

## PLANTS OF THE NUNAVUT ARCTIC

When living in the southern Canada, we tend to think of the Canadian arctic as cold, desolate, bare and no colourful grounds. It is other way around. During the summers, the flowers, native to Nunavut are blooming, just on the surface of sand or soil, the root plants are also in bloom, the arctic cotton is blooming in the early fall, different kinds of leave plants are in bloom. The colours of the blooms are in pink, red, purple, white, beige, yellow, green and brown. The flowers and leaves are close to the ground and grow hardily on top of the mud, soil and sand. There are few kinds of berries that are hardly enough to grow in Nunavut, bearberries, blueberries and crowberries. Along the shores of the ocean also, there is so much life, besides small baby cod and sculpins that children look for during the summers, for something to do, there are several kinds of seaweed, different plants that grow on along the sea ocean shores. There are also a few kinds of moss, the soil is black and rich and so many other plants, too numerous to name.

When out walking with my mom during the Summer, I ate so many plants as we walked for miles and mile. My favourite was the leaves, green leaves so delicate and almost sweet. I think this could be the reason why I love green salads while living in the south. I ate them, even to the point of my mom asking me not to eat anymore, so that I would not get bloated. Another favourite for the Inuit is what's called 'eskimo carrot'. It's has a long root is subtly sweet, hearty meat. They are easy to spot when out walking, they have about a 4 inches long stem with brilliant yellow flowers on the top. Nowadays, when so easy to pick and take home, the ladies fry the carrots and eat them that way. However, the tradition is to pick them and eat them on the spot. The carrots grow all over the tundra, no specific area and they are a very nutritious 'pick me up' kind of food.

Another favourite is the berries. These berries grow in certain spots of the tundra, one has to go looking for the spots or they may have a spot they go to every summer to pick the berries. The women and children go in groups or just a couple of women with the children go for their day walks to pick berries, make tea out on the land and enjoy the summer. The children love the berries and the adults too but quite often saved for the children to eat. The crowberries where they are abundant in certain areas of Nunavut are picked, put in ice cream containers and frozen for the winter use. The blueberries in the arctic a few and they can only grow as big as size of a raw barley kernel. These are only picked and eaten on the spot as they are so tiny and not abundant in the arctic. I am talking Nunavut tundra, not the Northwest Territories or Nunavut below the arctic circle area. Below the arctic circle in Nunavut, there are many more kinds of plants that grow that do not and cannot grow inside the arctic circle.

The Heather plant is so important to the Inuit. Heather grows about 2 inches high from the ground, the heather is not eaten but used for making fire when out on the land. Also we used to use heather as insulation between the beddings and the snow in igloos, it was used for insulation in small cabins. Nowadays, it is used for making fire. The children, women and families pick lots of heather and gather them in a pile. They find a

big rock, then place 2 small rocks side by side with about 6 inches space in between, the heather is placed in the middle, light it and a kettle with water is placed over the rocks to make tea out on the land. The heather is green in early spring, the green heather is not used for making fire, it has too much moisture to light. As the heather matures, they turn brown, brown heather is only used in making fire. However, during the early spring, they use 'last years dead heather' to make fire which is already on the tundra.

Arctic Cotton plant is another plant that had been so important to the Inuit traditional way of life in the past. Arctic cotton plant grows in the marshy areas and even in small ponds, they are not always easy to collect. The Inuit women used to collect arctic cotton to use for wick in the seal oil lamps called qullik. The lamp is half moon shape, made of soapstone, the middle is carved in to hold seal blubber oil, then the arctic cotton is place on one edge to use as wick. The cotton burns slowly and not smoky, the lady tends to the lamp with a stick to maneuver around the edge of the lamp. The seal oil lamp is left on 24/7 in the igloo. It's kept the snow houses warm and used for boiling water or for slowing cooking fish or red meats. It was used also for making Bannock. When I light qullik when living in the south, I use cotton artificial kind bought in drugstores, saturate it in canola oil and it burns similar to the arctic cotton and blubber. The Inuit do not use qullik anymore in their houses, when out camping, they might use qullik but for remembering olden times only. The children still pick arctic cotton nowadays to give to their mothers or place them in a vase for decoration.

The arctic is not desolate during the Spring and Summer. The land is full of life with blooming of the plants and flowers, birds arriving from the south to nest in the arctic, people going outside and going out on the land and the children looking forward to be spending a lot of time outdoors.