

NORTHERN LABRADOR PLANT FIELD GUIDE

Big River and Nunatsiavut • Season 9



TREES

EDIBLE

TOXIC

TRADITION

KNOWLEDGE • SKILL • DISCIPLINE • SURVIVAL

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

REGION AT A GLANCE

Spruce-fir forest, bakeapples, Labrador tea, bog toxins and river-valley materials of northern Labrador.

Filming region: Lower Big River and the Nunatsiavut region south of Makkovik, Labrador, Canada

Alone season(s): 9

Ecology: Subarctic spruce-fir boreal forest, muskeg, peatland, river terrace, coastal influence and exposed barrens

The Big River filming region is a wet, cold mosaic of spruce-fir forest, muskeg, peatland and exposed barrens. Black spruce dominates many saturated sites, while balsam fir, white birch and alder occupy richer slopes and river terraces. Berries can be locally abundant, but a cold summer or early frost may reduce fruit sharply. Bog shrubs include both useful species and plants that can cause serious poisoning.

FIELD PRIORITIES

- Separate black spruce, white spruce and balsam fir by needles, cones and bark.
- Learn cloudberry, lingonberry, blueberry and crowberry as complete plants before fruiting season ends.
- Never make tea from an evergreen bog shrub until Labrador tea and bog rosemary are confidently separated.
- Do not disturb deep peat or lichen mats for minor harvests.
- Respect Nunatsiavut land-use rules and local knowledge; published uses do not replace community permission.

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.

BLACK SPRUCE	TREE / WOODY
<i>Picea mariana</i> IDENTIFY Narrow spire crown, short four-sided blue-green needles, small persistent cones and scaly dark bark. HABITAT & SEASON Muskeg, peatlands, cold flats and thin rocky soils. Season: Year-round DOCUMENTED USE Small straight poles, sheltered dead twigs, roots and resinous wood support shelter and fire systems. CAUTION Shallow roots create windthrow hazards. Smoky resinous fires need ventilation. LOOK-ALIKES White spruce has longer needles and larger cones and favors better-drained sites.	
1	
WHITE SPRUCE	TREE / WOODY
<i>Picea glauca</i> IDENTIFY Sharp single needles with a pungent odor when crushed, larger flexible cones and a fuller crown. HABITAT & SEASON River terraces, sheltered valleys, lake margins and better-drained forest. Season: Year-round DOCUMENTED USE Strong poles, roots and fuel. Dry lower branches are often available beneath the crown. CAUTION Root stripping kills trees; use exposed or dead material. Pitch may irritate skin. LOOK-ALIKES Balsam fir needles are flat and soft; spruce needles roll between fingers.	
2	

TREES AND WOODY PLANTS

Identification, practical material properties and conservation cautions.

BALSAM FIR

TREE / WOODY

Abies balsamea

IDENTIFY

Flat fragrant needles with two pale bands below, smooth gray bark with resin blisters and upright cones that break apart on the tree.

HABITAT & SEASON

Cool moist forest, sheltered slopes and river valleys. Season: Year-round

DOCUMENTED USE

Springy boughs for bedding and insulation, light poles and easy-to-carve wood.

CAUTION

Bough harvest can damage small trees. Fir wood burns fast and does not make long coals.

LOOK-ALIKES

Spruce needles are sharp and cones hang; fir cones stand upright.

3

PAPER BIRCH

TREE / WOODY

Betula papyrifera

IDENTIFY

White peeling bark with dark lenticels, oval toothed leaves and hanging catkins.

HABITAT & SEASON

Burns, river terraces and mixed spruce-fir forest. Season: Year-round

DOCUMENTED USE

Loose dead bark is reliable tinder and can serve as a short-term waterproof layer. Wood burns hot when dry.

CAUTION

Never girdle living trees. Bark fires spread quickly.

LOOK-ALIKES

Mountain alder has gray bark and cone-like catkins; aspen bark is smooth and does not peel.

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TREES AND WOODY PLANTS

Identification, practical material properties and conservation cautions.

TAMARACK

TREE / WOODY

Larix laricina

IDENTIFY

Soft needles in clusters, small upright cones and yellow autumn foliage that drops before winter.

HABITAT & SEASON

Fens, bog margins and wet lowlands. Season: Year-round wood

DOCUMENTED USE

Rot-resistant poles and roots have documented use in frames, snowshoes and lashings.

CAUTION

Small bog trees grow slowly. Use dead or permitted material. Wet wood is difficult to ignite.

LOOK-ALIKES

Spruces retain sharp single needles in winter.

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SPECKLED ALDER

TREE / WOODY

Alnus incana subsp. rugosa

IDENTIFY

Multi-stem shrub or small tree with oval toothed leaves, pale speckled bark and persistent woody cone-like female catkins.

HABITAT & SEASON

Riverbanks, wet thickets, pond edges and floodplains. Season: Year-round wood; leaves growing season

DOCUMENTED USE

Straight stems for wattle, racks and light poles. Seasoned alder gives even heat and is commonly used for smoking.

CAUTION

Wet alder smokes heavily. Dense thickets can hide unstable banks and animal trails.

LOOK-ALIKES

Birch bark peels and lacks woody cone-like catkins.

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DOCUMENTED EDIBLE PLANTS

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

CLouDBERRY / BAKEAPPLEDOCUMENTED EDIBLE

Rubus chamaemorus

IDENTIFY
Low unarmed herb with rounded lobed leaves and a single raspberry-like fruit that ripens from red to amber-orange.

HABITAT & SEASON
Peatlands, wet barrens and bog edges. Season: Mid- to late summer

DOCUMENTED USE
Fully ripe amber fruit is a documented and culturally important food.

CAUTION
Unripe red fruit is hard and sour. Harvest lightly and avoid trampling peat hummocks.

LOOK-ALIKES
Dwarf raspberry species may have red fruit and more divided leaves.

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PARTRIDGEBERRY / LINGONBERRYDOCUMENTED EDIBLE

Vaccinium vitis-idaea

IDENTIFY
Low evergreen shrub with leathery oval leaves, pale dotted undersides and bright red berries with a crown.

HABITAT & SEASON
Open spruce forest, barrens, heaths and bog hummocks. Season: Late summer through winter

DOCUMENTED USE
Ripe berries are documented food and often persist after frost.

CAUTION
Confirm evergreen leaves and fruit crown. Avoid berries beside animal scat or contaminated shorelines.

LOOK-ALIKES
Bearberry has netted leaf veins and mealy fruit.

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DOCUMENTED EDIBLE PLANTS

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

LOWBUSH BLUEBERRYDOCUMENTED EDIBLE

Vaccinium angustifolium

IDENTIFY
Low deciduous shrub with fine toothed leaves, green twigs and blue berries with a waxy bloom and crown.

HABITAT & SEASON
Burns, open barrens, rocky forest and dry peat edges. Season: Late summer

DOCUMENTED USE
Ripe berries are documented food and can be eaten fresh, cooked or dried.

CAUTION
Black bears feed heavily in berry patches. Maintain visibility and do not monopolize fruit.

LOOK-ALIKES
Bog blueberry has rounder blue-green leaves and wetter habitat.

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CROWBERRYDOCUMENTED EDIBLE

Empetrum nigrum

IDENTIFY
Creeping evergreen mat with tiny grooved needle-like leaves and shiny black berries along the stems.

HABITAT & SEASON
Exposed barrens, coastal heaths, bog margins and rocky ground. Season: Late summer through winter

DOCUMENTED USE
Ripe berries are documented food, mild and water-rich.

CAUTION
Low fruit is easily contaminated. Confirm creeping stems and tiny leaves.

LOOK-ALIKES
Juniper has sharp needles in whorls and blue waxy cones.

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DOCUMENTED EDIBLE PLANTS

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

SMALL CRANBERRY

DOCUMENTED EDIBLE

Vaccinium oxycoccos

IDENTIFY

Very slender trailing stems over sphagnum, tiny evergreen leaves pale beneath and red berries on fine curved stalks.

HABITAT & SEASON

Open bogs and sphagnum mats. Season: Fall through spring

DOCUMENTED USE

Ripe berries are documented food and often improve after frost.

CAUTION

Bog travel can be hazardous. Fruit yield is low; avoid damaging the moss mat.

LOOK-ALIKES

Lingonberry is a more upright woody shrub with larger leaves.

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FIREWEED

DOCUMENTED EDIBLE

Chamerion angustifolium

IDENTIFY

Tall colonies with narrow leaves, magenta four-petaled flowers and long seed capsules with silky fluff.

HABITAT & SEASON

Burns, river gravel, old camps and disturbed ground. Season: Young shoots spring; flowers summer

DOCUMENTED USE

Young shoots and leaves have documented food use after correct identification and cooking. Dry stems yield light fiber and tinder.

CAUTION

Older stems become tough. Early shoots can resemble other herbs before leaves expand.

LOOK-ALIKES

Purple loosestrife has opposite leaves and dense spikes of smaller flowers.

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TOXIC PLANTS - AVOID

High-consequence species to recognize before any gathering begins.

SPOTTED WATER HEMLOCK

TOXIC - AVOID

Cicuta maculata

IDENTIFY

Wetland perennial with divided leaves, white umbrella flower clusters and thick chambered roots.

HABITAT & SEASON

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

DOCUMENTED USE

No use. Do not harvest wetland roots.

CAUTION

Extremely poisonous; roots are especially dangerous and can cause seizures and death.

LOOK-ALIKES

Angelica and other carrot-family plants can look similar. Never taste to decide.

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RED BANEERRY

TOXIC - AVOID

Actaea rubra

IDENTIFY

Woodland herb with divided leaves, small white flower clusters and glossy red berries on stout stalks.

HABITAT & SEASON

Rich moist forest and streambanks. Season: Fruit late summer

DOCUMENTED USE

No food use.

CAUTION

Berries and roots are poisonous and can cause severe gastrointestinal and cardiovascular effects.

LOOK-ALIKES

Red huckleberry is a woody shrub with simple leaves, not a divided-leaved herb.

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TOXIC PLANTS - AVOID

High-consequence species to recognize before any gathering begins.

BOG LAUREL

TOXIC - AVOID

Kalmia polifolia

IDENTIFY

Low evergreen shrub with opposite narrow leathery leaves and bright pink saucer-shaped flowers.

HABITAT & SEASON

Bogs, peatlands and wet heaths. Season: Flowers early summer

DOCUMENTED USE

No food or tea use.

CAUTION

Contains grayanotoxins; ingestion can cause vomiting, weakness, low blood pressure and heart effects.

LOOK-ALIKES

Labrador tea has alternate leaves rusty beneath and white flower clusters.

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BOG ROSEMARY

TOXIC - AVOID

Andromeda polifolia

IDENTIFY

Low evergreen bog shrub with narrow rolled-edge leaves pale beneath and small pink urn-shaped flowers.

HABITAT & SEASON

Sphagnum bogs and peat hummocks. Season: Year-round leaves

DOCUMENTED USE

No food or tea use.

CAUTION

Contains grayanotoxin-type compounds and may cause serious illness.

LOOK-ALIKES

Labrador tea leaves are broader and rusty-woolly beneath.

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TRADITIONAL-USE PLANTS

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

LABRADOR TEA

TRADITIONAL-USE

Rhododendron groenlandicum

IDENTIFY

Evergreen shrub with narrow rolled-edge leaves densely rusty-woolly below and clusters of white flowers.

HABITAT & SEASON

Muskeg, bog edges and wet spruce forest. Season: Year-round leaves

DOCUMENTED USE

A culturally important documented beverage and traditional-use plant.

CAUTION

Strong or repeated infusions can cause illness. Bog rosemary and bog laurel are dangerous look-alikes.

LOOK-ALIKES

Bog rosemary is pale beneath; bog laurel has opposite leaves and pink open flowers.

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YARROW

TRADITIONAL-USE

Achillea millefolium

IDENTIFY

Aromatic finely divided leaves and flat white to pink flower clusters.

HABITAT & SEASON

Dry barrens, river gravel, trails and disturbed ground. Season: Summer through fall

DOCUMENTED USE

Published traditional uses include external washes and aromatic preparations; dry tops can be light tinder.

CAUTION

Possible allergy, pregnancy and anticoagulant concerns. Clean wound care is still required.

LOOK-ALIKES

Poison hemlock is taller with hollow spotted stems and umbrella flower clusters.

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TRADITIONAL-USE PLANTS

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

COMMON JUNIPER

TRADITIONAL-USE

Juniperus communis var. depressa

IDENTIFY

Low evergreen shrub with stiff sharp needles in whorls of three and blue-black berry-like cones.

HABITAT & SEASON

Dry barrens, rocky slopes and open woodland. Season: Cones late summer through winter

DOCUMENTED USE

Small amounts of mature cones have documented culinary and traditional uses; resinous twigs can scent smoke.

CAUTION

Not for pregnancy, kidney disease or unsupervised medicinal use. Concentrated oils are unsafe.

LOOK-ALIKES

Crowberry has softer tiny leaves pressed to creeping stems and glossy black fruit.

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GOLDTHREAD

TRADITIONAL-USE

Coptis trifolia

IDENTIFY

Tiny evergreen three-part leaves close to the ground, slender white star-like flowers and bright yellow thread-like rhizomes.

HABITAT & SEASON

Cool mossy spruce-fir forest and rotting wood. Season: Spring through fall

DOCUMENTED USE

A documented Indigenous medicinal plant, especially associated with bitter yellow rhizomes.

CAUTION

Do not dig or self-dose. Concentrated berberine-type alkaloids can interact with medications and pregnancy, and harvest damages slow-growing colonies.

LOOK-ALIKES

Threeleaf goldthread is smaller than clover and remains evergreen; flowers and yellow rhizomes confirm identity.

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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	Black spruce, White spruce, Balsam fir	Windthrow, fire, protected slow-growing plants
Moist forest / sheltered valley	Paper birch, Tamarack, Speckled alder	Look-alikes, falling timber, poor visibility
Wetland / peat / stream edge	Spotted water hemlock, Red baneberry	Water hemlock or toxic bog shrubs; unstable ground
Open disturbance / camp edge	Cloudberry / bakeapple, Partridgeberry / lingonberry, Lowbush blueberry, Crowberry	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
Spotted water hemlock	Wetland perennial with divided leaves, white umbrella flower clusters and thick chambered roots.	Extremely poisonous; roots are especially dangerous and can cause seizures and death.
Red baneberry	Woodland herb with divided leaves, small white flower clusters and glossy red berries on stout stalks.	Berries and roots are poisonous and can cause severe gastrointestinal and cardiovascular effects.
Bog laurel	Low evergreen shrub with opposite narrow leathery leaves and bright pink saucer-shaped flowers.	Contains grayanotoxins; ingestion can cause vomiting, weakness, low blood pressure and heart effects.
Bog rosemary	Low evergreen bog shrub with narrow rolled-edge leaves pale beneath and small pink urn-shaped flowers.	Contains grayanotoxin-type compounds and may cause serious illness.

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. Digital Flora of Newfoundland and Labrador

Memorial University and regional botanical collaborators - regional scientific flora

<https://newfoundland-labradorflora.ca/>

2. Newfoundland and Labrador native-plant education resources

Memorial University Botanical Garden - regional education

<https://www.mun.ca/botanicalgarden/>

3. Flora of North America North of Mexico

Flora of North America Association - scientific flora

http://floranorthamerica.org/Main_Page

4. Aboriginal Plant Use in Canada's Northwest Boreal Forest

Marles, Clavelle, Monteleone, Tays and Burns; Canadian Forest Service - ethnobotany

<https://publications.gc.ca/site/eng/9.611374/publication.html>

5. Canadian Poisonous Plants Information System and poison-safety resources

Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada / Canadian poison centres - poison safety

<https://infopoison.ca/>

6. Plants of the World Online

Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew - taxonomy and distribution

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

INDEPENDENT PUBLICATION NOTICE

This guide is an independent educational reference and is not affiliated with HISTORY, the Alone television series, local Indigenous governments or protected-area authorities. Traditional-use notes summarize published sources and do not transfer cultural authority. Local knowledge holders, current regulations and qualified medical or botanical professionals take precedence.