



Ancient plant use lecture covers history's harvest

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YUCCA VALLEY — American Indian plant use was the subject of the “Ancient Abundance” lecture at the Hi-Desert Nature Museum Thursday afternoon.

Presenter Michelle Hedgecock is a cultural and natural science educator with Caliso Learning in Palm Desert. She invited her audience to touch, taste, sniff, and play with

familiar plants to appreciate their place in the Mojave Desert’s Cahuilla tribal world long ago.

“There is a trend to go back to traditional lifestyles and discover the uses of these native plants,” Hedgecock told her audience.



The fronds of the native California sand palm had many uses for the native people and animals. Hooded Orioles still use the stringy filaments that wisp between the sections to make their hanging nests on the underside of the fans.

“The palms need a permanent source of water close to the surface, so these signify an oasis is present,”

Hedgecock said. “You can dig one foot down and hit moist soil, maybe even have water flowing out.”

The palm has clusters of tiny nutritious dates at the top, but also large, wicked thorns edging the frond stems. These thorns are vestiges from the days when mastodons and sloths liked to eat the woody fronds, so people had to be clever and

“This was a funky little find,” laughs educator Michelle Hedgecock as she shared a container made from the bottom of hollowed-out yucca stalk. The handle is made from animal sinew. “You could hook this to a belt and carry your cellphone.”

persistent to harvest the dates.

It will soon be wildflower season in the desert, and Hedgecock noted that native peoples utilized all of them for their seeds. They were harvested with little racquet-shaped beaters and flat baskets, to be mixed with other grains like wheat and barley or used for flavoring.

Other plants were used for dyes. The indigo bush was not used for its dark blue berries, but for its the leaves and stems. These were crushed and boiled to yield a saffron-hued pigment.

“I’ve heard that the Levi Company in the 1800’s utilized the indigo plant’s roots, and octopus ink, to get the blue dye for their jeans out here,” Hedgecock said.

The tables at the lecture were decorated with vases of flowering native plants.

The creosote bush is the only desert evergreen. The educator noted that some people don’t like its scent, and some of those present agreed. However, many associate the smell with precious desert rain, as moisture releases the resin and the fragrance.

“I use it in a steam bath, because I like the smell, and I’ve used it in place of Vick’s Vapo-Rub because it really opens you up,” Hedgecock declared.

She passed around a bag of “Chaparral Tea” from Desert Hot Springs that was made from the creosote bush. It was labeled as a “pleasant tasting tea,” but with one caution.

“The biggest mistake is to think that tea should have color,” Hedgecock warned. “If you want to clear yourself of toxins, make a strong batch of creosote tea because you won’t be able to keep it down from either end!”

The Cahuilla would use honey mesquite seedpods to sweeten the creosote tea as a general health tonic.



Jane Mootz of Yucca Valley admires a fragrant stalk of Desert sand verbena.
(Rebecca Unger, Hi-Desert Star)

“It’s really the plant of the 21st Century. Drug companies, and the Food and Drug Administration are studying it because it carries the flags that cancer researchers get

excited about,” the plant enthusiast said.

Cahuilla girls were often named for flowers. “A happy little girl who was always smiling would be called Yucca Blossom because her teeth were white and shining,” Hedgecock said. “The boys were usually named after weather events or animals.”

Yucca and agave are different species but their uses were almost identical. The blossoms and fruit were food sources, and the fibers from the leaves were used for rope, nets, blankets, and clothing.

“It was a long, tedious process of soaking and drying to make the fibers strong and useable,” Hedgecock admitted. Another common item in the desert are coyote gourds.

They were used for rattles, or cleaned out and used as bowls or scoopers.

Even with all the show and tell, and a slide show about cacti, the visiting expert apologized to her raptly engaged audience.

“I’m only touching the tip of the iceberg today,” she said in closing.



Ruth McCloud of Yucca Valley samples the tiny, sweet dates of the California sand palm. For the Cahuillas 200 years ago, this would be a great source of food. (Rebecca Unger, Hi-Desert Star)



Agave fibers had several valuable uses to native peoples. Phyllis Lyte of Yucca Valley handles a replica pair of sandals that the ancient Mojave Desert dwellers would have made to protect their feet from the hot sand. (Rebecca Unger, Hi-Desert Star)