

Leaf — Cuak; Cuyaq

CUYAT KATAGTUT.—THE LEAVES ARE FALLING.



Photo: Leafy alder branches, AM725

Leaves are the part of a green plant that manufacture food through photosynthesis. In addition to the flat rounded leaves of plants like alders and cottonwoods, the needles of conifers like Kodiak's Sitka spruce are also considered leaves. Alutiiq people use leaves for both food and medicine.

Tender young leaves are popular spring vegetables. For example, people enjoy eating oyster-leaf (*Mertensia maritima*) a hardy, creeping plant found on Kodiak's upper beaches in sand or gravel. This low-lying herb grows to a height of about eight inches and has small white, pink, or blue flowers. Its leaves are greyish green and salty tasting. People enjoy eating the leaves fresh and add them to soups and salads.

Leafy branches are harvested for use in the steam bath. Sitka alder, Pacific red elder, and Kenai birch branches are collected with their leaves attached and are used as switches. People soak the branches in hot water and then switch themselves to promote sweating, circulation, and the absorption of plant medicine. Switching can relieve pain and fatigue and promote relaxation. For example, hot switches of red elder can relieve menstrual cramps when placed on a woman's abdomen, and midwives will switch the belly of a pregnant woman to relax her and check the position of her baby.

Additionally, people use leaves to make beverages. Some make healing teas by steeping fresh or dried leaves in water. Nettle leaf tea can help to relieve the pain of arthritis. Other people boil spruce needles to create flavored water for brewing beer.