

The Native Plants of Mission San Antonio

and how they were used by the Salinan People

The San Antonio Valley, also known as the Valley of the Oaks, is found in the Santa Lucia Mountains. The Salinan people, who called the area where Mission San Antonio is located *Jolon* (or *Xolon*), have lived in the Valley of Oaks for thousands of years.

The Salinans were hunters and gatherers, living in harmony with the natural environment, and using many of the native plants for a variety of purposes. The Salinans carefully managed the natural environment, including the use of fire to benefit certain plants (like oaks and grasses) and to limit others.

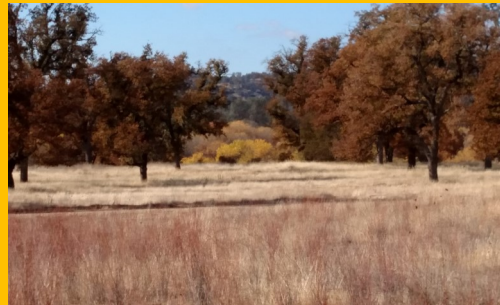
The Valley of the Oaks and its adjacent mountains have a diverse mosaic of different plant communities interspersed with one another. The parklike valley floor is carpeted with large, stately oaks and prairie. A lush growth of cottonwoods, willows and sycamores hugs the banks of the rivers and creeks. Wetlands with bulrushes and sedges were scattered throughout the valley. Mixed oak and pine woodland inhabit the foothills and mountains on both sides of the valley. A chaparral community of scrub oaks, ceanothus, chamise, toyon, sagebrush and manzanita is found on the drier foothill slopes.

The plants on this brochure are just a sampling of the many plants utilized by the Salinan people. Many of these plants can be seen on the mission grounds, including in the garden. **Note: Please consult with local experts in botany or ethnobotany before consuming any wild plants for food or medicinal purposes!**

Oaks



Since the time of the Spanish this valley has been known for *Los Robles*, which is Spanish for deciduous oak trees. The blue oaks, white oaks, and Jolon oaks are all deciduous, losing their leaves every fall, and growing new leaves in the spring. Evergreen live oaks (*encina* in Spanish) and smaller scrub oaks were common in the foothills, canyons and mountains. The acorns (seeds) of oaks were a major food resource for the Salinan people.



Acorn porridge

Acorns were harvested in the fall. The acorns would be cracked open to remove outer "shell" and the inner part of the acorn would be harvested. This inner part would be ground in a stone mortar. The resulting acorn "flour" would be leached many times with water to remove the tannic acids. It was leached until it lost its bitter flavor. The flour and water now formed a mush, which was cooked in a basket with hot rocks.

Grasses

Various native species of bunch grasses are perennial and were the dominant plants in native grasslands in California until they were replaced by non-native European annual grasses. Deer Grass (*Muhlenbergia rigens*) is a large native bunch grass. Deer Grass is found near wetlands and creeks, even ephemeral "dry" creeks. It forms a "fountain" of grass blades about three feet high and has flower/seed stalks that are two feet above that.



Another common bunch grass is needle grass (*Stipa*), which is found on slopes in the chaparral, and in oak woodlands. There are several species of *Stipa* that are very common in Central California, including foothill needle grass, nodding needle grass and purple needle grass. Purple needle grass is the state grass of California.

Related to the grasses are the sedges, rushes, and cattails, which are largely found in the originally extensive wetlands in the Valley. The bulrush, also called "tule," was used along with cattails to make bolsas, or tule boats.

The Salinans were very talented basket weavers, and they used baskets for many purposes. Deer grass was used by the Salinan people for making baskets, along with other plants such as willows (*Salix*), sumac (*Rhus* or *Malosma*), bracken ferns (*Pteridium*), sedges (*Carex*) and rushes (*Juncus*).



Sages

There are several species of sage (*Salvia*) in California. Purple Sage (*Salvia leucophylla*) is found on the coastal side of the Santa Lucias and in Carmel Valley. Purple sage was used as a cure for insomnia. Chia (*Salvia columbariae*), an annual, and Creeping Sage (*Salvia sonomensis*), a low growing perennial, are common throughout Salinan territory.



White Sage (*Salvia apiana*), found more commonly in the southern portion of Salinan lands (San Luis Obispo County), was burnt as a form of incense in ancient Salinan ceremonies.

Elderberry

Elderberry (*Sambucus mexicana*) had a variety of uses. Berries were used for dyes in basketry, and are high in Vitamin C. Berries are toxic when fresh but are edible after cooking. Flowers were used in a tea to treat colds. The stems were used to make a tea to treat fever. The wood was used for clapper sticks and flutes, which were the musical instruments played during tribal gatherings.



California Lilac

California Lilac (*Ceanothus*) are common plants in the chaparral and woodland communities. These plants flower profusely during the spring. Hairy ceanothus (*Ceanothus oliganthus*) and Chaparral Whitethorn (*Ceanothus leucodermis*) have blue flowers. Buckbrush (*Ceanothus cuneatus*) has cream colored flowers. Ceanothus leaves were boiled to make tea, and it was used medicinally during childbirth and as a relief for rheumatism.



Buckwheat

Buckwheat are low growing woody bushes found in the chaparral community and are very common in the foothills of the San Antonio Valley. The Salinan people used the dried leaves to make tea, to treat headaches, stomach pain and heart problems.



Miners Lettuce

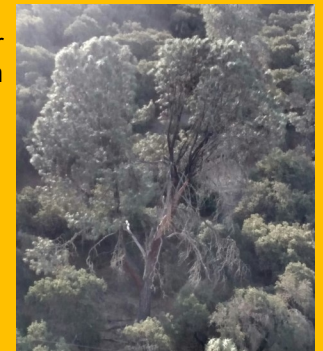
Miners lettuce (*Claytonia perfoliata*) is an annual plant which grows and flowers in the spring. Native people eat this plant fresh. Its common name stems from the fact that hungry miners ate it during the gold rush.



Gray Pines

The most common conifer in the foothills and on the valley floor is the gray pine. The gray pines are known for their large cones, which can weigh as much as two pounds.

The seeds can be eaten uncooked after being harvested from the cones. The seeds were also roasted whole. Like the oak acorns, the seeds were ground up with a stone mortar and pestle and made into a flour. The flour was used



to make a bread and was also used in a soup. The wood of the gray pine was used as firewood and the pine sap was used for medicinal purposes.

Brochure created by the Friends of Historic San Antonio Mission, Jolon, California
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