

## Wild & Free: Arrowleaf Balsamroot

by Sarajoy Van Boven, Newsletter Volunteer

April winds bring a curious alchemy to our dusty hills. The magic is this: dirt, our very own loess, is transformed into silver and gold. And the treasure chest of Paradise brims with the golden rays of Arrowleaf Balsamroot flowers and the silver sheen of their leaves. In our fields gone feral, on our hills un-bruised by human hands, in our parks, and upon our ridge tops, gold and silver tumble down.

More sophisticated than pure gold and far superior to actual silver, these wild flowers outshine those inedible, domesticated minerals of arbitrary value. This gold and silver can feed us, without the middlemen. From root to seed, and all parts in between, these holy, shining fortunes sustain soul and body both.

Unless you have a sunshine allergy or severe agoraphobia, I am confident that on some April day you have seen a hoard of yellow "sunflowers" around. And it was surely the gorgeous bounty of Arrowleaf Balsamroot (heretofore referred to as AB).

AB, of the Aster family, is nearly identical cousins with the Common Sunflower, reflected by layman's terms: Spring Sunflower and Wild Sunflower (Food Plants of the Interior First People by Nancy J. Turner). You can deduce from these common names that AB's flowers are sun-oidal with golden rays extending from a round gold center.

The leaves, as the name more than suggests, are arrow shaped, growing up to two feet long. A sheen of white hairs tones down their green to a trendy silver/green hue. These leaves clump together and produce a bevy of one-flowered stalks from 8 to 30 inches tall. The official sunflower sprouts many heads per stalk, but AB believes that flowering involves only one flower and one stalk, together for the rest of their lives.

The roots, which apparently smell of balsam, as the name in both scientific Greek *Balsamorhiza sagittata* and plain English indicates, are rich in carbohydrates and fiber both ([www.usask.ca](http://www.usask.ca) "Rangeland Ecosystems and Plants"). Before miners dug the hills of North Idaho oh-so-unsustainably, Native Americans dug here for the roots of this real silver and gold. In spring, local tribes dug up smaller, carrot-sized roots, avoiding the largest taproots. Then the preparations began. First, they beat them to loosen the outer skins, then peeled, then pit-steamed overnight, then ate as is or dried and stored or

powdered for flour. These roots were also boiled into medicinal teas for immunity, childbirth, headaches, and whooping cough. The roots were lit as incense in various Native American ceremonies. (*Edible and Medicinal Plants of the Rockies* by Linda Kershaw).

I admit to lacking root experience for two reasons: 1) I have no sense of entitlement over any field of these enough to dig them up and 2) the extensive preparations are way to "slow food" for even me, maven of the three hour dinner.

The new shoots, however, are much more accessible. Before AB blossoms, the newest leaf and flower stalks are good enough to eat, peeling first if you like. Tasting akin to intense celery, the Nez Perce loved their páasx ([www.Native-American-Online.org](http://www.Native-American-Online.org)) this way. Some eat the leaves as well, but the velour texture is too much of a mouthful for me, as is the name itself: Arrowleaf Balsamroot. The newest leaves can also be boiled as "greens."

The sap was used as a topical anesthetic, as well as anti: septic, bacterial, and fungal. Mashed, the leaves were placed on burns, small cuts, insect wounds and athletes foot (*Edible and Medicinal Plants...*) I guess moccasins weren't all they're cracked up to be.

The seeds were also a staple for Native Americans who roasted them or filled a buckskin bag and pounded them into a meal (Food Plants of the Interior). They can be used like sunflower seeds, in granola and breads.

According to Kim Williams in *Eating Wild Plants*, AB is ranked precisely third in importance to area tribes. This bronze medalist was bested by only Camas and Bitterroot. Clearly, a plant with all edible parts would be a top contender for favorite food, a reliable stock, and a secure investment.

Silver and gold grow annually, freely,

arrowleaf  
balsamroot



and in abundance here. As always, be 100 percent sure it's the AB silver/gold/green of natural-value before you bite into it.

Sarajoy lives only four blocks from a large feral field of precious AB's in Pullman.