

AMAZON LOWLAND RAINFOREST & FLOODPLAIN PLANT SURVIVAL GUIDE

South America • USDA-EQUIVALENT ZONES 11-13 • KÖPPEN Af / Am

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: South America USDA-equivalent hardiness: 11-13 Köppen: Af / Am

Regional habitat: Terra firme forest, varzea, igapo and river margin

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

1. PLACE

Confirm continent, elevation, water regime, soil and disturbance.

2

2. FORM

Tree, shrub, vine, herb, grass, sedge, palm, fern, succulent or aquatic.

3

3. LEAF

Arrangement, veins, edge, hairs, glands, sap, odor and underside.

4

4. STEM / BARK

Thorns, pith, nodes, buds, lenticels, fibers, latex and branching.

5

5. FLOWER / FRUIT

Petal count, inflorescence, fruit attachment, seed and maturity.

6

6. EXCLUDE

Name every dangerous look-alike and explain why it is different.

7

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

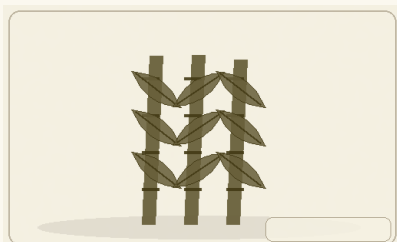
1. Deadfall and shed bark.
2. Abundant annual greens and fruit.
3. Pruned shoots and leaves.
4. Small stems from common thickets.
5. Roots, bark and whole plants only with permission and no safer substitute.

USEFUL PLANTS FOR TOOLS, FIRE AND SHELTER

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

GUADUA BAMBOO

USEFUL MATERIAL



Stylized form diagram — not an identification photograph

Guadua angustifolia and related spp.

IDENTIFY: Large hollow segmented culms; branch thorns in some species; broad grass leaves.

HABITAT / SEASON: Tropical American riverbanks, foothills and disturbed forest. Season: Culms year-round; shoots rainy season.

SURVIVAL USE: Exceptional material for shelter, containers, water tubes, traps, arrow shafts, bows in laminated designs and friction-fire sets; young shoots of selected species require boiling.

CAUTION: Fresh culms can split explosively in fire. Species and shoot cyanide levels vary.

LOOK-ALIKES: Woody reeds are smaller and lack robust branching culms.

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

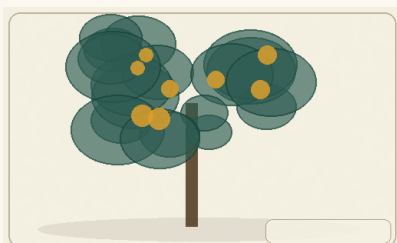
Verified images: POWO

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1

KAPOK / CEIBA

USEFUL MATERIAL



Stylized form diagram — not an identification photograph

Ceiba pentandra

IDENTIFY: Massive buttressed trunk; palmate leaves; large pods releasing silky floss.

HABITAT / SEASON: Tropical American and African lowland forest and river margins. Season: Floss and pods seasonal; wood year-round.

SURVIVAL USE: Floss bulks tinder and insulation; light wood is easy to carve for floats, containers and bow-drill hearths.

CAUTION: Floss ignites quickly but also spreads sparks. Large trees may be culturally protected.

LOOK-ALIKES: Balsa has simple heart-shaped leaves and no palmate leaflets.

TASKS: tinder, insulation, float, bow drill board

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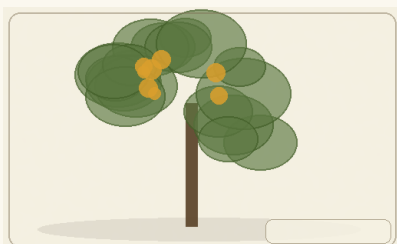
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USEFUL PLANTS FOR TOOLS, FIRE AND SHELTER

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

BALSA

USEFUL MATERIAL



Stylized form diagram — not an identification photograph

Ochroma pyramidale

IDENTIFY: Very large heart-shaped leaves; pale flowers; elongated pods with silky fibers; extremely light wood.

HABITAT / SEASON: Tropical American riverbanks, gaps and secondary forest. Season: Wood year-round; floss seasonal.

SURVIVAL USE: Very light wood for floats, rafts, containers and friction-fire hearth boards; floss is tinder.

CAUTION: Weak for load-bearing structures. Fast-growing trees can shed limbs.

LOOK-ALIKES: Cecropia has palmately lobed leaves and hollow stems.

TASKS: float, raft, bow drill board, tinder

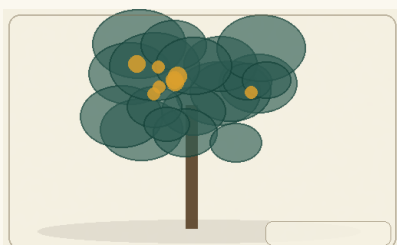
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3

CECROPIA

USEFUL MATERIAL



Stylized form diagram — not an identification photograph

Cecropia spp.

IDENTIFY: Large palmately lobed leaves pale beneath; ringed hollow stems; finger-like fruiting spikes.

HABITAT / SEASON: Tropical American forest gaps, roadsides and river edges. Season: Year-round.

SURVIVAL USE: Hollow stems can form tubes, floats and light containers; dry soft wood can be friction-fire material.

CAUTION: Ant colonies often inhabit stems. Fruit and medicinal use vary by species and are excluded without local expertise.

LOOK-ALIKES: Papaya leaves are deeply lobed but grow in a crown on one trunk.

TASKS: container, float, bow drill board

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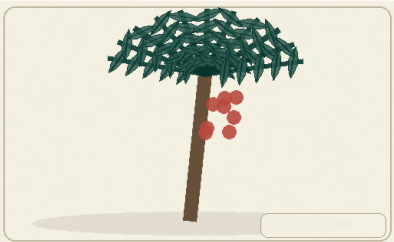
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USEFUL PLANTS FOR TOOLS, FIRE AND SHELTER

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

PEACH PALM

USEFUL MATERIAL



Bactris gasipaes

IDENTIFY: Clumping palm often armed with dark spines; pinnate leaves; dense clusters of orange-red fruits.

HABITAT / SEASON: Humid tropical American lowlands and old cultivation sites. Season: Fruit seasonal; stems year-round.

SURVIVAL USE: Boiled ripe fruit is high-energy food; hard palm wood makes spear points, bows and durable tools.

CAUTION: Fruit must be cooked; spines cause serious injury. Harvest ownership and cultural rights matter.

LOOK-ALIKES: Astrocaryum palms are also spiny but have different fruit clusters.

TASKS: food fruit, bow wood, spear, tools

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MATERIAL SELECTION SCREEN

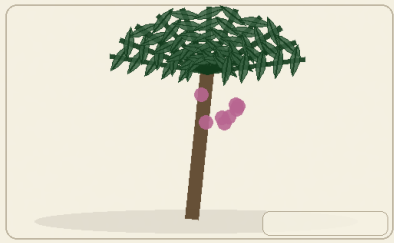
Before cutting, test straightness, grain, dryness, hidden rot, sap or smoke toxicity, and whether the species is protected. Match the material to the load: springy bow wood, straight shaft wood, soft dry hearth board, harder spindle, fibrous cordage, or resin-free cooking fuel.

LAND-BASED EDIBLE PLANTS

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

AÇAÍ PALM

LAND FOOD



Stylized form diagram — not an identification photograph

Euterpe oleracea

IDENTIFY: Multi-stem slender palm; pinnate leaves; many small purple-black fruits in hanging clusters.

HABITAT / SEASON: Amazonian floodplain and swamp forest. Season: Fruit seasonal; stems year-round.

SURVIVAL USE: Fruit pulp is documented food; palm fibers and stems support light construction.

CAUTION: Fruit processing needs clean water; palm-heart harvest kills stems and is not recommended.

LOOK-ALIKES: Other *Euterpe* species and dark palm fruits require local confirmation.

TASKS: food fruit, fiber, construction

Verified images: POWO

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BURITI / MORICHE PALM

LAND FOOD



Stylized form diagram — not an identification photograph

Mauritia flexuosa

IDENTIFY: Large fan palm; brown scaly oval fruits; commonly forms swamp groves.

HABITAT / SEASON: Amazon, Orinoco and Guiana savanna wetlands. Season: Fruit seasonal; leaves year-round.

SURVIVAL USE: Fruit pulp is documented food; leaves provide thatch, cordage, baskets and floats.

CAUTION: Wet palm groves can conceal deep mud, caimans and contaminated water.

LOOK-ALIKES: Carnauba has fan leaves but drier habitat and different fruit.

TASKS: food fruit, thatch, cordage, basketry

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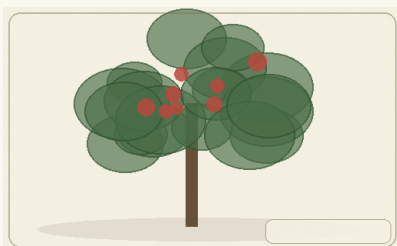
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LAND-BASED EDIBLE PLANTS

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

GUAVA

LAND FOOD



Stylized form diagram — not an identification photograph

Psidium guajava

IDENTIFY: Opposite oval leaves with strong parallel side veins; smooth peeling bark; white brush flowers; aromatic fruit.

HABITAT / SEASON: Tropical and subtropical disturbed ground, forest edge and river terraces. Season: Fruit varies by climate; wood year-round.

SURVIVAL USE: Ripe fruit is documented food; hard close-grained wood makes pegs, handles and friction-fire spindles.

CAUTION: Fruit can host insects and feral plants may be sprayed. Leaves are not a substitute for medical care.

LOOK-ALIKES: Other Myrtaceae share opposite leaves; fruit odor and flower structure help confirm.

TASKS: food fruit, handles, bow drill spindle

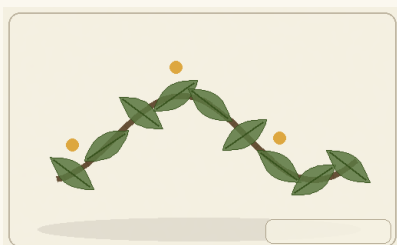
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WILD PASSIONFRUITS

LAND FOOD



Stylized form diagram — not an identification photograph

Passiflora spp.

IDENTIFY: Tendrilled vine; distinctive radial flowers; round to oval fruits; leaves often lobed.

HABITAT / SEASON: Tropical and subtropical forest edge, thicket and riverbank. Season: Fruit seasonal.

SURVIVAL USE: Fully ripe fruit of confirmed edible species is documented food; vines can provide temporary lashings.

CAUTION: Many species have cyanogenic leaves or unpalatable fruit. Eat only known ripe fruit, not unknown foliage.

LOOK-ALIKES: Cucurbit vines have separate flower structure and rough stems.

TASKS: food fruit, lashing

Verified images: POWO

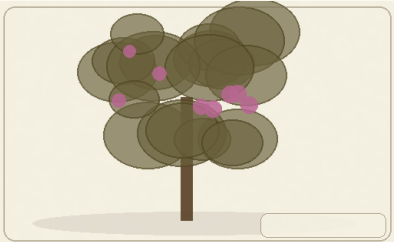
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LAND-BASED EDIBLE PLANTS

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

PAPAYA
LAND FOOD



Carica papaya

IDENTIFY: Soft unbranched hollow trunk; crown of deeply lobed leaves; large fruits attached near the trunk.

HABITAT / SEASON: Tropical clearings, river terraces and abandoned cultivation. Season: Fruit year-round in warm climates.

SURVIVAL USE: Fully ripe fruit is documented food; black seeds are peppery but used sparingly. Green fruit is cooked in established cuisines.
 CAUTION: Milky latex can irritate skin and may affect pregnancy or medications. Avoid wild fruit contaminated by animals.
 LOOK-ALIKES: Cecropia has woody branching stems and finger-like fruits.
 TASKS: food fruit, food green

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FOOD HARVEST SCREEN

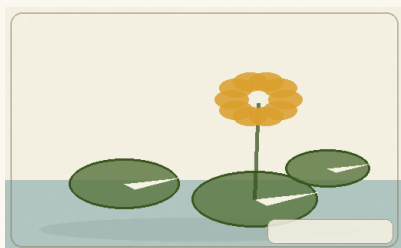
Confirm species, plant part and maturity. Check whether cooking, leaching, peeling, fermenting or repeated water changes are required. Reject mold, animal contamination, roadside plants, chemically treated ground and any food whose safe preparation cannot be completed with current water and fuel.

WATER AND WETLAND EDIBLE PLANTS

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

AMAZON WATER LILIES

AQUATIC FOOD



Stylized form diagram — not an identification photograph

Victoria amazonica / *Nymphaea* spp.

IDENTIFY: Large floating leaves; showy flowers; seeds and thick underwater structures depending genus.

HABITAT / SEASON: Warm floodplain lakes and slow tropical rivers. Season: Seeds and flowers seasonal.

SURVIVAL USE: Seeds and selected rhizomes have documented food use after local species-specific preparation.

CAUTION: Large leaves hide deep water and animals. Raw tissues and unknown Nymphaeaceae should not be eaten.

LOOK-ALIKES: Aquatic aroids may have arrow-shaped leaves and irritating sap.

TASKS: food seed, food starch

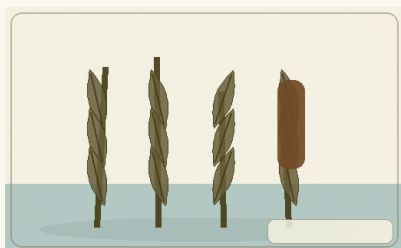
Verified images: POWO

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TROPICAL ARROWHEADS

AQUATIC FOOD



Stylized form diagram — not an identification photograph

Sagittaria guayanensis and related spp.

IDENTIFY: Arrow to oval leaves rising from shallow water; three-petaled white flowers; some produce tubers.

HABITAT / SEASON: Floodplains, marshes and slow tropical water. Season: Tubers seasonal.

SURVIVAL USE: Tubers of confirmed edible species are documented food after cooking.

CAUTION: Species vary in tuber production; wetlands may contain parasites and toxic aroids.

LOOK-ALIKES: Arrow arum and other aroids have spadix-and-spathe flowers.

TASKS: food tuber

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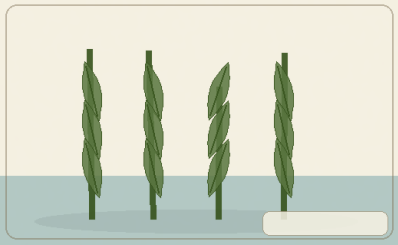
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WATER AND WETLAND EDIBLE PLANTS

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

WATER SPINACH

AQUATIC FOOD



Stylized form diagram — not an identification photograph

Ipomoea aquatica

IDENTIFY: Hollow creeping stems; arrow to lance leaves; pale morning-glory flowers.

HABITAT / SEASON: Warm freshwater ditches, ponds and slow rivers; native or invasive. Season: Warm season.

SURVIVAL USE: Tender shoots are a documented cooked green.

CAUTION: Raw plants can carry parasites and sewage pathogens; avoid polluted water and check invasive-species law.

LOOK-ALIKES: Water hemlock has divided leaves and umbels, not morning-glory flowers.

TASKS: food green

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AQUATIC HARVEST SCREEN

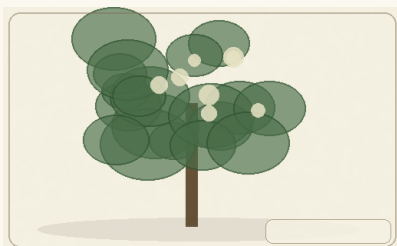
Check five separate questions: Is the species correct? Is the plant part edible? Is the water free of sewage, mining or farm runoff? Are parasites or harmful algal blooms plausible? Is entry and exit from the water safe? A “yes” to the plant and a “no” to the water still means do not eat.

MEDICINAL AND TRADITIONAL-USE PLANTS

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

COPAIBA TREES

TRADITIONAL-USE



Stylized form diagram — not an identification photograph

Copaifera spp.

IDENTIFY: Large forest trees with paired leaflets and resin canals; small flowers and pod fruits.

HABITAT / SEASON: Amazon and tropical South American forest. Season: Resin and wood year-round.

SURVIVAL USE: Resin has documented traditional external and technical uses; wood serves construction and fuel.

CAUTION: Tapping requires expertise and permission. Ingesting resin can cause illness and drug interactions.

LOOK-ALIKES: Many legumes have paired leaflets; bark tapping without identification is unsafe.

TASKS: resin, medicine, fuel

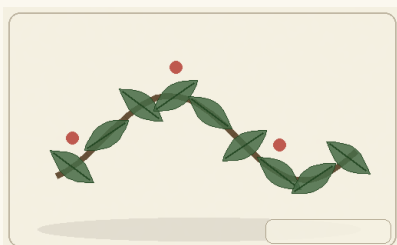
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CAT'S-CLAW VINE

TRADITIONAL-USE



Stylized form diagram — not an identification photograph

Uncaria tomentosa and related spp.

IDENTIFY: Woody climbing vine with paired curved hook-like spines at nodes and opposite leaves.

HABITAT / SEASON: Amazonian and Andean foothill forest. Season: Stems year-round.

SURVIVAL USE: Strong vines have lashing uses; bark has documented regional medicinal use.

CAUTION: Do not self-dose; pregnancy, immune and medication interactions are concerns. Several *Uncaria* species differ.

LOOK-ALIKES: Other hook-bearing lianas and rattan palms may resemble it.

TASKS: lashing, medicine

Verified images: POWO

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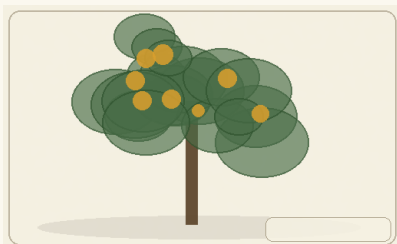
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MEDICINAL AND TRADITIONAL-USE PLANTS

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

DRAGON'S-BLOOD TREE

TRADITIONAL-USE



Stylized form diagram — not an identification photograph

Croton lechleri

IDENTIFY: Pale-barked tree; large heart-shaped leaves; red latex exudes from cuts.

HABITAT / SEASON: Amazonian forest gaps and river slopes. Season: Latex and wood year-round.

SURVIVAL USE: Red latex has documented regional external use and can seal small non-food containers.

CAUTION: Latex is not sterile and internal dosing is not advised. Croton species may have irritating or toxic sap.

LOOK-ALIKES: Other latex trees may exude white or clear sap.

TASKS: sealant, medicine

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MEDICINAL RESTRAINT

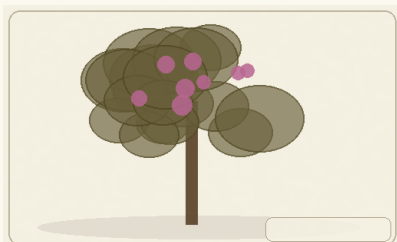
A plant can be culturally important and pharmacologically active yet still be the wrong survival choice. Unknown concentration, dehydration, pregnancy, allergies, chronic illness and medicine interactions can turn a traditional remedy into a second emergency.

POISONOUS PLANTS AND DANGEROUS LOOK-ALIKES

High-consequence species to learn before gathering starts.

MANCHINEEL

POISON — AVOID



Stylized form diagram — not an identification photograph

Hippomane mancinella

IDENTIFY: Coastal tree with glossy oval leaves, small green flowers and apple-like green-yellow fruit; milky sap.

HABITAT / SEASON: Caribbean and tropical American beaches and coastal forest. Season: Year-round.

SURVIVAL USE: No use.

CAUTION: Sap and fruit are severely toxic and blistering; rain dripping from leaves and smoke from burning wood can injure.

LOOK-ALIKES: Sea grape has large round leaves with red veins and grape-like fruit clusters.

TASKS: poison

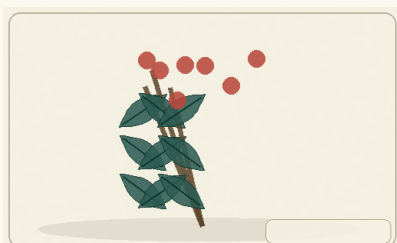
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DUMBCANE

POISON — AVOID



Stylized form diagram — not an identification photograph

Dieffenbachia spp.

IDENTIFY: Large variegated leaves on cane-like stems; green-white spadix and spathe; clear to milky sap.

HABITAT / SEASON: Tropical American forest understory and disturbed wet ground. Season: Year-round.

SURVIVAL USE: No food use.

CAUTION: Calcium oxalate crystals cause intense mouth swelling, pain and possible airway compromise.

LOOK-ALIKES: Edible aroids require exact identification and cooking.

TASKS: poison

Verified images: POWO

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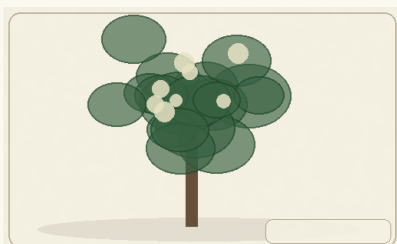
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POISONOUS PLANTS AND DANGEROUS LOOK-ALIKES

High-consequence species to learn before gathering starts.

SANDBOX TREE

POISON — AVOID



Stylized form diagram — not an identification photograph

Hura crepitans

IDENTIFY: Tall tree with dark conical trunk spines, heart-shaped leaves and pumpkin-like segmented capsules.

HABITAT / SEASON: Tropical American lowland forest and riverbanks. Season: Year-round.

SURVIVAL USE: No food use. Wood handling is specialized.

CAUTION: Milky sap is caustic and fruit explodes forcefully, scattering poisonous seeds.

LOOK-ALIKES: Kapok has trunk spines when young but palmate leaves and floss-filled pods.

TASKS: poison

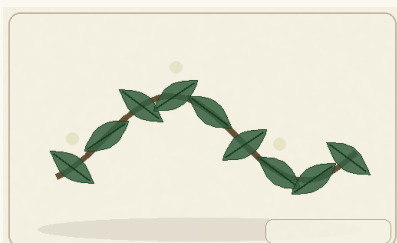
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TOXIC STRYCHNOS VINES AND TREES

POISON — AVOID



Stylized form diagram — not an identification photograph

Strychnos spp.

IDENTIFY: Opposite leaves with strong curved veins; tendrils or woody stems; round fruits vary by species.

HABITAT / SEASON: Tropical forest and savanna. Season: Year-round.

SURVIVAL USE: No food use unless a local expert identifies a known edible species.

CAUTION: The genus includes plants with strychnine-type toxins. Fruit appearance is not enough to judge safety.

LOOK-ALIKES: Edible monkey oranges are region-specific *Strychnos* and still require expert confirmation.

TASKS: poison

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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	Peach palm	Use dead, shed or pruned material first.
Arrow or dart shaft	Guadua bamboo	Use dead, shed or pruned material first.
Bow-drill hearth	Kapok / ceiba, Balsa, Cecropia	Use dead, shed or pruned material first.
Bow-drill spindle	Guava	Use dead, shed or pruned material first.
Tinder	Kapok / ceiba, Balsa	Use dead, shed or pruned material first.
Fuel / coals	Copaiba trees	Use dead, shed or pruned material first.
Cordage / fiber	Buriti / moriche palm	Use dead, shed or pruned material first.
Basket / mat	Buriti / moriche palm	Use dead, shed or pruned material first.
Container / wrap	Guadua bamboo, Cecropia	Use dead, shed or pruned material first.
Fruit food	Peach palm, Açaí palm, Buriti / moriche palm, Guava	Verify part, maturity and preparation.
Green food	Papaya, Water spinach	Verify part, maturity and preparation.
Seed / nut	Amazon water lilies	Verify part, maturity and preparation.
Root / starch	Amazon water lilies	Verify part, maturity and preparation.
Traditional-use	Copaiba trees, Cat's-claw vine, Dragon's-blood 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. Tropicos

Missouri Botanical Garden — American and global botanical records

<https://tropicos.org/>

9. Flora e Funga do Brasil

Jardim Botânico do Rio de Janeiro — Brazilian scientific flora

<https://floradobrasil.jbrj.gov.br/>

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.