

# Stepping Stones

## FIRST NATIONS TRADITIONAL PLANTS AND USES

### Planning your learning journey

*What are traditional plants,  
and how do many First Nations  
people use them?*



JULIA MCDUGALL, 2018.

*An eagle feather, abalone shell, sweetgrass braid,  
and Métis sash.*

### FIRST STEPS



Many Indigenous Peoples share a holistic world view<sup>1</sup> that has humans living in a universe made by the Creator and needing to live in harmony with nature, one another and with oneself. This world view has an interconnectedness and interrelatedness to all aspects of living on this earth. Each Indigenous culture expresses this world view in a different way and with different practices, stories and cultural items.<sup>2</sup> First Nations ceremonies and cultural practices including powwows, sweat lodges, smudging, singing and dancing are expressions of spirituality within this holistic, balanced and harmonious world view.<sup>3</sup>

The traditional ceremonies<sup>4</sup> and medicine wheel<sup>5</sup> teachings common to many plains and western First Nations<sup>6</sup> have been passed down from generation to generation. The medicine wheel provides a teaching and learning tool for maintaining balance and harmony in all aspects of a person's well-being including the physical, mental, emotional and spiritual dimensions.<sup>7</sup> Some sources describe the medicine wheel with its four directions and four corresponding sacred medicines: sweetgrass in the north, tobacco in the east, cedar in the south and sage in the west.<sup>8</sup>

It is important to note that medicine wheel teachings can vary, and those wishing to learn more should consult with local Indigenous Elders, Knowledge Keepers and Cultural Advisors.





## TRADITIONAL PLANTS AND USES



Since time immemorial, Indigenous Peoples have used plants, trees and other natural materials they call sacred medicines<sup>9</sup> to promote healthy living and cure illness, and during ceremonies.<sup>10</sup> The most common sacred medicines used by First Nations in Alberta for ceremonies are tobacco, cedar, sage, sweetgrass and diamond willow fungus. These sacred plants thrive in natural outlying areas such as wetland marshes, along the edges of lakes and rivers, and in uncultivated meadows and pastures. It is important to follow a traditional protocol that pays respect to Mother Earth when harvesting sacred plants; therefore, indiscriminate picking of these plants is disrespectful. Teachings about traditional plants and uses, including traditional protocol, should be guided by local Elders, Knowledge Keepers or Cultural Advisors.



ISTOCK

Braided sweetgrass and sage leaves

**Tobacco** is held as a sacred plant<sup>11</sup> by most First Nations people. When people want an Elder, Knowledge Keeper or Cultural Advisor to give them advice or pray on their behalf, they should first offer the tobacco. Generally tobacco is not smoked except on special ceremonial occasions.

**Cedar** is used for purification and to attract positive energy, feelings, emotions and balance. Traditionally, First Nations people used cedar for its vitamin C content to help prevent scurvy when fruits and vegetables were unavailable during the winter months.

**Sage** is a woman's medicine, conferring strength, wisdom and clarity of purpose. This powerful purifying medicine drives away negative energies. Using sage to smudge is recommended because all people can smudge with sage at anytime. This is particularly important for women who smudge when they are on their moon time (menses). During this time, women can only use sage to smudge.<sup>12</sup>

**Sweetgrass** is used by almost all First Nations people for spiritual cleansing. The braiding of sweetgrass in itself honours the teachings of interconnection between mind, body and spirit. When sweetgrass is walked on, it bends but does not break. Hence, it has been associated with the virtue *kindness*. If someone has suffered an injustice, that injustice can be returned with kindness, as does sweetgrass,<sup>13</sup> by bending and not breaking when walked upon.

**Diamond willow fungus** is also used for ceremonial and medicinal purposes. It can be found in northern Alberta and is dried

before use. It is usually picked in the fall or in the winter by tapping on the frozen fungus until the pieces fall off.<sup>14</sup>

### What is smudging?

Smudging<sup>15</sup> is a cultural practice done by many First Nations to create balance, purify the energies, feelings and thoughts, and connect with the Creator. Today many Métis and Inuit peoples have incorporated smudging into their lives. The forms of smudging vary from Nation to Nation and person to person, but all consider it as a way of cleansing oneself. Smudging has been passed down from generation to generation.

Many schools are creating spaces to offer smudging for students, staff, families and community, as well as providing opportunities for students to experience a smudging ceremony in classrooms and schoolwide events. The following are helpful suggestions when considering smudging in your classrooms or school community:

- First and foremost, seek guidance from a local Elder, Knowledge Keeper, Cultural Advisor or other Indigenous expert.
- Provide background information on the smudging ceremony to staff, students and families in collaboration with a local Indigenous expert, including who will be offering the smudging ceremony.
- Post the time frame in the area and e-mail staff, students and families in advance.
- Explore possible allergic sensitivities for students and staff and consider well-ventilated areas internally and externally.



SOURCE: YUET CHAN

Left to right: Rino Villeneuve, Yvonne Jones, Deborah Lloyd and Patrick Loyer prepare for a smudging ceremony.

## NEXT STEPS



The *Indian Act* and residential school system were attempts to assimilate Indigenous Peoples into the dominant European culture. Under these policies, cultural and spiritual ceremonies were prohibited or discouraged and as a result many Indigenous Peoples lost these traditional cultural practices. The *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada: Calls to Action* (2015) addressed this issue by calling for professional cultural awareness of Indigenous healing practices such as smudging. In 2016, the Government of Canada fully endorsed the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which states “Indigenous peoples have the right to promote, develop and maintain their...distinctive customs, spirituality, traditions, procedures [and] practices...in accordance with international human rights and standards.” The Alberta Professional Practice Standards require teachers to enhance their understanding of First Nations, Métis and Inuit world views and cultural practices to support education for reconciliation. There are many situations in the school setting where teachers will have the opportunity to observe and participate in cultural ceremonies that use traditional plants, and they are encouraged to seek more information about these topics and guidance on appropriate protocol from First Nations, Métis and Inuit Elders, Knowledge Keepers and Cultural Advisors in the school community.

- Expect that students and staff may prefer to observe and learn the teachings provided, rather than participate directly in the smudging ceremony.
- Inquire about existing policies and regulations within your school division, as well as discuss the possibilities with staff dedicated to building facilities.

Providing spaces that promote cultural practices aligns with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada’s Calls to Action and the United Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) and contributes to the reconciliation process.

### Who can conduct the smudge?

The act of clearing the air, mind, spirit and emotions may be accomplished in a variety of ways, but according to many First Nations a smudge is led by a person who has an understanding of what a smudge is and why it is

done. In an educational setting, that person may be an Elder, Knowledge Keeper or Cultural Advisor who has been invited into the school or a staff member, parent or even a student who is knowledgeable about the practice of smudging.

Smudging is personal and always voluntary. People should never be forced or pressured to smudge. It is completely acceptable for a person to indicate that he or she does not want to smudge and that person may choose to stay in the room and refrain or leave the room during a smudge. Respect for all is the guiding principle in any Indigenous practice.<sup>18</sup>



# Continuing Your Learning Journey

- a) How does understanding traditional plants and uses assist educators to build respectful relationships and create inclusive environments?
- b) Why were First Nations spiritual practices illegal at one time, and why are these practices more widely accepted now?
- c) What are your local school board and school policies regarding smudging in an educational setting?

## NOTES

1. A world view is a way of perceiving and conceptualizing everything in existence. The world view of Aboriginal Peoples are distinct from the world views of the mainstream culture of Canada. *Guiding Voices*, Glossary of Terms and Concepts, [www.learnalberta.ca/content/fnmigv/index.html](http://www.learnalberta.ca/content/fnmigv/index.html) (accessed September 27, 2018).
2. Western Canadian Protocol Framework for Aboriginal Language and Culture Programs, Kindergarten to Grade 12 (2000). Glossary, page 131, <https://education.alberta.ca/media/563925/common-curriculum-framework-for-language-and-culture-k-12.pdf> (accessed September 27, 2018).
3. *Aboriginal Spirituality*. The Faith Project. [http://thefaithproject.nfb.ca/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/TFP\\_Aboriginal\\_Dec2014.pdf](http://thefaithproject.nfb.ca/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/TFP_Aboriginal_Dec2014.pdf) (accessed September 27, 2018).
4. To Aboriginal Peoples, ceremony is about community; ceremony is a way to acknowledge the interconnectedness of everything; ceremony is how values and beliefs are taught and reinforced. <http://riic.ca/the-guide/in-the-field/aboriginal-customs-and-protocols/> (accessed September 27, 2018).
5. Nicole Bell, "Teaching by the Medicine Wheel: An Anishinaabe Framework for Indigenous Education," *Education Canada Magazine*, Canadian Educational Network, 54, no 3 (Summer 2014), also available at [www.edcan.ca/articles/teaching-by-the-medicine-wheel/](http://www.edcan.ca/articles/teaching-by-the-medicine-wheel/) (accessed September 27, 2018).
6. Chelsea Crowshoe, *Sacred Ways of Life: Traditional Knowledge*, prepared for the First Nations Centre National Aboriginal Health Organization, 2005, [https://documents.sd61.bc.ca/ANED/educationalResources/Miscellaneous/Sacred\\_Ways\\_of\\_Life\\_Traditional\\_Knowledge.pdf](https://documents.sd61.bc.ca/ANED/educationalResources/Miscellaneous/Sacred_Ways_of_Life_Traditional_Knowledge.pdf) (accessed September 27, 2018).
7. Nicole Bell, "Teaching by the Medicine Wheel: An Anishinaabe Framework for Indigenous Education," *Education Canada Magazine*, Canadian Educational Network, 54, no 3 (Summer 2014), also available at [www.edcan.ca/articles/teaching-by-the-medicine-wheel/](http://www.edcan.ca/articles/teaching-by-the-medicine-wheel/) (accessed September 27, 2018).
8. Canadian Cancer Society, "Aboriginal Traditional Healing," [www.cancer.ca/en/cancer-information/diagnosis-and-treatment/complementary-therapies/aboriginal-traditional-healing/?region=on](http://www.cancer.ca/en/cancer-information/diagnosis-and-treatment/complementary-therapies/aboriginal-traditional-healing/?region=on) (accessed September 27, 2018).
9. "The term *medicine* as it is used by First Nations people does not refer to drugs or herbal remedies. It is used within the context of inner spiritual energy and healing or an enlightened experience often referred to as spiritual energy's." [www.dancingtoeaglespiritsociety.org/medwheel.php](http://www.dancingtoeaglespiritsociety.org/medwheel.php) (accessed September 27, 2018).
10. *Canadian Encyclopedia*, "Indigenous Medicines," (Toronto: Historica Canada, 2006), also available at [www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/native-medicines](http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/native-medicines) (accessed September 27, 2018).
11. Alberta Health Services, *Traditional Use of Tobacco in Aboriginal Cultures*, 2016, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=PKFPBD6k73I&list=PLi1TOF1I5ZoUvse4nEljWZCVG1zk8U8S-&index=14](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PKFPBD6k73I&list=PLi1TOF1I5ZoUvse4nEljWZCVG1zk8U8S-&index=14) (accessed September 27, 2018).
12. Aboriginal Education Directorate Manitoba Education and Advanced Learning, *Smudging Protocol and Guidelines for School Divisions*, 2014, [www.edu.gov.mb.ca/aed/publications/pdf/smudging\\_guidelines.pdf](http://www.edu.gov.mb.ca/aed/publications/pdf/smudging_guidelines.pdf) (accessed September 27, 2018).
13. KiiskeeNtum (She Who Remembers), *Gifts from the Creator for Man's Use...The Smudging Ceremony*, *Windspeaker Publication*, 16, no 2, 1988, <http://ammsa.com/node/12407> (accessed September 27, 2018).
14. Mikisew Cree First Nation Government and Industry Relations, Centre for Indigenous Environmental Resources, *Sagow Pimachiwin Plants and Animals Used by Mikisew Cree First Nation for Food, Medicine and Materials*, Public Version, (Winnipeg, Man), p 67, [www.yourcier.org/uploads/2/5/6/1/25611440/sagow\\_pimachiwin\\_guidebook.pdf](http://www.yourcier.org/uploads/2/5/6/1/25611440/sagow_pimachiwin_guidebook.pdf) (accessed September 27, 2018).
15. *Canadian Encyclopedia*, "Smudging," (Toronto: Historica Canada, 2018), also available at [www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/smudging](http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/smudging) (accessed September 27, 2018).
16. Aboriginal Education Directorate Manitoba Education and Advanced Learning, *Smudging Protocol and Guidelines for School Divisions*, 2014, [www.edu.gov.mb.ca/aed/publications/pdf/smudging\\_guidelines.pdf](http://www.edu.gov.mb.ca/aed/publications/pdf/smudging_guidelines.pdf) (accessed September 27, 2018).
17. *Canadian Encyclopedia*, "Smudging," (Toronto: Historica Canada, 2018), also available at [www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/smudging](http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/smudging) (accessed September 27, 2018).
18. Aboriginal Education Directorate Manitoba Education and Advanced Learning, *Smudging Protocol and Guidelines for School Divisions*, 2014, p 5, [www.edu.gov.mb.ca/aed/publications/pdf/smudging\\_guidelines.pdf](http://www.edu.gov.mb.ca/aed/publications/pdf/smudging_guidelines.pdf) (accessed September 27, 2018).

## Stepping Stones

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For additional resources and information on Walking Together, visit [www.teachers.ab.ca](http://www.teachers.ab.ca).

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EDUCATION FOR RECONCILIATION

