

# Berry customs endure tough times

*Warm Springs residents create solutions to keep their traditions alive.*

Liya Davis, 17, of Warm Springs sits at a table quietly and beads a new pair of moccasins. She says her grandma taught her and she's making a beaded outfit for powwow dancing.

Her grandma taught her a lot of things.

"My grandma stores roots, huckleberries, and meats for the winter," she proudly says, "I was taught to dig roots and everything."

Davis may be rare for her generation.

"Most of the kids my age aren't into it. Learning the traditions depends on if their family is traditional," says Davis about huckleberry gathering and other traditions.

She continues to confidently exhibit her knowledge, "Huckleberry gathering is important to our people. It's an Indian tradition where we have a feast and share the huckleberries. It's a tradition my family taught me."

Some are concerned the kids aren't being taught.

Huckleberry gatherer Leah Boise Montiel carries her heirloom cedar root huckleberry basket in the forest near Trout Lake. "There is a lack of teaching and many kids would rather run to McDonald's than go picking," she says.

Some kids are being taught but the tradition is changing, she says. For example, explains Montiel, the younger generation eats out of the basket. The elders don't eat out of the basket. They say it makes you lazy.

On the Warm Springs Reservation tradition is still alive and strong, but there are folks who remember a different time with different reasons to harvest.

One of those people is Frank Smith, director of the Warm Springs Boys and Girls Club. He fears without the necessity of storing for the winter, the four traditional seasons of Warm Springs – spring salmon fishing and root digging, late summer huckleberry gathering, hunting and fishing in the fall and the winter oral tradition of storytelling – may be lost.

Outside near The Boys and Girls Club, Smith points to the hill where he grew up. He remembers not having running water, electricity, and stores.

Smith explains, "The kids today are being taught on a different level. When I was a kid we picked berries and preserved them for the winter. There was no choice, we didn't have Safeway."

Although the necessity to harvest for winter is less than in the old days, Smith stresses the importance of "kids learning that if it weren't for the berries, fish, water and all other things, they would not be here today."

He adds, "It is our responsibility to take care of this sacred way of life. The Creator gave us these things to take care of. It is important the kids identify with themselves, who they are, and where they came from. These traditions are a part of our way of life."

To make sure every child has that opportunity to experience and take part in their culture, Smith started a cultural program at the Boys and Girls Club, where they acknowledge and participate in the four sacred seasons.

## Saving the huckleberry bush

Huckleberries have been an important part of subsistence and tradition for the people of Warm Springs from time immemorial. In reverence to the huckleberry, there is feast, ceremony, and the people make baskets. There is culture and spirituality surrounding huckleberries.

The berries are eaten fresh, canned,



From top, clockwise: Lance Boise shows off a choice huckleberry bush near Trout Lake; close up of the big huckleberry, *Vaccinium membranaceum*; Leah Boise Montiel stands with her cedar root heirloom basket near Trout Lake; above is atwai Ellen Squiemphen collecting berries at High Rock in 1978. The photo of Ellen Squiemphen was taken by Cynthia Stowell, and appears in her book, *Faces of a Reservation*.

jammed, and dried over a small fire. They can be used as a dye, and when the leaves start to turn color, picked for tea. They are considered an important part of the Warm Springs diet, next to water, salmon and roots.

Known to the people as a nutrient source, Montiel believes, "It is a medicine and healer depending on how you are raised. The healing depends on how you pray and how the elders taught you."

Scientific data backs her belief. The huckleberry bush contains high doses of vitamin C and bioflavonoids, which promote formation of connective tissue and strengthen capillaries in the body, working as a natural antihistamine. They are also an antioxidant, a substance known to prevent cancer.

Each year tribal families return to traditional huckleberry spots. Their berry-stained hands patiently pick the scattered deep blue berries.

The people of Warm Springs typically harvest a species known as the big huckleberry, scientific name *Vaccinium membranaceum*. Six types of huckleberries have been documented in the Mount Hood National Forest alone and twelve species exist

in the states of Oregon and Washington.

Up until the early 1900s it was common practice for Native Americans of the Pacific Northwest to manage forests with controlled burns. In this time, huckleberries were abundant and an individual picked 8-10 gallons of berries in a half day.

"But the burns completely stopped around when Smokey the Bear showed up, about 50 years ago," said Evaline Patt, Program Coordinator at the Warm Springs Museum.

Up until March of 2002, Patt was director of the Warm Springs Sustainability Project.

In 1998 the project, funded by the Ford Foundation, began taking measures to preserve huckleberries as a food source for the Indians. Today, temporarily on hold, the project awaits new funding. Tribal grant writer Marsha Williams is looking for a new financial aid, and Patt anticipates new support for the project will be found in the next 3 to 6 months.

For the project, Patt conducted an oral history of huckleberries to try to understand how the resource was managed and if that knowledge could be applied today.

In her research efforts, she was only



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**Evaline Patt**

able to find two elders with memory of controlled burns. She thinks the last burns were between the years of 1917 and 1940.

Controlled burning is less of an option today. The tribal fire department still conducts controlled burns, but very little is performed to stimulate new huckleberry growth.

Although new huckleberry growth could be a fringe benefit of modern day burns, Gary Cooke, Warm Springs Fire Management Officer, says, "It is mostly the wildfires, which burn hotter, that will do that."

*Story and Spilyay photos by Shannon Keaveny*

Off reservation in the national forests, even less, if any, is done specifically for huckleberry growth.

Loggers on the reservation protect existing huckleberry stands by only logging in three feet of snow so bushes aren't damaged by falling trees.

But huckleberry groves continue to dwindle and tribal recognition of a pending loss of heritage is essential.

"In the last 20 years," laments Evaline Patt, "huckleberries have diminished substantially at Mount Hood's traditional picking areas."

The new generation of huckleberry gatherers average a mere gallon per person per half day.

Wolf Camp, a popular huckleberry location for the people of Warm Springs in the 1920's and 1930's and no longer burned, is a different place, she says. Today the trees are large and the huckleberries less plentiful.

In the old days, trees were kept at about 15-20 feet tall in prime picking areas. Now, Patt estimates, trees are double the height. Modern forest management has prioritized trees over huckleberries, she explains, and the huckleberries are being shaded out. Also, other low shrubs like manzanita and snowbrush are taking the place of the berry bushes.

Outside groups picking the berries are also a part of the problem.

Urban families pick berries recreationally on the weekends in the Mount Hood National Forest. But they are unlikely the problem, with a three gallon limit. The Forest Service makes an effort to steer them away from areas important to the Native Americans.

A forest service employee said, "We can't tell them where to go, but we can strongly suggest areas we feel won't encroach on the Natives space."

The groups that have impact on the berry harvest are, most likely, not following these regulations and picking in a manner not conducive to berry reproduction. Berries should be picked one by one, without implements. Commercial groups often cut branches and pull trees, permanently damaging berry producing limbs and consequently next year's harvest.

Patt says, "To pick using any kind of implement destroys the plant and is frowned upon by the tribes."

Outside groups also may be infringing on tribal treaty rights. More often than not, tells Patt, tribal gatherers find their patches bare when they arrive.

She hopes to work out designated areas within the national forest, exclusive to tribal use.

Tribal lawyer Jim Noteboom explained, "Tribal members have a treaty right to harvest up to 50 percent of the huckleberries in all national forests. So it's not an exclusive right we are talking about, but a significant right."

Mount Hood National Forest has taken an active role in aiding the tribes' efforts.

"The Forest service people have been helpful, cooperative and even surprised us at times," says Patt. "These relations have helped make our project a success."

Patt recognizes that less of an interest from the tribes influences the preservation of the plant and the traditional spots they grow. She laments the loss of interest from the younger generation.

"As fewer people go to Mount Hood to pick berries, fewer have an interest or notice its preservation. I have noticed that the community elders keep a more watchful eye on this project and have more interest [than the younger generation] in the tribes' efforts to work with the Mount Hood Forest Service."