

Sweetgrass

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So I learned something new the other day. No it wasn't how to tie my shoes. That was last week and thanks for jumping to conclusions. No what I learned was a lot about a plant I was not familiar with until asked: Sweetgrass. Native to North America, it doesn't grow much further south than Nebraska but stretches from New England to the Pacific northwest and well north into Canada. It also goes by many common names like manna's, Mary's, vanilla, and bison grass - the last one surprisingly used by Polish vodka makers. It's scientific genus name of *Hierochloa* means "holy grass" and *odorata* translates to "fragrant" from Greek and Latin.

There are two main varieties of sweetgrass, one that can be harvested one, maybe two times a year, and another than has naturally occurring multiple sets of matched chromosomes that grows faster and can be harvested up to five times per year. It's a shorter grass growing no taller than 8" on floppy leaves, and has a hard time handling full sun and droughty conditions. When it flowers in mid- to late summer a sweet vanilla-like scent helps identify the plants.



The holy grass name harkens to the many ceremonial uses of the grass by Native Americans. Over the years it was also discovered sweetgrass could also be used for medicinal, weaving, and craft work. With very few exceptions the grass must be completely dried after harvest before rehydrating it or using it in its dry state.

Something unique about sweetgrass is once ignited it will only smolder without flame. This trait undoubtedly helped elevate its use for ceremonial needs. Either dry or when smoldering, sweetgrass gives off a pleasing scent, which is believed to do the same for the spirit world. As such, it is often burned at the beginnings of prayers and ceremonies. Kept dry, sweetgrass was sometimes braided into the hair of young men along with a couple of braids worn around their necks.

Incorporating sweetgrass into baskets strengthens the baskets and adds a pleasing scent if the grass was harvested before the first frost of the year. For sweetgrass to be used in weaving, it must first be rehydrated, often then woven into strands, possibly re-dried, and only then crafted into the finished product.

But arguably the main use of sweetgrass was as a medicinal to the point that along with sage, tobacco, and cedar made up the "four sacred medicines," a grouping of plants that held across many Native tribes. Teas with sweetgrass in it was used for a wide variety of illnesses and would often be carried by medicine men along with other well known medicinal herbs and roots.

Sweetgrass is notoriously hard to start from seed and therefore is more likely to be propagated by root cuttings or plugs taken from established plants. However, there has been some recent, semi-clinical experimentations done by modern day growers to propagate sweetgrass from seed. Does it work? Well, I'm about to find out as the period of vernalization (prolonged cooling of seeds to help with germination) for 250 seeds will be finished later this week. Once out of the refrigerator they'll go into potting mix and with steady warmth and moisture we'll hopefully have sweetgrass sprouting in a month or two. I will let you know how it goes.

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