

Psoralea esculenta

[Synonyms : *Pediomelum esculentum*]

PRAIRIE APPLE is a perennial. Native to South Africa and North America it has small purplish-blue flowers.

It is also known as Breadroot, Common breadroot, Cree potato, Indian breadroot, Indian turnip, Missouri breadnut, *Nugthe* (Omaha and Ponca North American Indian), *Patsuroka* (Pawnee North American Indian), Prairie potato, Prairie turnip, *Tdokewihi* (Winnebago North American Indian), *Tipsi* (Dakota North American Indian), Tipsin, Tipsinna, and Wild turnip.

Esculenta is Latin (eatable).

It was not an unusual sight in the North American Blackfoot Indian tribe to see members of it using pieces of the dried root to decorate their clothing.

The roots were eaten both by local North American Indian tribes for whom it formed a significant part of the diet and in due time the early European settlers. Records show that the Dakota, Pawnee, Blackfoot, Winnebago, Ponca, Omaha and Cheyenne Indians all ate the peeled fresh roots cooked or uncooked – and that they and the Montana Indian tribe dried and stored them for Winter food as well. For some of the Dakota and also for the Montana Indian, Cheyenne and Omaha tribes the dried and powdered plant provided a thickening agent for soups and other dishes. The Montana Indian tribe roasted the roots as a vegetable and the Cheyenne made slices of dried plant into a pudding by boiling them and adding a sweetener.

The importance of this food source to the local Indian communities is evident in the many references to prairie apple in their mythology and rituals. Apparently the above ground part of the plant breaks off soon after maturity to be blown away so that the seeds can be scattered. The roots are then difficult if not impossible to locate. Thus women and children had to dig them up before the upper parts of the plant had dispersed. They are said to have observed the direction in which the branches pointed (presumably that of the prevailing wind) as an indication of where roots of already matured plants might still be retrieved from the earth.

This root was also eaten by settlers (who no doubt learnt of it from the Indians from whom they often bought it) and records show that John Colter (1773?-1843) (a member of the 1804-1806 Lewis and Clark Expedition that explored the then unknown lands west of the Mississippi and crossed the Rocky Mountains in western North America) claims that he survived by eating it on an occasion when he escaped from capture by some unfriendly Indians. (Suggestions have been made in the past that the plant should be developed for commercial cultivation as a modern food crop.)