



PLANT HIGHLIGHT:

Cañaigre, Wild Rhubarb

Common Name(s): Cañaigre, Wild Rhubarb

O'odham Name: Sivijul

Piipaash Name: Iplymaan

In late winter and early spring, a conspicuous plant with large green leaves and thick succulent reddish stems ascends from the sandy soil along the river where the water still flows. This plant called *Sivijul* in O'odham and *Iplymaan* in Piipaash is also commonly referred to as canaigre and wild rhubarb. Its scientific name is *Rumex hymenosepalus*. It once grew abundantly along the Gila and Salt Rivers but dwindled when the rivers were dammed.

Sivijul / *Iplymaan* has a number of different uses, but it was (and still is) primarily used as a medicine by the O'odham and Piipaash. The roots or tubers of this plant that resemble a sweet potato are used for treating colds, coughs and sore throats. Most commonly, pieces of the fresh root are simply chewed, but some people also boil it or pound dried roots into a powder. The latter can be used on open sores as well. The taste in any form of preparation is quite bitter and astringent.

The bitter taste of the roots is largely due to its high tannin content. In fact, it has been cultivated in the United States specifically for its high tannin content which is used in leather tanning. This, however, was not an indigenous O'odham or Piipaash practice. The roots also make a nice dye that was occasionally used by men for dyeing leather and by women for dyeing willow used in basket weaving.

The use of this plant as a food source is somewhat obscure. There is some early documented evidence that the leaf stems may have formerly been cooked, peeled and eaten plain, but some very knowledgeable contemporary elders have stated that they never heard of that. Some contemporary elders did, however, use the stems in the exact same manner as rhubarb in the making of pies. This is obviously a more contemporary practice. In the book, *By the Prophet of the Earth*, May Makil, a Maricopa woman, stated about this plant, "in olden times the Indians roasted the seeds, ground them on a metate, added water, formed the dough into flat cakes, and baked them in hot ashes." It is probable, however, that she was referring to another closely related plant, *Rumex crispus* or curly dock.



Although *Sivijuls* / *Iplymaan* is not as common as it once was, it can still be found and gathered. The tubers remain underground throughout the year, even when there is no evidence of the plant above ground. It is still used for its medicinal qualities by those who know where to find it and how to use it. Ask the elders in your family if they ever used it and if so, how they used it. Better yet, take them out to the river and have them show you.

CAUTION

NEVER ingest any wild plant or plant part unless you are absolutely certain about its identity and appropriate use. While many native plants are edible and have beneficial medicinal qualities, they can cause injury or death if used improperly. Ingesting an unknown plant can be just as dangerous as swallowing unlabeled pills from the medicine cabinet.

