

## Native plants kept Cahuilla people healthy



Native plants and the ways they helped keep the Cahuilla people healthy proved to be a popular subject for Thursday's Brown Bag Lecture. The Hi-Desert Nature Museum was packed for the lecture given by anthropology professor Leslie Mouriquand M.A., RPA.

Mouriquand focused on the dietary and medicinal uses of the mesquite, pinyon pine and chia.

Mouriquand became interested in the uses of native plants in part when she was diagnosed with Type 2 diabetes.

Lecture attendees sample a dip made with ground nettles and yucca blossoms. Phyllis Schwartz described it as, "a fascinating flavor; intensely herbal."

"The number one illness suffered by native Americans is Type 2 diabetes. A return to using native plants by tribal el-

ders is helping with their health issues, making a link with their past and helping to preserve their culture. I have been using native plants myself and I no longer test as a diabetic," Mouriquand said.

Mesquite is a particularly useful plant. Medicinally, mesquite is a blood sugar stabilizer and is used to treat anemia and help with weight control. It works as an anti-fungal, anti-bacterial and anti-microbial. It makes a great eye and skin wash to treat sores and ulcers. The flowers have a very sweet sap used to make sweet treats for Cahuilla children, seed pods are pounded into a flour, the seeds are very tough and require grinding to be useful.

"Don't try eating mesquite seeds or you will break your teeth," Mouriquand warned.

The local Cahuilla people were primarily hunter/gatherers with some limited horticulture. They sometimes helped maintain wild plants with pruning, irrigating and weeding but did not plant crops of mesquite. The lecture was held in conjunction with the "Seaweed, Salmon, and Manzanita Cider – A California Indian Feast," exhibit at the museum.

The exhibit includes recipes for salmon cooked on a redwood sticks, chia lemonade, toasted chia candy, rose hip or elderberry syrup, venison acorn casserole, pine nut soup and rabbit liver with watercress. The recipes are on tear-sheets so people can take them home to try. The exhibit is up through Feb. 28.

native people were experts in the seasonality of their crops.

“Each season brings a different resource to be used,” Mouriquand explained. “They had to know how and when to gather food, how to process it and how to store it. They would weave large granary baskets and elevate them above the ground to keep vermin. Native Americans had gender-based specializations. I think of the women as ethno-botanists who knew a great deal about local plants and the men were more like ethno-zoologists with a great deal of knowledge about local animals.”

The mesquite plant is also very important to the coyote. In the summer months mesquite makes up about 75 percent of the animal’s diet.

Pinion trees provide nuts and a very useful sap.

“I’ve been experimenting with the sap a lot. It has a fantastic smell. It is also an anti-fungal, anti-bacterial and anti-microbial and you can find soap made from pinyon pine sap. Hunters used to use it to mask their human smell to make hunting easier,” Mouriquand explained.

The chia seed is also called the “super seed,” it is high in protein and has more Omega 3 fatty acids than salmon. The Cahuilla made porridge, pancakes and beverages from them.

Mouriquand made mesquite, pinyon pine nut and chia seed cookies and making nettle and yucca blossom dip. After the lecture concluded attendees were able to sample the ancient fare. Phyllis Schwartz described the flavors.

“The cookies are sweet, crunchy yet light, and the nettle and yucca blossom dip has a fascinating flavor; intensely herbal.”