

# Teacher trees



Photo Ellie Gkatzimas

## By Toris Jaeger and Holly Grossman

At the Orinda Nature Area we aim to illuminate the sacred gifts of nature. Let's dive into the glorious lives of trees and explore how they are our wise elders. Herman Hesse said, "Trees are sanctuaries. Whoever knows how to speak to them, whoever knows how to listen to them, can learn the truth."

Trees are gentle giants that surround us, with gentle arms above us. They provide us with oxygen and absorb the greenhouse gasses around us. In our area we can see them budding in delight of the spring weather. Have you no-

ticed the trees where you live? Are they evergreen or deciduous? Trees that are evergreen are green in the fall and winter months. Trees that are deciduous lose their leaves in the late fall and winter, and are bare during winter.

Additionally, there is a magical life-force amongst trees that may surprise you. Did you know that trees are social beings? In the forest they care for each other and nourish unhealthy trees back to health. They communicate and share resources through chemicals given off by their leaves and branches, and also through a complex network of soil fungi known as mycelium connecting one plant to another. Through the mycelium an enormous amount of information and goods is transferred to benefit the health of the collective trees in a forest. In this way, the trees teach us the importance of our interconnectedness as a means to a thriving community.

Trees provide us with life sustaining food and medicine, and teach us that everything we need is provided by Mother Nature. Let's look at some of the native trees in our area and learn about their sacred qualities.

We have Black Oak, Valley Oak, and Live Oak. Oak is highly valued in the timber industry for its strength, resilience and its beauty. But, it's also important to keep these trees alive!

Different parts of the oak tree (acorns, leaves, bark, roots) have been used throughout time to treat ailments such as diarrhea, alleviating respiratory illnesses, and relieving hemorrhoids. Perhaps the most obvious use of the Oak tree is the acorns. The beautiful fruit and seed of the Oak beckons us to claim it for our own use and sustenance. Acorns can be used in place of nuts and cornmeal in many recipes. With acorns you can make pancakes, pasta, bread, dumplings, muffins, soups ... the list goes on. Check out the Ohlone Cafe in Berkeley to see and taste all the delicious ways they use acorns.

Bay Laurel is another tree in abundance in our area, and has many medicinal qualities: supports digestive tract functions, reduces flatulence, soothes urinary tract infections, dental infections, and sore throats, and offers antiseptic and bactericidal properties. Emotionally, it is known to alleviate anxiety, hypersensitivity, and lack of self-esteem. Good tip for the kitchen: flies are generally repelled by the odor of Laurel leaves!

Next, let's look at Elderberry, which has been known as the magic tree of life. It is extremely versatile as well as fast growing. It is a true gift to us all, packed with vitamins, flavonoids, anti-oxidants, rutin and tannins, and we often walk right by it without even noticing it is there.

Not only are elderberry flowers delicious additions to recipes, they also are useful for reducing fevers, upset stomachs, boosting the immune system, mitigating itchy skin and improving the complexion, and treating inflammation of appendix and kidney. Natives used the whole plant, including its bark and roots, for things like reducing pain and swelling from bee stings. The wood is also highly versatile. The natives made instruments, fire drills, weapons, toys, combs, and building materials out of elderberry wood. We find elderberry in natural healing remedies on our grocery store shelves, and the berries are used in jams and pies.

The most sacred tree is the Redwood. Our Native Peoples believed it to be so, and cutting down a redwood was an act of violence. If one embraces the Redwood, it will heal you and give you a giving nature. The Natives knew that no one of us is the center of the universe, and felt a deep kinship with the Redwood. I encourage you to dive deeper into the Redwood by reading a collection of essays in, "The Once and Future Forest: California's Iconic Redwoods." This book was put out by Save the Redwoods League on its 100th anniversary.

For more learning on the wisdom of trees, check out the work of Peter Wohlleben in his book, "The Hidden Life of Trees."

*"For in the true nature of things, if we rightly consider, every green tree is far more glorious than if it were made of gold and silver." ~ Martin Luther*