 2: online)

Habitat: in the Pacific: Boggy places, wetlands, damp forest floors with moist, acidic soils. **in the eastern forests:** deep, wet shady places. Devil's club is reliably hardy to minus 20 degrees, but it's not all that tolerant of heat and direct sunlight (5:online).

Range: Both sides of the Cascades in the northern half of Oregon, throughout red cedar forest in Washington, British Columbia and Alaska. Sometimes it can be found in northern Idaho, Montana and even Wyoming. It reappears in the forests encircling Lake Superior. (Moore, p. 125)

Native Where: North America

Ecological Relationships: Bears think the berries are delicious (5:online).

Places/Dates Observed/Description: Observed in the Gifts of the First People Garden medicinal trail and in a stump at the beginning of the path, both in 2003 and 2004 and just this fall as well (2005). They screamed at me from the bus all along the highway to Skokomish from Bremerton last spring. Most recently observed hundred of stems last weekend (Nov. 6) in Capitol Forest.

Propagation:

Technique: Devil's Club is a fairly slow-sprouting plant, sometimes taking 18 months to germinate. It can be propagated vegetatively, by layering, and also by self-propagating through root-crown sprouting; it prefers clay or loam soil, with poor drainage, ample shade, and lots of water. The soil in which it grows best is rich and has a low pH (3:online).

Harvest:

Plant Part: Inner bark of the rhizome and true roots.

Season of Harvest: Spring or fall

Method of Harvest: Wear gloves. Cut rhizome from the outer most areas of the patch/thicket you are harvesting from. Cut only what you absolutely need. Watch out for movement of other stems as you are on the ground harvesting, because you may hit an underground stems that connects to an aerial stem that might hit you: it's called Devil's Club for a reason! Try using a skunk cabbage leaf to protect your hand from the spikes (5:online).

Ecological Considerations of Harvest: Because Devil's Club grows in habitats that are generally quite threatened by human development, this is one of the plants that one should not harvest at all without good intentions and deep study of both the plant and it's connections to the land where you are interested in taking it from. Do not harvest solitary plants.

Cultural Considerations of Harvest: Be aware that this is a very threatened plant. Be aware that there are people who use it for multiple ceremonial/medicinal purposes following long tradition, and that everyone who uses it for whatever reason could be affected by your harvest. We have to be very careful to ensure its survival. Since Devil's Club is extremely important culturally, commercialization also raises concerns about the lack of recognition of and compensation for, the intellectual property rights of indigenous peoples from Alaska to British Columbia and Oregon (2:online). Also, all parts of the plant have power, so try not to throw any parts away (use the heartwood and sapwood of the stems for something artistic...)

Indigenous and Non-Western Use/Significance/Relationships:

Materials/technology: Specific tribal uses: Tlingit: Wood of plant retained for luck, bark used in bath, (2:online) **General observations (not specific to any particular tribes):** The inner stem bark of Devil's Club has often been used in infusion or decoction form to wash down fishing boats, fishnets, and to purify a house after an illness or death, and also as charcoal to prepare protective face paint for ceremonial dancers (2:online). Some tribes have dried and pulverized the bark for use as a deodorant. Some tribes have made a reddish cosmetic paint by mixing burned stems with grease. Additionally, Northwest Coast Indians have made charms from its wood and tied bits of bark onto fish hooks to increase the chances of a large catch. (1:online).

Medicine: Devil's Club is a very important spiritual and medicinal plant to most indigenous peoples who live in the range of its growth. Different parts of this plant are used by over 38 linguistic groups for over 34 categories of physical ailments, as well as many spiritual uses (2: online).

Indigenous Group: Tlingit (many other tribes have used Devil's Club, and abundant information is available, but I am focusing on Tlingit uses).

Part Used: Almost all parts of the plant are used by various tribes, but the most consistent use is an infusion or a decoction of inner bark of the rhizome taken internally (2:online).

Medicinal Actions: Antifungal, antiviral, analgesic, emetic, purgative, respiratory stimulant and expectorant, (2:online), blood purifier, laxative, tonic, digestive aid (3:online).

Indications: Among all of the traditional medicinal uses of Devil's Club, its most widespread is for the treatment of external and internal infections,

including tuberculosis (2:online). It is also used as an aid in childbirth (post-partum), for arthritis, rheumatism, respiratory ailments, pneumonia, internal hemorrhaging, stomach and digestive tract ailments, gallstones, vision impairment, blindness, broken bones, fever, dandruff, lice, headaches, acne, as a treatment for cancer (2:online) and hypoglycemia (5:online). Also: insanity (introduced by beating a person with the stems (2:online)).

Body System Associations: Respiratory, nervous, lymphatic, skin.

Energetics: purifying, protective, strengthening (source: self)

Storage: Devil's Club constituents seem to be easily lost due to exposure.

Preparation: Boiled, infused, pounded into poultices.

Applications: Tribe members steep it into teas, decoctions, mash it into salves, rubs, poultices, chew on inner stem bark (2:online) sip and steam it (5:online). For cataracts, use tea as eyewash (2:online). For sores (swellings, cuts, boils, burns, and external infections): "Inner bark, or infusion of, used externally as a poultice or wound dressing or rubbed over sore, dried inner bark pulverized with pitch or burnt to ash and mixed with oil or grease (sometimes salmonberries and dog feces) and applied externally, berries pounded into a paste and applied externally, decoction of root applied externally, and sliver of bark placed in wound to prevent infection (2:online)."

Cautions: Wear thick gloves.

Other: Spiritual applications of Devil's Club: purification and cleansing; protection against supernatural entities, epidemics and evil influences; acquisition of luck; ceremonial and protective face paint; in rituals. Uses include bathing with a Devil's Club inner bark infusion for personal protection and purification, and using parts of the stem as a protective amulet. In traditional uses of medicinal healing, there is not so much of an explicit distinction between spiritual and medicinal uses, in fact, most traditional "medicinal" applications of devil's club are closely linked to "spiritual" applications of the plant, particularly its use for cleansing and purification (2:online). Some of the ethnobotanists' findings for the Tlingit (2:online) include using Devil's Club to end bad weather, for personal purification, for luck, for protection and other intensely crazy uses that I'm not so sure should be online!

Western (European-American) Uses/Relationships:

Food:

Materials/Technology: Devil's club is used in Alaska State and National Parks as a natural "fence." When the state division of parks was looking for a natural barrier to keep visitors from wandering off trails, Devil's Club was cultivated intentionally for this purpose (5:online).

Medicine:

Part Used: The inner bark of the rhizomes.

Medicinal Actions: Expectorant and respiratory stimulant. Phytochemical research reveals antifungal, antiviral, antibacterial, and anti-microbacterial properties (2:online).

Indications: Use to increase mucus secretions to create productive coughs and to soften up hardened bronchial mucus that can occur later in a chest cold (Moore, p.

128). For rheumatoid arthritis and other autoimmune disorders, it is helpful during periods of remission, but not specific for active distress (Moore, p. 128). For those who are experiencing symptoms of adult onset diabetes, especially those of stockier builds with higher blood pressure and resistance to insulin, the tea can help to decrease pituitary stress and well as regulate and lower desires for sugary foods (Moore, p. 129)

Body System Associations: Respiratory System, Lymphatic system, Nervous System.

Constituents: The essential oil of the root contains nerolidol, torreyol, dodinene, bulnesol, dodoecenol, cadenene and cedrol (Moore, p. 127)

Harvest: Harvest the rhizomes (stem-roots), and wash them. Then strip the outer bark using fingers or a stiff brush; use the inner bark directly under the thin layer of outer bark.

Storage: Keep in a tightly sealed glass jar in a dark place. The bark will remain potent for at least a year. After a year, the aromatic oils will begin to break down, but many constituents will remain for another year.

Applications: Alcohol tincture, decoction, cold infusion (Moore, p. 127).

Preparation: Fresh tincture: use a 1:2 ratio of plant matter to 60% alcohol. Dry tincture: use a 1:5 ratio of plant matter to 60% alcohol (Moore, p. 127). For the cold infusion, use a ratio of 1:32 plant matter to cold water; let steep at room temperature for at least six hours (Moore, p. 24).

Pharmacy: Fresh and dry tinctures: 15 to 30 drops, up to three times per day; cold infusion: 1 to 3 fluid ounces, up to three times per day (Moore, p. 127)

Cautions: Wear good gloves when harvesting, because the spines can break off under the skin, forming an abrasion that is slow to heal (Moore, p. 127).

Essential Oil Information: The whole plant is sweetly aromatic.

Personal Experience:

Materials/Technology: Rhizome's heartwood and sapwood hang in a small bundle over my kitchen window to protect us.

Medicine:

Part Used: Inner bark and true roots

Harvest:

Site Location: Capitol Forest, Nootka Road

Site Description: I turned on Nootka Road, and we headed up the base of the mountain. This road was the place where former classmate (2003) Karen Wilk had harvested Devil's Club. Her place of harvest was up the creek about half a mile, and I have to thank her for pointing us in the general vicinity.

Recently, I had gone farther up (8 miles) this same old logging road alone, looking for...well, I wasn't specifically looking for anything, but I had hoped to find a trailhead, and I had hoped that maybe that trail would cross paths with some Devil's Club for me to observe. That day, was bathing in the mountain sunlight and I decided I had gone far enough, so I turned around. About halfway down the mountain, as I came around a steep curve, suddenly the truck stopped (I did it, but man, did I ever feel 'stopped').

I got out of the truck, still in disbelief of what I thought I saw. All along the hillside, there were huge strong stems of Devil's Club. Everywhere I looked, there were more, hundred of them, some of the widths as large as half of my wrist, some the size of my thumb, all of them a consistent height, between 5-10 feet tall. There were hardly any other plants around them. They truly dominated the hillside in a very healthy way. Turning around, I saw the hillside across the valley, which was full of clearcut areas.

I decided that this was not the place to take Heather, not really because they were close to the road, but because the road to get way up there was almost 8 miles really bumpy, and I didn't want to jar her nervous system before we harvested her medicine. We stopped only a few miles down Nootska Road, just over a culvert. The sun shone radiantly as we got out of the car. Heather waited and journaled while I headed upstream.

Technique: I set forth with good intention, knowing that it would be just fine if this was not the area to harvest. I crossed over some sword fern communities toward a conifer, whose branches parted gently to reveal a "path" for me--there was no specific path, but there were areas that were less dense than others. There were many ferns, and a few large trees and some smaller trees, but mostly, this area felt more like a wetland-thicket than a forest.

Hardly 100 feet from the road, I began to see communities of Devil's Club, rising from the ground in their twisted style. There were so many, perhaps a 10x15 patch to my left, and I was in awe and I continued deeper. I began to vocalize my intention, saying "for my friend." Soon, I came around the corner of a few birch trees to a "clearing" filled with even more Devil's Club. Everywhere I looked, I saw more. I continued around the trees, and I knew then that this was the spot. I felt warm, welcomed and good about this community, and I felt like that area was "sanctuary."

I crouched down and admired the strength of these plants. I realized that, for all my research and interest in this plant, I have barely scratched the surface of this plant's amazing power. Just its physical presence awes me, its twisty growth a metaphor for growth and development: we must continue to grow and stand as tall as we can, even though there are setbacks and difficulties. The smell was overwhelming, quite a powerful medicine in itself. I explained my intention again, and I cannot even begin to describe how right it felt (I was thinking in images for a little while--dreamlike, childlike, present, yet ancestral). I thought about my ancestors, how those whose blood flows through mine have taken this action before. I thought about Heather and envisioned her "inner bark" being strengthened by this inner bark.

I chose a stem at the edge of a cluster of stems at the periphery of one of the many communities. Then I began to clear away the fallen leaves, the sepias, the ochres, the light greens, the grays. I cleared away a few layers of dirt and felt the rhizome, close to the surface, much like the bones in our bodies. Again, the smell was so powerful. I excavated the soil near the roots, digging down less than a foot along about a foot stretch. The rhizome was loose, and some of the little roots were giving way. At that point, I was surprised, because the rhizome shot in a 90-degree angle to a stem about a foot away, a

stem that I did not even think could be connected to the stem whose rhizome I had chosen. I was ready to break the rhizome off from its lifeline, so I broke off a connected spiny stem and I lifted the rhizome. As I did so, there was a subtle sound of some of the the little roots coming out of the ground, reminding me of the sound of hairs being pulled out of my head. After I cleanly broke the rhizome, I grabbed my half of my hair, pulling on it, and pulling some of it out, gently, but with still with force. I did this a few times, and set the thin clumps of hair along the space where the rhizome had been, looking something like an almost invisible set of nests. (My hair, normally dark brown, looked white against the soil--happy autumn color association revelation to me). I buried my hair, and began the process of giving thanks.

As I covered the space back up with soil and leaves, I noticed one of the leaves was a wild ginger plant with root/rhizome still attached: I had unearthed it in my process. Fortunately, it was intact and healthy and said something like "Oh, just replant me there," which I did: right in the center of where the Devil's Club rhizome had been. I had noticed ginger on the way, but then I looked around to see that the wild ginger plants were everywhere. EVERYWHERE! I touched a few and smelled my fingers to be certain. Yes, they were wild ginger and they were so numerous that I had to tiptoe to not step on them in some areas.

As I surveyed my harvest area, I stood up. I looked to my right and this one plant called out to me. It was a Devil's Club stalk that had definitely been clipped at an angle by a human tool several years ago. The stalk was spiky and about 5 inches out of the ground. Now, this may sound...anyway, it said to me, in all seriousness, "I want to go to Heather, too." The funny thing about that is that the whole time, I had been saying "for my friend, my friend," not really speaking or saying or even thinking her name, but this plant seriously said to me, "Heather." Just then I noticed that its true root was very very close to the surface: it was a thick one, and I could just see the top of it as it dove into the soil. Here, instinct took over (plants telling you what they want to do can humble one's mind) and I put my fingers around this root. I don't even remember moving the dirt at all, but I snapped it off, and the little thing was about 8 inches long, one true root that separated into two that intertwined. I figured then that this root was seriously powerful medicine and would be another element of the medicine we would make.

I left the area and made my way back to the stream: as I did so, I saw many Devil's Club plants and I sung a song of thanks for allowing me to take their brother and sister. It was a great song, very funny and uplifting, the cadence of a child's song. I would later tell Heather that I felt about 4 years old at that point. I took some pictures as I approached the end of the Devil's Club communities, kissing the spikes of one.

Processing: Later in the day, we processed the Devil's Club at her home. I scrubbed off the thin outer bark and used a potato peeler to take the inner bark off in strips (which I later cut in small pieces for maximum surface area) while she chopped the true roots. This took some time, and we talked and laughed and awed as we did so. Just as her family was returning, we were ready to cover the Devil's Club with the vodka. We did, and I headed out (after telling Heather to make a decoction of a few of the leftovers,

then pour the decoction into her bathwater). I shared with her the ways I've seen people use the heartwood of the stem.

Experience: I drove the truck down Delphi Road as we spoke thoughtfully about many aspects of health, class, our tendencies, our epiphanies, our strengths, the earth and our spirits; this woman is wonderfully articulate and has such a strong spirit of love and compassion. I am excited to share with her this point in life; this time of reconnection to her "earth," living in her physical body.

Our conversations were so joyfully enlightening. I gained so much from Heather, truly feeling connected to her, and feeling a deep understanding. She is very powerful, and I feel that she not only is great at sharing herself, but she also excels in bringing the best out of me. I truly felt both understood and communicative and I very much admire both Heather's qualities and her abilities to get me in a place that I felt very comfortable and nourished while sharing. Here are some of the ideas that were on our tongues (of course, there is no possible way for me to convey in this report the totality of the conversations, because it really did seem very simple and true, yet also like epiphany after epiphany):

The earth is in crisis, so in many ways, it makes sense for our bodies to be going haywire--if we look at ourselves from the perspective that we are always a "whole," then illnesses become sources of strength to reorient us with what we need to be more in tune with that whole self. Illnesses need to not be a source of shame; we didn't "do something wrong" to cause sickness, but instead, it is an opportunity for us to listen and reconnect and catalyze healing not just for that sickness, but for the other aspects that are/were connected to that manifested illness.

Heather and I first spoke at Mount Rainier, a short but incredibly powerful conversation. I remember the fresh alpine air, and the smile on Heather's face. This was my first impression of her, so I have since then had an "alpine scent" of renewing freshness associated with her. I have been studying Devil's Club on and off for over 2 years, so this quarter, I took the opportunity to get to know this plant as thoroughly as possible for class. Knowing this, Marja recommended that Heather and I work together to harvest and process Devil's Club.

Other notes of interest: I think of my Dad's 4 brothers and sisters, all of whom have adult-onset diabetes. They are all of Tlingit descent, but have not had access to the traditional use of Devil's Club. I know I can't say "if they had had access to Devil's Club, they would not have developed diabetes," because there are so many factors that influenced their developments of the disease. It does make me stop and think about the impacts of quick cultural changes that happened within 2 generations of my family, like not having Devil's Club on a regular basis, compared to the rather slow physical/genetic changes, like the tendencies to develop certain diseases in the absence of traditional food and medicine. It's as if their bodies are genetically predisposed to desiring Devil's Club, so much so that they developed a disease in its absence. What is the most interesting to

me is that their bodies react to cultural changes in this loud and clear way, yet their spirits and hearts are relatively quiet when it comes to addressing cultural changes—have we adjusted culturally more quickly on a mental/emotional level than on a genetic level? Is this possible? Or did cultural changes get internalized and manifest as physical?

Cautions: It's prickly. Wear good gloves. Conserve.

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Elizabeth Egan
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Kid-friendly narrative:

We live in the Pacific Northwest, and among the many precious natural treasures of this beautiful area is the incredible plant that goes by the name of Devil's Club. If you have seen it, and especially if you've touched it, you will remember it forever. You may have seen Devil's Club while walking on a moist and damp forest trail. Devil's Club appears to be sticking out of the ground with tall yet curvy stems that can be as thick as your thumb or thicker than your wrist, and these stems can be as tall as (or taller than) you, and they are covered with hard prickly spikes. The stems reach up to the sky in twisted pathways, and the stems are connected by underground parts called rhizomes.

In the spring, the tops of the stems give way to buds that produce gigantic green leaves that also have rows of spikes along their veins. Now these spikes can definitely hurt humans who touch them, which makes the plant seem unwelcoming at first. But those spikes protect this delicate plant, and we humans can benefit from what is inside this plant. The parts that we would use for medicine would be these underground parts. The rhizome, that underground part that connects the above-ground stems, has a very thin outer bark. When we scrape that outer bark away, there's another layer of bark, the inner bark: this inner bark is one of the parts of Devil's Club that can be used for medicine.

When we boil this inner bark in water to make a type of tea, Devil's Club can heal us in many ways; it can be used to clear out mucus and phlegm from the lungs. It can also be used to strengthen the body's natural talents for healing itself. While the spikes of Devil's Club protect the plant, Devil's Club's inner bark can protect our bodies from getting sick. In a quite magical way, Devil's Club knows just what to do inside our bodies, depending on what our bodies need at the time. I like to think of it in this way: the medicine from the inner bark makes our bodies more resistant to the forces that can make us sick, and it can help to clear signs of sickness away. In a sense, using Devil's Club gives our bodies invisible spikes that protect our bodies and also our minds and spirits.

My ancestors who lived in the cold rainforests of Alaska have used Devil's Club for thousands of years for many of the same purposes that we can use Devil's Club today. It has helped to protect them from sicknesses of the body, mind and spirit. For all this time, they have used Devil's Club in even the same forms that we can use it today. In fact, many of the doctors and researchers learned about all the good benefits of Devil's Club from watching and talking to these Native American people, the Tlingits (pronounced like this: KLin-KET).

Devil's Club is a truly amazing plant and it can offer us so many gifts of health, but we must use it very carefully. Devil's Club grows mostly in the forests, near streams or wetlands and in fragile soils. Fortunately, Devil's Club can grow very well once it starts growing. But because Devil's Club is quite picky about what its home looks like, it is becoming a threatened plant. Human homes and other creations are making it harder and harder for Devil's Club to find long-term homes. So let's be very careful to not take too much Devil's Club out of its home areas, and let's do our best to make sure that our

friends and families know to not disturb it or its home where it grows. If we keep doing our best to watch out for the health of Devil's Club in the wild, then hopefully, Devil's Club will keep watching out for us, protecting and strengthening us when we need it most.