

*Polystichum munitum*

[Synonyms : *Aspidium munitum*, *Aspidium munitum* var. *incisoserratum*, *Polystichum munitum* var. *incisoserratum*]

**WESTERN SWORDFERN** is an evergreen fern. Native to western North America it has long, narrowly sword-shaped, glossy dark green fronds.

It is also known as American sword fern, Christmas fern, Giant holly fern, Pacific coast sword fern, Pineland sword fern, Sword fern, and Sword holly fern.

*Munitum* is derived from Latin *munitio* (fortify) meaning ‘armed, fortified’ with reference to the toothed and sharply edged leaflets.

Several North American Indian tribes included the fern (boiled or steamed) in their diet. Some of the Klallam tribe ate the cooked base leaves, and Makah Indians used the fern’s leaves as a flavouring during cooking. But it was the cooked underground stem that was most favoured including by the Makah, Nitinaht, Quileute, Quinault, some of the Kwakiutl, the Thompson and Klallam tribes.

The fronds were used to line the cooking pits of many tribes including the Chehalis, Makah, Nitinaht, Thompson, Quileute, Pomo, Cowlitz, some of the Kwakiutl, the Oweekeno and Quinault. They also served as mats for various purposes. Hesquiat Indians used frond mats to keep food clean and off the ground, the Nitinaht tribe used them as place settings at feasts, Oweekeno Indians favoured them as fish cleaning mats, and the Squaxin and some of the Salish tribe both put frond matting on their berry drying racks.

Records show that some of the Salish tribe spread large fronds on their floors, while Hesquiat, Yurok, Quileute and Cowlitz Indians used the fronds for mattresses – the latter tied them in bunches with maple bark (*Acer*).

The plant played a role in some of the Indian ceremonial ritual. Male Oweekeno tsaika dancers made their ‘hula hula skirts’ with them, and members of the Hesquiat tribe wore long straight fronds as head dresses when visiting somewhere special. Fronds were used in the Saanich initiation dances, while during the Kwakiutl ritual calling of the north west wind the plant was used to charm it. Paiute graves were often planted with the fern. Then there were various associated superstitions. In the Thompson tribe before fishing for sturgeon (or whaling) fishermen rubbed their hands with the plant for luck, and fronds were placed under a young girl’s bed in the Kwakiutl tribe so that she would have as many children as there were plants.

At play fronds also featured in adult games in the Nitinaht and Karok tribes – and in children’s games among the Paiute, Klallam and Makah Indians.

Quinault Indians used a root decoction when washing their hair to counter dandruff.

Authorities have also noted a few tribes that have valued western swordfern as a source of medicine. Pregnant women in the Lummi tribe chewed its leaves to ease childbirth, and Hesquiat women chewed young shoots to treat cancer of the womb. For Swinomish Indians the fresh plant was eaten to ease sore throats. Then both the Quileute and Cowlitz tribes applied the fern to various skin problems, and the Quinault Indians put it on burns.

The edible peeled underground stem (said to have a banana-like taste, *Musa acuminata*), and the young fronds too, have been eaten locally.

Records indicate that in its native habitat the fern offers food for elk, deer generally, black bear and in some places the sewellel or mountain beaver.

Western swordfern has not only been cultivated as an ornamental plant but has also been picked by flower arrangers.