

Introduction to Ethnobotany

Subjects: Ethnobotany, Science, History, Social Studies

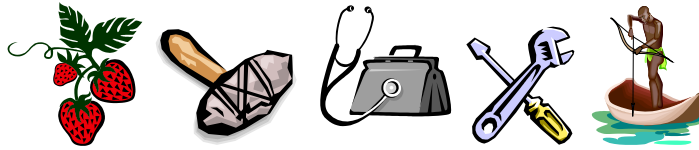
Objective: Students will become familiar with different Native American and pioneer uses of various plants.

Material Needs:

Student handout: Research & Presentation Strategies

Activity/Instructions:

1. Introduce this activity by reminding the students that before grocery stores, drug stores, hardware stores, and department stores were invented, people had to find everything they needed from their environment. But what did they use for food, medicine, tools, and toys?
2. Explain to the students that they are going to become ethnobotany detectives and uncover the answers to that question. They will work in research teams and gather information. Each team will be assigned a set of plants/trees to research, over a period of two weeks. (You can alter the time allotted for research to whatever works best in your classroom situation.)
3. At the end of the research period, each team will have an additional week to create a poster showing drawings of each plant/tree along with the information gathered for each plant/tree.
4. This activity will wrap-up with a “research symposium,” where each team will present their findings to their research peers (classmates). This activity might also extend beyond the classroom... consider having the student teams hang their posters and explain their research findings to invited guests (other classrooms, staff, etc.)



Research & Presentation Strategies

Questions to ask while researching ethnobotany:

- Was this used for food? How was it gathered? How was it prepared? Was it poisonous if not collected/prepared correctly?
- Was this used as a toy? How? What part of the plant/tree was used? What sorts of toys or games were made from this?
- Was this used as a tool? If so, was the tool used in the kitchen? In the field? In the home? Where?
- Was this used for building material? For what? For canoes? For homes? For fishing nets?
- Was this used as a good luck charm? How? What “luck” was it supposed to give the user?
- Was this used as a weapon? As a poison?
- Was this used for personal purposes? For brushing teeth? For toilet paper?
- Has this plant/tree been used by different people over the centuries for different purposes?
- Where did this plant/tree grow? Was it easy to find? Does it grow near you today?
- Is there anything we use today that is still made from this plant/tree?
- Is the information being gathered mythology/folklore? Scientific fact? A combination of both?

Sources of Ethnobotanical Information:

- The Internet. Try using key words in the search engines such as: ethnobotany, plants, history, edible, medicine, folklore, Native American, pioneers, etc.
- The library.
- Adults. (Some of your parents, grandparents, neighbors might remember gathering and using some of these plant/tree products.)

Presentation Strategies:

- Option #1: Arrange each plant/tree separately - showing pictures of it, pictures of some of its uses, and a listing of all the information you uncovered.
- Option #2: Arrange your information by different categories – have a separate category for tools, medicines, foods, etc., and list each plant/tree that was used for that purpose, along with describing how/why each was used that way. If you set-up your poster this way, make sure to have pictures of each plant somewhere around the outside/top of the display, so other people can see what each one looks like.
- Try collecting examples (if the season is right) of each plant/tree you researched. Display these (pressed or in Ziploc baggies) along with your other information.
- If one of your species was used as a game, try to find an example specimen and bring it in, so everyone can play the game.