

NORTHERN VANCOUVER ISLAND PLANT FIELD GUIDE

Quatsino coastal rainforest • Seasons 1, 2, 4



TREES

EDIBLE

TOXIC

TRADITION

KNOWLEDGE • SKILL • DISCIPLINE • SURVIVAL

Independent educational field guide • verify current laws, local conditions, and expert guidance

REGION AT A GLANCE

Trees, edible plants, toxic look-alikes and traditional-use species of the wet Pacific coast.

Filming region: Quatsino Sound and the northern Vancouver Island coastal rainforest, British Columbia, Canada

Alone season(s): 1, 2, 4

Ecology: Coastal temperate rainforest, estuary, bog, shoreline and disturbed camp edges

The northern Vancouver Island filming region lies in one of the wettest temperate forests in North America. Western redcedar, western hemlock and Sitka spruce dominate many sites, while salal, huckleberries, salmonberry, ferns and mosses form a dense understory. Salt spray, bogs, tidal edges and logging disturbance create sharp changes in plant communities over short distances.

FIELD PRIORITIES

- Learn the three dominant conifers before using bark, roots, pitch or boughs.
- Treat every white-flowered wetland plant as hazardous until water hemlock is ruled out.
- Use berry color only as a supporting clue; leaf shape, stem form, flower and habitat must agree.
- Harvest lightly. Many coastal plants are culturally important and slow to recover in saturated soils.
- Do not eat mushrooms from this guide; fungi require a separate expert-reviewed manual.

NON-NEGOTIABLE PLANT SAFETY

Never consume a plant from one photo, one common name or one guide. Positive identification requires multiple traits and a reliable regional source. Do not experiment with medicinal dosing. For suspected poisoning, remove plant material from the mouth, preserve a sample or photo, contact emergency services or a poison centre, and do not induce vomiting unless directed.

POSITIVE IDENTIFICATION PROTOCOL

Use a repeatable process. Confidence is built from independent features, not intuition.

1**1. PLACE**

Record habitat, moisture, slope, elevation and nearby dominant plants.

2**2. FORM**

Decide tree, shrub, vine, herb, grass-like plant, fern or succulent.

3**3. LEAVES**

Check arrangement, shape, edge, veins, hairs, odor and underside.

4**4. STEM & BARK**

Look for thorns, sap, pith, lenticels, buds, twig color and texture.

5**5. FLOWER / FRUIT**

Count petals, inspect clusters, seed structures and fruit attachment.

6**6. CROSS-CHECK**

Match at least three reliable sources and rule out every dangerous look-alike.

AUTOMATIC STOP LIST

No tasting to identify.
No wetland roots.
No unknown white umbels.
No unknown bulbs.
No unknown milky sap.
No medicinal experiments.

DOCUMENTATION KIT

Photograph whole plant, leaf top and bottom, stem, bark, flowers, fruit and habitat. Add a scale object. Record date, location and confidence. Never let an AI label overrule a regional botanist.

TREES AND WOODY PLANTS

Identification, practical material properties and conservation cautions.

WESTERN REDCEDAR

TREE / WOODY

Thuja plicata

IDENTIFY

Flat sprays of scale-like leaves; small upright oval cones; fibrous reddish-brown bark that pulls in long strips; drooping leader.

HABITAT & SEASON

Moist lowlands, stream margins, seepage slopes and old coastal forest. Season: Year-round

DOCUMENTED USE

Durable, easily split wood for boards, stakes, shingles and containers. Published Indigenous technologies include cordage, mats and baskets made from carefully prepared bark and roots.

CAUTION

Do not ring-bark living trees. Cedar dust and fresh foliage may irritate sensitive people; internal medicinal use is not recommended.

LOOK-ALIKES

Yellow-cedar has sharper, more aromatic scale leaves and rounder cones.

1

WESTERN HEMLOCK

TREE / WOODY

Tsuga heterophylla

IDENTIFY

Short flat needles of unequal length with two pale bands below; tiny pendant cones; slender drooping top; bark becomes furrowed and dark.

HABITAT & SEASON

Cool, shaded coastal forest, nurse logs and moist slopes. Season: Year-round

DOCUMENTED USE

Straight-grained wood for poles and light structures. Young boughs can provide springy bedding when used sparingly.

CAUTION

Hemlock the tree is not poison hemlock, but the shared common name causes dangerous confusion. Never use a name alone for identification.

LOOK-ALIKES

Pacific yew has flat needles without pale undersides and red arils; Douglas-fir needles are more evenly arranged.

2

TREES AND WOODY PLANTS

Identification, practical material properties and conservation cautions.

SITKA SPRUCE

TREE / WOODY

Picea sitchensis

IDENTIFY

Stiff sharp four-sided needles; large thin-scaled hanging cones; gray-brown scaly bark; massive buttressed trunks near the coast.

HABITAT & SEASON

Shorelines, estuaries, river terraces and wind-exposed coastal forest. Season: Year-round

DOCUMENTED USE

Strong wood for poles and split kindling. Flexible roots have documented use in lashing and basketry after skilled preparation.

CAUTION

Needles are extremely sharp. Resin can contaminate eyes and wounds. Take roots only from downed material or with permission.

LOOK-ALIKES

Western hemlock needles are soft and flat; shore pine needles occur in bundles of two.

3

DOUGLAS-FIR

TREE / WOODY

Pseudotsuga menziesii var. *menziesii*

IDENTIFY

Single soft needles with a citrus-resin scent when crushed; cones have distinctive three-pointed bracts extending beyond the scales; deeply furrowed bark on old trees.

HABITAT & SEASON

Drier slopes, rocky benches and disturbed forest, less common on the wettest coastal sites. Season: Year-round

DOCUMENTED USE

High-value structural poles and dense fuelwood. Resinous dead twigs can assist fire starting when dry.

CAUTION

Do not confuse with true firs, whose cones stand upright and fall apart on the branch. Avoid ingesting resin.

LOOK-ALIKES

Grand fir has flat needles in two rows and upright cones without protruding bracts.

4

TREES AND WOODY PLANTS

Identification, practical material properties and conservation cautions.

RED ALDER

TREE / WOODY

Alnus rubra

IDENTIFY

Oval leaves with rolled-under margins and prominent parallel veins; smooth gray bark often mottled with lichens; woody cone-like female catkins persist.

HABITAT & SEASON

Slides, streambanks, road edges, clearings and young forest. Season: Spring to fall for leaves; year-round bark and wood

DOCUMENTED USE

Fast-growing poles, pegs and smoking wood. Alder wood burns evenly once seasoned; green wood is useful for low-smoke cooking racks only after safe setup.

CAUTION

Bark and leaf preparations have traditional uses but may cause reactions; do not self-medicate. Wet alder is poor emergency fuel.

LOOK-ALIKES

Paper birch has peeling white bark; hazelnut has toothed leaves and bristly husks.

5

BIGLEAF MAPLE

TREE / WOODY

Acer macrophyllum

IDENTIFY

Very large opposite leaves with five broad lobes; paired winged seeds; greenish bark on young trees, often thick with mosses and licorice fern.

HABITAT & SEASON

Floodplains, lower slopes, forest edges and rich disturbed ground. Season: Spring through fall

DOCUMENTED USE

Broad leaves can serve as short-lived work-surface liners. Hard wood is useful for carved utensils, wedges and tool handles when seasoned.

CAUTION

Wilted maple leaves should not be fed to livestock. Moss-covered branches can hide decay; test wood before loading.

LOOK-ALIKES

Vine maple is smaller with more delicate, usually seven- to nine-lobed leaves.

6

DOCUMENTED EDIBLE PLANTS

Documented foods only. Positive identification and safe preparation remain essential.

SALAL

DOCUMENTED EDIBLE

Gaultheria shallon

IDENTIFY

Evergreen leathery oval leaves with fine teeth; pink-white urn-shaped flowers; dark purple-black berries in clusters on reddish stems.

HABITAT & SEASON

Forest edges, open conifer woods, rocky bluffs and coastal thickets. Season: Late summer through fall

DOCUMENTED USE

Ripe berries are documented food and can be eaten fresh or mashed and dried. Leaves have published traditional beverage and medicinal uses.

CAUTION

Only consume fully identified ripe fruit. Berries may carry animal contamination; wash or cook when conditions permit.

LOOK-ALIKES

Evergreen huckleberry has smaller pointed leaves and berries with a crown-like calyx scar.

7

SALMONBERRY

DOCUMENTED EDIBLE

Rubus spectabilis

IDENTIFY

Arching prickly canes; three-part or deeply lobed leaves; bright magenta flowers; raspberry-like fruits ranging from yellow to red.

HABITAT & SEASON

Wet thickets, streambanks, slide tracks and forest openings. Season: Late spring to midsummer

DOCUMENTED USE

Ripe fruits are edible and water-rich. Young peeled shoots have documented traditional food use when collected at the proper stage.

CAUTION

Avoid moldy berries and heavily road-sprayed patches. Canes can tear skin and clothing.

LOOK-ALIKES

Thimbleberry lacks prickles and has large soft maple-like leaves.

8

DOCUMENTED EDIBLE PLANTS

Documented foods only. Positive identification and safe preparation remain essential.

EVERGREEN HUCKLEBERRYDOCUMENTED EDIBLE

Vaccinium ovatum

IDENTIFY
Dense evergreen shrub with small glossy sharply toothed leaves; pink urn-shaped flowers; blue-black berries with a small crown.

HABITAT & SEASON
Coastal forest edges, dry hummocks, old logs and openings. Season: Late summer through fall

DOCUMENTED USE
Ripe berries are edible fresh or cooked. Dense twiggy growth also provides light brush material for screening and small brooms.

CAUTION
Do not rely on dark berry color alone. Check the woody shrub, alternate leaves and crown at the fruit tip.

LOOK-ALIKES
Salal leaves are larger and rounder; privet and other garden escapes lack the typical *Vaccinium* flower and fruit crown.

9

RED HUCKLEBERRYDOCUMENTED EDIBLE

Vaccinium parvifolium

IDENTIFY
Fine green angular twigs; small thin oval leaves; translucent red berries borne singly; delicate open shrub.

HABITAT & SEASON
Rotting logs, stumps and moist shaded forest. Season: Midsummer through early fall

DOCUMENTED USE
Ripe berries are edible and tart. The species is an indicator of decayed wood and moist organic microsites.

CAUTION
Fruit is small and easily contaminated by soil splash. Positive identification requires the green twig and *Vaccinium* fruit crown.

LOOK-ALIKES
Red baneberry fruits are in upright clusters and the herb has divided leaves, not woody green twigs.

10

DOCUMENTED EDIBLE PLANTS

Documented foods only. Positive identification and safe preparation remain essential.

PACIFIC CRABAPPLE

DOCUMENTED EDIBLE

Malus fusca

IDENTIFY

Small thorny or spur-branched tree; oval toothed leaves; white-pink apple blossoms; small yellow to reddish apples with a persistent calyx.

HABITAT & SEASON

Estuary margins, wet meadows, stream edges and coastal thickets. Season: Fall

DOCUMENTED USE

Fruit is edible after positive identification, often improved by cooking or drying. Hard wood is suitable for small pegs and tool parts.

CAUTION

Seeds contain cyanogenic compounds and should not be crushed or eaten in quantity. Avoid fruit from polluted estuaries.

LOOK-ALIKES

Hawthorn has more obvious thorns and lobed leaves; ornamental crabapples may occur near settlements.

11

STINGING NETTLE

DOCUMENTED EDIBLE

Urtica dioica subsp. gracilis

IDENTIFY

Opposite sharply toothed leaves on square-ish fibrous stems; translucent stinging hairs; small green hanging flower clusters.

HABITAT & SEASON

Rich disturbed soil, river terraces, old camps and forest openings. Season: Young shoots in spring; fiber later

DOCUMENTED USE

Young tops are documented food only after thorough cooking or drying disables the stings. Mature stems yield strong bast fiber with skilled processing.

CAUTION

Wear gloves. Do not eat raw. Avoid plants after flowering if you have kidney disease or are using medications unless a clinician approves.

LOOK-ALIKES

Dead-nettles have showier flowers and non-stinging hairs; mint relatives smell aromatic.

12

TOXIC PLANTS - AVOID

High-consequence species to recognize before any gathering begins.

WESTERN WATER HEMLOCK

TOXIC - AVOID

Cicuta douglasii

IDENTIFY

Tall wetland perennial with divided leaves, umbrella-like white flower clusters and thick chambered rootstocks; leaf veins often end in the notches between teeth.

HABITAT & SEASON

Marshes, ditches, wet meadows and slow stream margins. Season: Spring through fall

DOCUMENTED USE

No survival use. Treat as a no-touch, no-taste plant and teach its habitat before collecting any wetland roots or celery-like greens.

CAUTION

Extremely poisonous; small amounts can cause violent seizures and death. Roots are especially dangerous. Seek emergency help immediately after suspected exposure.

LOOK-ALIKES

Cow parsnip and angelica also have white umbels but differ in leaf form, stem and root structure. Never resolve this group by smell or taste.

13

DEATH CAMAS

TOXIC - AVOID

Toxicoscordion venenosum

IDENTIFY

Grass-like basal leaves; cream to greenish six-tepaled star flowers in an upright cluster; onion-like bulb but no onion odor.

HABITAT & SEASON

Open meadows, rocky coastal bluffs and seasonally wet grasslands. Season: Spring to early summer

DOCUMENTED USE

No food use. Learn it before harvesting any wild onion or edible bulb.

CAUTION

All parts are poisonous and cooking does not make them safe. Lack of onion smell is a warning, not a complete test.

LOOK-ALIKES

Wild onions have a clear onion odor in leaves and bulbs; blue camas has blue flowers but should still be harvested only by experts.

14

TOXIC PLANTS - AVOID

High-consequence species to recognize before any gathering begins.

PACIFIC YEW

TOXIC - AVOID

Taxus brevifolia

IDENTIFY

Small understory tree with flat dark green needles arranged in two ranks; thin reddish-purple scaly bark; single red cup-like arils around a hard seed.

HABITAT & SEASON

Shaded old forest, ravines and moist slopes. Season: Year-round

DOCUMENTED USE

Dense elastic wood has documented use for bows, wedges and tools where legal and culturally appropriate.

CAUTION

Needles, bark and seeds contain dangerous taxines. The red flesh around the seed does not make the plant safe for casual eating. Never burn yew in a cooking fire.

LOOK-ALIKES

Western hemlock has pale bands under needles and small cones; yew lacks resin canals and cones.

15

FOXGLOVE

TOXIC - AVOID

Digitalis purpurea

IDENTIFY

Tall spike of purple, pink or white tubular flowers with spotted throats; large soft gray-green wrinkled basal leaves.

HABITAT & SEASON

Roadsides, clearcuts, old homesteads and disturbed coastal ground. Season: Late spring through summer

DOCUMENTED USE

No field medicinal use. Remove from children's camp areas only with gloves and lawful disposal.

CAUTION

All parts contain potent cardiac glycosides; ingestion can cause dangerous heart rhythm disturbances. Do not make tea or poultices.

LOOK-ALIKES

First-year rosettes can resemble comfrey or mullein. Flowering stalks are much easier to recognize.

16

TRADITIONAL-USE PLANTS

Published cultural or historical uses - not prescriptions or dosing advice.

DEVIL'S CLUB

TRADITIONAL-USE

Oplopanax horridus

IDENTIFY

Large maple-like leaves on thick stems densely armed with yellow spines; red berries in upright clusters; sprawling shrub.

HABITAT & SEASON

Wet ravines, seepage slopes, stream edges and old-growth forest. Season: Year-round stems; leaves in growing season

DOCUMENTED USE

A culturally important plant with extensive documented Indigenous ceremonial and medicinal uses. In a survival context, its dense spines make effective visual barriers and route markers without cutting the plant.

CAUTION

Spines break in skin and can cause infection. Internal use is not advised; respect local cultural protocols and do not harvest without permission.

LOOK-ALIKES

Thimbleberry has similar leaves but soft unarmed stems and raspberry-like fruit.

17

YARROW

TRADITIONAL-USE

Achillea millefolium

IDENTIFY

Aromatic finely divided fern-like leaves; flat-topped clusters of small white to pink flower heads; tough creeping rhizomes.

HABITAT & SEASON

Dry openings, shore gravel, trails and disturbed soil. Season: Summer through fall

DOCUMENTED USE

Published traditional uses include external wound washes and aromatic preparations. The dry flowering tops can also serve as emergency tinder when fully dry.

CAUTION

Do not use internally during pregnancy or with anticoagulant therapy. Contact allergy is possible. External wound care still requires clean water and proper medical assessment.

LOOK-ALIKES

Poison hemlock has larger glossy divided leaves, purple-spotted hollow stems and umbrella-shaped flowers.

18

TRADITIONAL-USE PLANTS

Published cultural or historical uses - not prescriptions or dosing advice.

BLACK COTTONWOOD

TRADITIONAL-USE

Populus trichocarpa

IDENTIFY

Tall tree with triangular to heart-shaped leaves, flattened leaf stalks and sticky aromatic winter buds; gray bark becomes deeply furrowed.

HABITAT & SEASON

River floodplains, estuaries and wet valley bottoms. Season: Buds late winter to spring; wood year-round

DOCUMENTED USE

Light wood for expedient carving and dry kindling. Resinous buds have documented traditional external preparations.

CAUTION

Bud resins can trigger salicylate or fragrance sensitivity. Do not strip bark from living trees or rely on wet cottonwood as primary fuel.

LOOK-ALIKES

Balsam poplar is similar and replaces it farther north; red alder has cone-like catkins and rounded leaf tips.

19

LICORICE FERN

TRADITIONAL-USE

Polypodium glycyrrhiza

IDENTIFY

Evergreen once-divided fern with separate leathery leaflets; round orange sori beneath; creeps over mossy trunks and rocks with a sweet-tasting rhizome.

HABITAT & SEASON

Mossy bigleaf maple trunks, logs, cliffs and humid coastal forest. Season: Fall through spring

DOCUMENTED USE

Published traditional use includes small amounts of cleaned rhizome as a flavoring or throat preparation.

CAUTION

Do not harvest from contaminated bark or cliffs. Rhizome use is not appropriate for people with kidney, heart or blood-pressure conditions without clinical advice.

LOOK-ALIKES

Sword fern is much larger and rooted in soil; deer fern has separate fertile fronds.

20

SEASONAL AND HABITAT PLANNING

Availability is local and variable. Use these patterns to plan observation, not to assume harvest.

PHASE	WHAT TO EXPECT	FIELD EMPHASIS
SPRING / THAW	New shoots, flowers, catkins and wetland hazards become visible.	Learn leaves and flowers before fruit; avoid roots and bulbs.
SUMMER / PEAK GROWTH	Maximum foliage; most edible greens and traditional-use herbs are identifiable.	Photograph multiple traits; note habitat and abundance.
AUTUMN / FRUIT & FROST	Most berries, hips, cones and seed structures mature.	Confirm entire plant; leave food for wildlife and regeneration.
WINTER / PERSISTENT	Evergreen shrubs, bark, twigs, cones and persistent fruit remain.	Rely on woody traits; snow and frost obscure herb identification.

HABITAT FORECAST

HABITAT	LIKELY PLANTS	PRIMARY RISK
Dry ridge / exposed slope	Western redcedar, Western hemlock, Sitka spruce	Windthrow, fire, protected slow-growing plants
Moist forest / sheltered valley	Douglas-fir, Red alder, Bigleaf maple	Look-alikes, falling timber, poor visibility
Wetland / peat / stream edge	Western water hemlock, Death camas	Water hemlock or toxic bog shrubs; unstable ground
Open disturbance / camp edge	Salal, Salmonberry, Evergreen huckleberry, Red huckleberry	Contamination, invasive species, human chemicals

SEASONAL REALITY

A late frost, drought, fire, flood, browsing pressure or poor flowering year can remove an expected food source. Build plans around several independent resources and assume that every crop may fail.

LOOK-ALIKE AND HAZARD MATRIX

The most important plant knowledge is often knowing what not to touch, taste or dig.

HAZARD	FIELD CUE	RULE
Western water hemlock	Tall wetland perennial with divided leaves, umbrella-like white flower clusters and thick chambered rootstocks; leaf veins often end in the notches between teeth.	Extremely poisonous; small amounts can cause violent seizures and death. Roots are especially dangerous. Seek emergency help immediately after suspected exposure.
Death camas	Grass-like basal leaves; cream to greenish six-tepaled star flowers in an upright cluster; onion-like bulb but no onion odor.	All parts are poisonous and cooking does not make them safe. Lack of onion smell is a warning, not a complete test.
Pacific yew	Small understory tree with flat dark green needles arranged in two ranks; thin reddish-purple scaly bark; single red cup-like arils around a hard seed.	Needles, bark and seeds contain dangerous taxines. The red flesh around the seed does not make the plant safe for casual eating. Never burn yew in a cooking fire.
Foxglove	Tall spike of purple, pink or white tubular flowers with spotted throats; large soft gray-green wrinkled basal leaves.	All parts contain potent cardiac glycosides; ingestion can cause dangerous heart rhythm disturbances. Do not make tea or poultices.

SUSPECTED POISONING

1. Stop exposure.

2. Remove material from mouth; rinse.

3. Do not induce vomiting.

4. Save a sample/photo.

5. Call emergency services or poison control.

6. Monitor breathing and consciousness.

HARVEST ETHICS

Take the common, leave the rare.

Never girdle a tree.

Avoid roots and whole plants.

Leave wildlife food.

Follow Indigenous and protected-area rules.

Restore disturbed ground.

SOURCES, SCOPE AND LIMITATIONS

Taxonomy and regional occurrence change. Verify the current name, distribution and legal status before publication or field use.

1. E-Flora BC: Electronic Atlas of the Flora of British Columbia
University of British Columbia - regional flora

<https://linnet.geog.ubc.ca/Atlas/Atlas.aspx>

2. Tree Species Compendium and identification resources
Government of British Columbia - government tree reference

<https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/environment/plants-animals-ecosystems/plant-species/tree-species-compe>

3. Flora of North America North of Mexico
Flora of North America Association - scientific flora

http://floranorthamerica.org/Main_Page

4. Plants of the World Online
Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew - taxonomy and distribution

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

5. Plants of Coastal British Columbia
Pojar, MacKinnon and Alaback; Lone Pine Publishing - regional field guide

6. Food Plants of Coastal First Peoples
Nancy J. Turner; Royal BC Museum - ethnobotany

<https://publications.royalbcmuseum.bc.ca/product/food-plants-of-coastal-first-peoples/>

7. Plant Technology of First Peoples in British Columbia and related works
Nancy J. Turner; Royal BC Museum / UBC Press - ethnobotany

<https://publications.royalbcmuseum.bc.ca/>

8. Canadian Poisonous Plants Information System and poison-safety resources
Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada / Canadian poison centres - poison safety

<https://infopoison.ca/>

INDEPENDENT PUBLICATION NOTICE

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