

Willow — Nimruyaq, Uqgwingcuk

NAAMA UQGWINGCUT? – WHERE ARE THE WILLOWS?



Photo: Detail of a costal willow bush.

There are more than fifty species of willow (*Salix* spp.) in Alaska. One botanist estimates that seventeen of these species can be found in the Kodiak region. Although most Alaska willows are shrub-sized plants, northern species can range in size from dwarf bushes to full-sized trees. Willows thrive in moist soils, particularly along stream banks. Their edible parts include leaves, buds, new sprouts, and inner bark, which are excellent sources of vitamin C.

The most common use of willows among Kodiak Alutiiq people is as a spring vegetable. Tender young shoots and leaves can be collected throughout the archipelago in May and June and eaten raw or added to salads and side dishes. Some Alutiiq people serve willow shoots with sea seal oil or preserve the shoots in oil for later use. Others enjoy eating the leaves and shoots with milk and sugar, much like *akutaq*, or Alutiiq ice cream.

Willow wood is soft, so it is not considered a good source of fuel. Willow is only used to warm houses or smoke fish if other woods are not available. The plant's soft wood, however, is a favorite material for Alutiiq children, who fashion whistles and slingshots from willow branches.