

EAST AFRICAN HIGHLANDS & AFROMONTANE FOREST PLANT SURVIVAL GUIDE

Africa • USDA-EQUIVALENT ZONES 7-11 • KÖPPEN Cwb / Cfb

LAND + WATER

REGIONAL HABITAT ILLUSTRATION — NOT AN ID PHOTO

USEFUL

EDIBLE

MEDICINAL

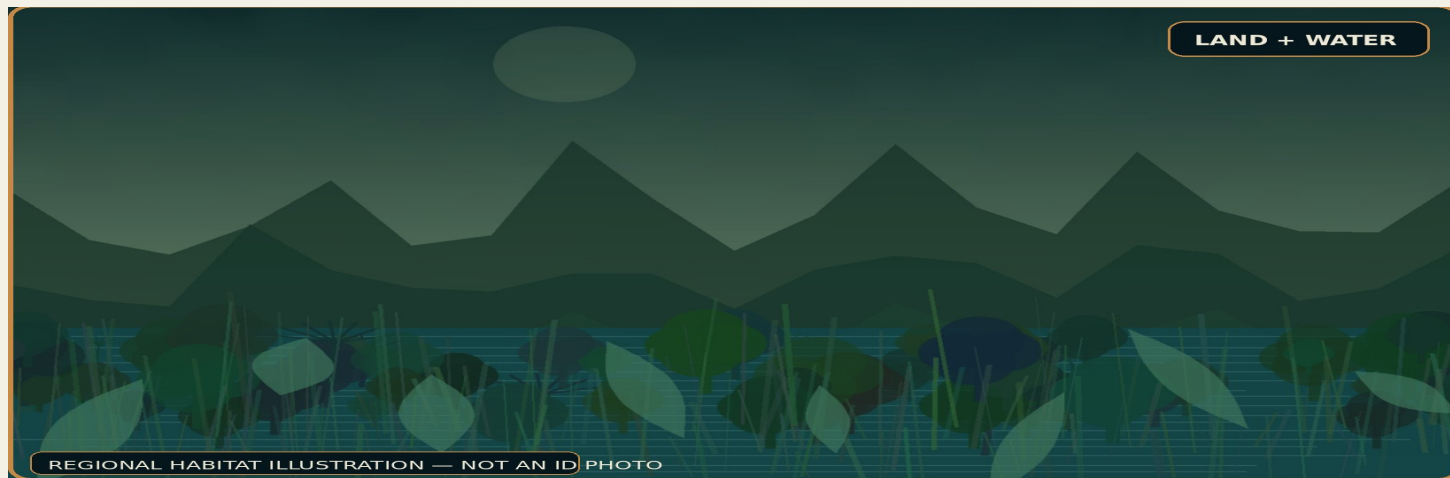
POISONOUS

IDENTIFY • EAT • BUILD • HEAL • AVOID

Illustrations show habitat and form; verify every plant with current regional photographs and expert sources.

REGION AT A GLANCE

A continental bioclimatic region, not a destination or a promise that every listed plant occurs at every site.



Continent: Africa USDA-equivalent hardiness: 7-11 Köppen: Cwb / Cfb

Regional habitat: Afromontane forest, bamboo belt, moorland and highland stream

Zone warning: hardiness describes winter minimum temperature only; rainfall, heat, soils, fire, elevation and seasonality still control the flora.

FIELD PRIORITIES

- Use the continent, climate band and habitat as filters — never as proof of identity.
- Match at least three independent traits and rule out every dangerous look-alike before harvest.
- Treat water plants as both botanical and water-quality decisions; parasites, sewage and algal toxins can defeat correct identification.
- Take material from deadfall or abundant growth first. Roots, bark and whole plants are the most destructive harvests.
- Medicinal notes document traditional use only; the guide gives no dosing and does not replace medical care.

SURVIVAL STANDARD

A correct plant name is only the beginning. Also verify plant part, maturity, preparation, dose, contamination, legal access and local cultural protocol. When any one of those is uncertain, do not consume or medicate.

POSITIVE IDENTIFICATION AND PRACTICAL USE

The illustrations are form diagrams. The linked POWO and iNaturalist pages provide current photographs and taxonomic context.

- 1. PLACE**
Confirm continent, elevation, water regime, soil and disturbance.
- 2. FORM**
Tree, shrub, vine, herb, grass, sedge, palm, fern, succulent or aquatic.
- 3. LEAF**
Arrangement, veins, edge, hairs, glands, sap, odor and underside.
- 4. STEM / BARK**
Thorns, pith, nodes, buds, lenticels, fibers, latex and branching.
- 5. FLOWER / FRUIT**
Petal count, inflorescence, fruit attachment, seed and maturity.
- 6. EXCLUDE**
Name every dangerous look-alike and explain why it is different.
- 7. VERIFY**
Use current regional flora, qualified local knowledge and several photos.

AUTOMATIC STOP LIST

No tasting to identify.
No unknown roots, bulbs or white umbels.
No unknown milky sap.
No raw wetland foods.
No medicinal dose experiments.
No smoke from unknown toxic wood.

USEFUL-PLANT HIERARCHY

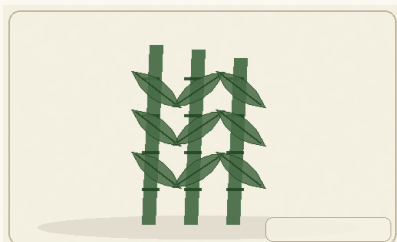
1. Deadfall and shed bark.
2. Abundant annual greens and fruit.
3. Pruned shoots and leaves.
4. Small stems from common thickets.
5. Roots, bark and whole plants only with permission and no safer substitute.

USEFUL PLANTS FOR TOOLS, FIRE AND SHELTER

Wood, fiber, tinder, bow-and-arrow components, friction fire, containers and construction.

AFRICAN HIGHLAND BAMBOO

USEFUL MATERIAL



Stylized form diagram — not an identification photograph

Oldeania alpina / *Oxytenanthera* spp.

IDENTIFY: Tall segmented culms in dense stands; narrow grass leaves; branching at nodes.

HABITAT / SEASON: African highlands or dry tropical woodland depending species. Season: Culms year-round; shoots seasonal.

SURVIVAL USE: Shelter, containers, arrow shafts, bows, traps, friction-fire sets and cooked shoots of known species.

CAUTION: Shoots may contain cyanogenic compounds and require boiling; stands hide wildlife and unstable slopes.

LOOK-ALIKES: Reeds are thinner and wetland-rooted.

TASKS: construction, arrow shaft, bow drill, container, food shoot

Verified images: POWO

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AFRICAN PENCIL CEDAR

USEFUL MATERIAL



Stylized form diagram — not an identification photograph

Juniperus procera

IDENTIFY: Tall evergreen with scale-like foliage, reddish fibrous bark and blue berry-like cones.

HABITAT / SEASON: East African highlands and Afromontane forest. Season: Year-round.

SURVIVAL USE: Durable aromatic wood for poles, tools, bows and fuel; fibrous bark is tinder.

CAUTION: Old trees are protected or culturally important. Smoke and oils irritate.

LOOK-ALIKES: Podocarpus has flat strap leaves and fleshy seed structures.

TASKS: bow wood, poles, tools, tinder

Verified images: POWO

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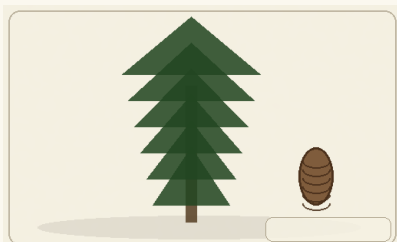
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USEFUL PLANTS FOR TOOLS, FIRE AND SHELTER

Wood, fiber, tinder, bow-and-arrow components, friction fire, containers and construction.

AFRICAN PODOCARPS

USEFUL MATERIAL



Stylized form diagram — not an identification photograph

Podocarpus latifolius / *P. falcatus*

IDENTIFY: Evergreen tree with flat strap-like leaves and single seeds on fleshy receptacles rather than cones.

HABITAT / SEASON: African montane and coastal evergreen forest. Season: Wood year-round; seeds seasonal.

SURVIVAL USE: Straight wood for bows, tools, boards and fuel.

CAUTION: Many populations are protected and overlogged. Fleshy seed structures are not general food.

LOOK-ALIKES: African juniper has scale leaves and berry-like cones.

TASKS: bow wood, tools, construction, fuel

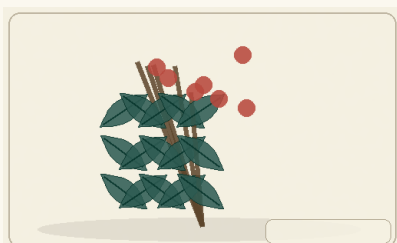
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WILD RAISINS / GREWIA

USEFUL MATERIAL



Stylized form diagram — not an identification photograph

Grewia spp.

IDENTIFY: Rough toothed leaves; small star-like flowers; lobed orange, red or brown drupes.

HABITAT / SEASON: African savanna, dry woodland and scrub. Season: Fruit seasonal; stems year-round.

SURVIVAL USE: Ripe fruits of selected species are documented food; straight stems provide arrow shafts, bows, cordage bark and tool handles.

CAUTION: Species vary. Confirm fruit and leaf traits; thorny thickets can conceal snakes.

LOOK-ALIKES: Ziziphus has paired thorns and three-veined leaves.

TASKS: food fruit, arrow shaft, bow wood, cordage

Verified images: POWO

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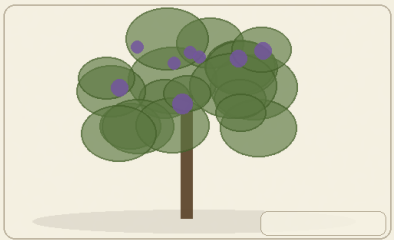
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USEFUL PLANTS FOR TOOLS, FIRE AND SHELTER

Wood, fiber, tinder, bow-and-arrow components, friction fire, containers and construction.

ALDERS

USEFUL MATERIAL



Alnus spp.

IDENTIFY: Oval toothed leaves; catkins; woody cone-like female structures persist through winter.

HABITAT / SEASON: Wet thickets, streambanks, avalanche tracks and disturbed forest. Season: Wood year-round; leaves growing season.

SURVIVAL USE: Straight stems for racks and wattle; seasoned alder burns evenly and is widely used as smoking wood.
CAUTION: Wet alder smokes heavily; dense thickets can hide unstable banks.
LOOK-ALIKES: Birch lacks persistent woody cones.
TASKS: poles, wattle, fuel, smoking

Verified images: POWO

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MATERIAL SELECTION SCREEN

Before cutting, test straightness, grain, dryness, hidden rot, sap or smoke toxicity, and whether the species is protected. Match the material to the load: springy bow wood, straight shaft wood, soft dry hearth board, harder spindle, fibrous cordage, or resin-free cooking fuel.

LAND-BASED EDIBLE PLANTS

Documented foods on dry or seasonally dry ground. Preparation and contamination still matter.

WILD ROSES

LAND FOOD



Stylized form diagram — not an identification photograph

Rosa spp.

IDENTIFY: Prickly stems; compound toothed leaves; five-petaled flowers; red to orange hips.

HABITAT / SEASON: Open woods, thickets, prairie, dunes and mountain slopes. Season: Hips late summer through winter.

SURVIVAL USE: Fleshy hip walls are documented food after the irritating hairs and seeds are removed; good for simmering or drying.

CAUTION: Internal hairs irritate skin and mouth. Avoid sprayed or moldy fruit.

LOOK-ALIKES: Hawthorn has simple lobed leaves and woody thorns.

TASKS: food fruit, cordage

Verified images: POWO

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STINGING NETTLE

LAND FOOD



Stylized form diagram — not an identification photograph

Urtica dioica

IDENTIFY: Opposite sharply toothed leaves; fibrous stems; translucent stinging hairs; green flower clusters.

HABITAT / SEASON: Rich disturbed soil, river terraces, old camps and forest openings. Season: Young tops spring; fiber later.

SURVIVAL USE: Young tops are documented food after thorough cooking or drying; mature stems yield strong bast fiber.

CAUTION: Wear gloves; do not eat raw. Internal use can affect medicines and kidney conditions.

LOOK-ALIKES: Dead-nettles do not sting and have showier mint-family flowers.

TASKS: food green, cordage, fiber

Verified images: POWO

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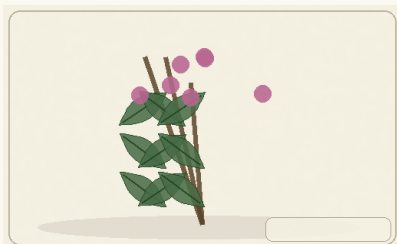
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LAND-BASED EDIBLE PLANTS

Documented foods on dry or seasonally dry ground. Preparation and contamination still matter.

WILD ONIONS AND GARLIC

LAND FOOD



Stylized form diagram — not an identification photograph

Allium spp.

IDENTIFY: Narrow leaves or hollow stems; spherical flower heads; clear onion or garlic odor in leaf and bulb.

HABITAT / SEASON: Meadows, rocky slopes, open woodland and stream terraces. Season: Spring through fall.

SURVIVAL USE: Leaves, flowers and bulbs of positively identified *Allium* are documented food and seasoning.

CAUTION: Every sampled part must smell of onion, but odor is not the only test. Avoid unknown bulbs.

LOOK-ALIKES: Death camas lacks onion odor and can be fatal.

TASKS: food green, food bulb

Verified images: POWO

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BILBERRY / BOG BLUEBERRY GROUP

LAND FOOD



Stylized form diagram — not an identification photograph

Vaccinium myrtillus / V. uliginosum

IDENTIFY: Low woody shrub; blue to blue-black berries with a crown; leaves alternate and small.

HABITAT / SEASON: Boreal, montane and tundra heath. Season: Mid- to late summer.

SURVIVAL USE: Ripe berries are documented food and can be dried or cooked.

CAUTION: Color alone is not enough; confirm woody stem and *Vaccinium* fruit crown.

LOOK-ALIKES: Black-berryed herbs lack woody stems; crowberry has needle-like leaves.

TASKS: food fruit

Verified images: POWO

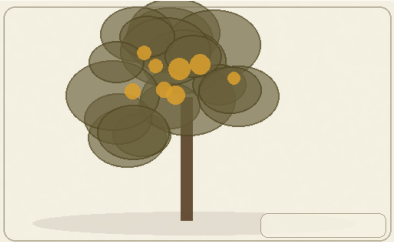
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LAND-BASED EDIBLE PLANTS

Documented foods on dry or seasonally dry ground. Preparation and contamination still matter.

TAMARIND
LAND FOOD



Stylized form diagram — not an identification photograph

Tamarindus indica

IDENTIFY: Fine paired leaflets; brown brittle pods containing sticky sour pulp and hard seeds.

HABITAT / SEASON: African and Asian dry tropics, river valleys and old settlements. Season: Pods dry season; wood year-round.

SURVIVAL USE: Pod pulp is documented food and drink flavoring; dense wood makes handles and fuel.
 CAUTION: Seeds are extremely hard; avoid moldy pods. Acidic pulp can worsen reflux.
 LOOK-ALIKES: Cassia pods and leaves differ; tamarind pods are brittle and pulp sticky.
 TASKS: food pod, handles, fuel

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FOOD HARVEST SCREEN

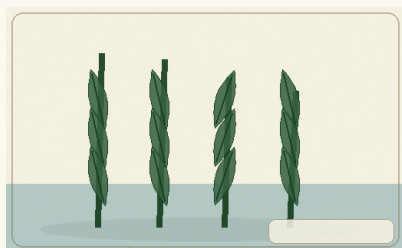
Confirm species, plant part and maturity. Check whether cooking, leaching, peeling, fermenting or repeated water changes are required. Reject mold, animal contamination, roadside plants, chemically treated ground and any food whose safe preparation cannot be completed with current water and fuel.

WATER AND WETLAND EDIBLE PLANTS

Freshwater, marsh, tidal and marine foods. Correct ID does not make dirty water safe.

WATERCRESS

AQUATIC FOOD



Nasturtium officinale

IDENTIFY: Creeping hollow stems; pinnate leaves with a larger rounded terminal leaflet; small white four-petaled flowers.

Stylized form diagram — not an identification photograph

HABITAT / SEASON: Cold flowing springs and streams, often where nutrient-rich. Season: Cool seasons.

SURVIVAL USE: Tender tops are documented food and are usually cooked in survival settings.

CAUTION: Raw watercress can carry liver flukes and sewage pathogens. Avoid downstream of livestock, roads or settlements.

LOOK-ALIKES: Water hemlock has divided leaves and umbrella flowers; never rely on habitat alone.

TASKS: food green

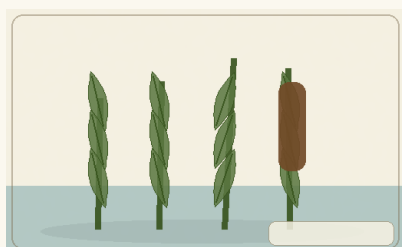
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CATTAILS

AQUATIC FOOD



Typha spp.

IDENTIFY: Tall flat strap leaves; dense brown cylindrical female flower spike below a narrower male section.

Stylized form diagram — not an identification photograph

HABITAT / SEASON: Marshes, pond edges, slow channels and wet ditches. Season: Shoots spring; pollen early summer; rhizomes year-round where lawful.

SURVIVAL USE: Documented food parts include young inner shoots, pollen and processed rhizome starch. Leaves make mats, baskets and thatch; seed down can bulk tinder.

CAUTION: Water can concentrate sewage, metals and parasites. Raw rhizome requires correct processing; avoid contaminated marshes.

LOOK-ALIKES: Yellow flag iris has sword leaves and showy flowers but no brown cattail head.

TASKS: food shoot, food starch, basketry, thatch, tinder

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WATER AND WETLAND EDIBLE PLANTS

Freshwater, marsh, tidal and marine foods. Correct ID does not make dirty water safe.

AFRICAN WATER LILIES

AQUATIC FOOD

Stylized form diagram — not an identification photograph

Nymphaea lotus / N. nouchali group

IDENTIFY: Round floating leaves with a slit; showy white, blue or pink flowers; seeds and rhizomes.

HABITAT / SEASON: Warm African lakes, floodplains and slow rivers. Season: Flowers and seeds seasonal; rhizomes year-round.

SURVIVAL USE: Seeds and rhizomes of selected species have documented food use after processing.

CAUTION: Raw tissues can be bitter or irritating; avoid polluted or crocodile habitat.

LOOK-ALIKES: Aquatic aroids have arrow leaves and a spadix.

TASKS: food seed, food starch

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AQUATIC HARVEST SCREEN

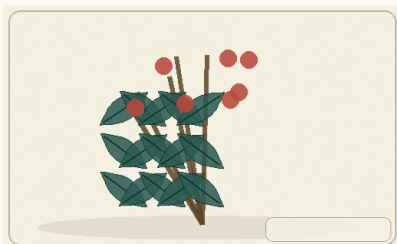
Check five separate questions: Is the species correct? Is the plant part edible? Is the water free of sewage, mining or farm runoff? Are parasites or harmful algal blooms plausible? Is entry and exit from the water safe? A “yes” to the plant and a “no” to the water still means do not eat.

MEDICINAL AND TRADITIONAL-USE PLANTS

Traditional and historical uses only — no dosing, diagnosis or treatment claims.

AFRICAN WORMWOOD

TRADITIONAL-USE



Artemisia afra

IDENTIFY: Gray-green aromatic finely divided leaves; small inconspicuous flower heads; woody base.

Stylized form diagram — not an identification photograph

HABITAT / SEASON: African highlands, grassland and disturbed mountain slopes. Season: Growing season.

SURVIVAL USE: Widely documented traditional aromatic and respiratory use; dry stems support tinder.

CAUTION: No survival dosing. Concentrated oils and teas can be toxic, especially in pregnancy or seizure disorders.

LOOK-ALIKES: Other *Artemisia* species and unrelated gray shrubs resemble it.

TASKS: medicine, tinder

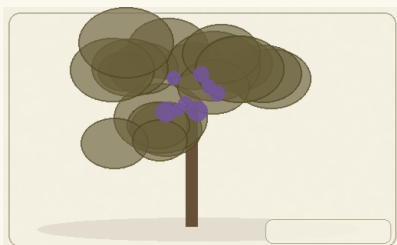
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AFRICAN CHERRY

TRADITIONAL-USE



Prunus africana

IDENTIFY: Glossy simple leaves with fine teeth, dark fissured bark and small purple-black drupes.

Stylized form diagram — not an identification photograph

HABITAT / SEASON: Afromontane forest. Season: Bark and wood year-round; fruit seasonal.

SURVIVAL USE: Dense wood for tools and fuel; bark has documented medicinal commerce.

CAUTION: The species is overharvested and protected in many areas. Do not strip bark or self-dose.

LOOK-ALIKES: Other *Prunus* have similar flowers and fruit but different leaf glands and bark.

TASKS: tools, fuel, medicine

Verified images: POWO

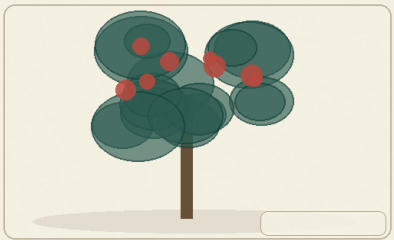
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MEDICINAL AND TRADITIONAL-USE PLANTS

Traditional and historical uses only — no dosing, diagnosis or treatment claims.

PEPPER-BARK TREE
 TRADITIONAL-USE



Warburgia salutaris

IDENTIFY: Aromatic glossy leaves with pale undersides; rough bark; small green flowers and berries.

HABITAT / SEASON: Southern and East African forest margins. Season: Leaves year-round.

SURVIVAL USE: Documented traditional medicinal plant and useful aromatic wood.
 CAUTION: Critically overharvested in parts of its range. Do not strip bark or self-dose.
 LOOK-ALIKES: Other aromatic trees require flower and bark confirmation.
 TASKS: medicine, tools

Verified images: POWO

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MEDICINAL RESTRAINT

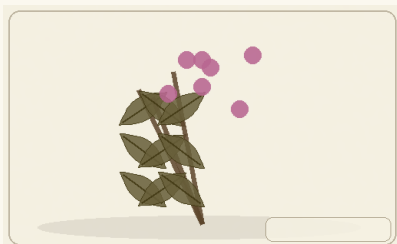
A plant can be culturally important and pharmacologically active yet still be the wrong survival choice. Unknown concentration, dehydration, pregnancy, allergies, chronic illness and medicine interactions can turn a traditional remedy into a second emergency.

POISONOUS PLANTS AND DANGEROUS LOOK-ALIKES

High-consequence species to learn before gathering starts.

MONKSHOODS

POISON — AVOID



Stylized form diagram — not an identification photograph

Aconitum spp.

IDENTIFY: Deeply divided palmate leaves; blue, purple, yellow or white hood-shaped flowers.

HABITAT / SEASON: Moist mountain meadows, streambanks and cool forest. Season: Summer.

SURVIVAL USE: No food or field medicinal use.

CAUTION: All parts contain potent aconitine-type alkaloids; ingestion can cause fatal heart and nerve effects.

LOOK-ALIKES: Larkspurs have a rear spur and are also toxic.

TASKS: poison

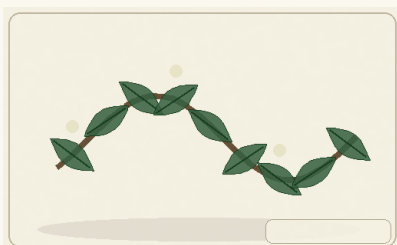
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FLAME LILY

POISON — AVOID



Stylized form diagram — not an identification photograph

Gloriosa superba

IDENTIFY: Climbing herb with tendril-like leaf tips and red-yellow reflexed flame-shaped flowers; underground tubers.

HABITAT / SEASON: African and Asian tropical grassland, thicket and forest edge. Season: Wet season.

SURVIVAL USE: No food or medicine use.

CAUTION: All parts, especially tubers and seeds, contain colchicine-type toxins and can be fatal.

LOOK-ALIKES: Edible yams twine differently and have inconspicuous flowers.

TASKS: poison

Verified images: POWO

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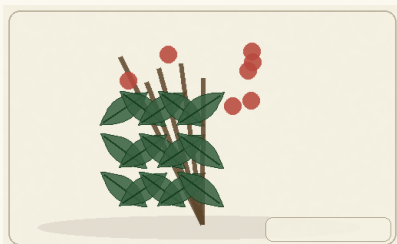
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POISONOUS PLANTS AND DANGEROUS LOOK-ALIKES

High-consequence species to learn before gathering starts.

CASTOR BEAN

POISON — AVOID



Stylized form diagram — not an identification photograph

Ricinus communis

IDENTIFY: Large star-shaped palmately lobed leaves; spiny capsules; glossy mottled seeds.

HABITAT / SEASON: Warm disturbed ground, riverbanks and tropical/subtropical waste areas. Season: Growing season; seeds seasonal.

SURVIVAL USE: No survival food or medicine use. Oil extraction is industrial, not a field process.

CAUTION: Chewed seeds can release ricin and cause severe or fatal poisoning.

LOOK-ALIKES: *Jatropha* has similar lobed leaves but different fruit; it is also toxic.

TASKS: poison

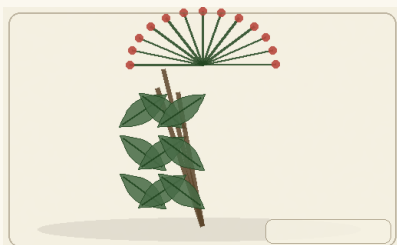
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WATER HEMLOCKS

POISON — AVOID



Stylized form diagram — not an identification photograph

Cicuta spp.

IDENTIFY: Wetland perennial with divided leaves, white umbrella flower clusters and thick chambered rootstocks.

HABITAT / SEASON: Marshes, wet meadows, stream edges and ditches across the northern hemisphere. Season: Spring through fall.

SURVIVAL USE: No survival use. Make wetland root gathering a prohibited activity unless a qualified botanist is present.

CAUTION: Extremely poisonous; small amounts, especially roots, can cause violent seizures and death.

LOOK-ALIKES: Angelica, cow parsnip and other Apiaceae can look similar. Never taste to decide.

TASKS: poison

Verified images: POWO

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SURVIVAL TASK MATRIX

Choose the least destructive plant that meets the job. A material that works poorly but is abundant may beat the perfect rare species.

TASK	BEST REGIONAL CANDIDATES IN THIS GUIDE	FIELD DECISION
Bow / spring wood	African pencil cedar, African podocarps, Wild raisins / Grewia	Use dead, shed or pruned material first.
Arrow or dart shaft	African highland bamboo, Wild raisins / Grewia	Use dead, shed or pruned material first.
Bow-drill hearth	No reliable candidate among the priority profiles.	Use a different technology or carried tool; do not force unsuitable plant material.
Bow-drill spindle	No reliable candidate among the priority profiles.	Use a different technology or carried tool; do not force unsuitable plant material.
Tinder	African pencil cedar, Cattails, African wormwood	Use dead, shed or pruned material first.
Fuel / coals	African podocarps, Alders, Tamarind, African cherry	Use dead, shed or pruned material first.
Cordage / fiber	Wild raisins / Grewia, Wild roses, Stinging nettle	Use dead, shed or pruned material first.
Basket / mat	Cattails	Use dead, shed or pruned material first.
Container / wrap	African highland bamboo	Use dead, shed or pruned material first.
Fruit food	Wild raisins / Grewia, Wild roses, Bilberry / bog blueberry group	Verify part, maturity and preparation.
Green food	Stinging nettle, Wild onions and garlic, Watercress	Verify part, maturity and preparation.
Seed / nut	African water lilies	Verify part, maturity and preparation.
Root / starch	Cattails, African water lilies	Verify part, maturity and preparation.
Traditional-use	African wormwood, African cherry, Pepper-bark tree	Documented use only; no field dosing.

SEASONAL OPERATING RHYTHM

PHASE	PRIMARY OPPORTUNITY	PRIMARY RISK
Early growth	Shoots, greens, flowers, sap and easy bark identification.	Toxic shoots and bulbs are hardest to separate before flowering.
Peak growth	Maximum leaf and flower information; fiber plants mature.	Heat, insects, sap and water contamination.
Fruit / seed	Highest food density; nuts, berries, pods, grains and tubers.	Mold, wildlife encounters and unripe or toxic fruit.
Dormant / dry	Wood, bark, evergreen leaves, persistent fruit and roots.	Fewer diagnostic traits; overharvest of stored underground parts.

SOURCES, IMAGE VERIFICATION AND EMERGENCY

Every profile links to current taxonomic and photograph searches. Treat community photographs as evidence to compare, not as a final authority.

1. 2023 USDA Plant Hardiness Zone Map

USDA Agricultural Research Service — hardiness-zone reference

<https://planthardiness.ars.usda.gov/>

2. Plants of the World Online

Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew — taxonomy, distribution and images

<https://powo.science.kew.org/>

3. World Flora Online

World Flora Online Consortium — global plant taxonomy

<https://www.worldfloraonline.org/>

4. Global Biodiversity Information Facility

GBIF Secretariat — occurrence records and licensed media

<https://www.gbif.org/>

5. World Checklist of Useful Plant Species

Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew — documented plant uses

<https://kew.iro.bl.uk/concern/datasets/7243d727-e28d-419d-a8f7-9ebef5b9e03e>

6. Poison Control

National Capital Poison Center — poisoning first-response guidance

<https://www.poison.org/>

7. WHO Monographs on Selected Medicinal Plants

World Health Organization — medicinal-plant safety and monographs

<https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9241545178>

8. African Plant Database

Conservatoire et Jardin botaniques de Geneve and SANBI — African taxonomy and distribution

<https://africanplantdatabase.ch/>

9. PlantZAfrica

South African National Biodiversity Institute — African species profiles and uses

<https://pza.sanbi.org/>

SUSPECTED POISONING

Stop exposure. Remove material from the mouth and rinse. Do not induce vomiting unless directed. Save a sample or clear photographs. Contact local emergency services or a poison center. Monitor airway, breathing and consciousness.

PUBLICATION LIMITS

Regional lists are representative, not exhaustive. Species ranges, names, laws and preparation practices change. Local floras, land managers, Indigenous knowledge holders, poison centers and clinicians take precedence.