

Steam Bath Scrubber — Taariq

TAARIQ TAISGU. – BRING ME THE STEAM BATH SCRUBBER.



Photo: Mrs. Chya with a bundle of roots. Courtesy of the Rostad Collection.

No trip to the steam bath is complete without switches and scrubbers made from local plants. Alutiiq people use these tools to enhance the cleansing and healing powers of steam. Switches are made from a variety of leafy branches, including alder and Kenai birch, while scrubbers are fashioned from wild ryegrass roots (*Elymus* sp.).

To make scrubbers, Alutiiq people collect coarse bundles of grass roots from the coast. Sometimes, the coarse root clumps erode from the shoreline and are gathered on the beach. Other times, people dig up the roots. Grass roots can be harvested at any time of the year, although they are often collected in summer. Once collected, Alutiiq people clean the tough, fibrous strands. Then they soften them by boiling, soaking in hot water, or tempering on hot rocks. This creates an Alutiiq version of a loofa. Although the roots soften as they are used, some people prefer softer, finer root bundles, because larger roots are harder and coarser. Root bundles are great for cleaning the skin and stimulating circulation. They can also be used to scrub clothing and dishes.