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Wapato: *Indian Potato*

by John Kallas

Wapato (*Sagittaria latifolia*), one of the few Native American names that we still use, is also known as arrowhead, arrowleaf, duck potato, and Indian potato. It is not known as arrowroot. *Sagittaria latifolia* and *Sagittaria cuneata* can be found in swamps all over North America. They both produce edible tubers. In the northwest, both the plant and the tubers it produces are referred to as wapato. This was originally a northwestern regional name, but has now gained widespread use.

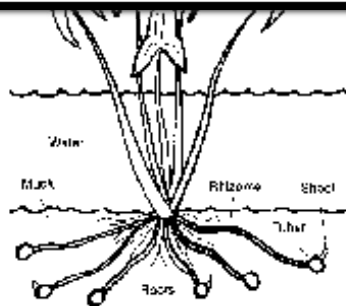


Wapato loves shallow ponds, swamps, slow moving streams, and the margins of quiet lakes. It requires a rich muck that is submerged in water for most or all of the year. In good conditions, wapato can grow in huge abundance. I have seen a shallow lake on Wapato Island with at least four football fields worth of plants. We are talking tons of tubers here!



Wapato is an herbaceous wetland plant. The leaves and flower stalk rise above the water. The leaves are arrow-shaped (sagittate). Leaf stems attach directly to the base of the plant like celery. The base is partially submerged in the muck, giving rise to the roots and rhizomes below.

Rhizomes are under ground stems that new plants can develop from. In this case, rhizomes produce tubers (starchy enlargements of the rhizome) at their tips. Even if detached from their rhizomes, the starch-filled tubers can grow new plants on their own. Potatoes also produce tubers on rhizomes. Reports of wapato being as big as a man's fist are hard to verify. One day I would like to see them that big. In the meantime, my experience is of tubers about half that size or smaller.



History

As far as we can tell from historical records, wapato grew so prolifically, that it could be harvested like crops. Native families apparently claimed patches that guaranteed rights of harvest. While wapato grows all over the North American continent (and the world), it probably came to prominence in the northwest due to mild winters and great abundance of places to grow. Wapato was gathered in October and November when most other ponds in the country are frozen over or too cold for gathering.



While wapato was dug, gathered from muskrat nests, or pulled by hand from very soft shallow muck, the most commonly mentioned gathering method was reported by Lewis and Clark in 1806. They heard reports of Native women wading in water up to their chests or even necks, while using their feet, to release tubers from their stems. The tubers floated to the water's surface, were collected, and tossed into a special canoe.



My Experience

On three separate occasions, I attempted to gather wapato using the traditional wading method. The photograph of me wading in the water was taken on November 11, 1996. This was the time that wapato was traditionally gathered in the Pacific northwest. The water was very cold. I was in it for about 30 minutes working the muck with my feet.

Prepare strategies to prevent hypothermia should you try this activity yourself. My most successful gathering experience actually occurred late in May 1995. I went gathering with Melissa Darby, a graduate student from Portland State University. We were interested in testing several methods of gathering wapato, including wading.

We obtained a research permit and went to Catfish Slew on Wapato Island. When I arrived, Melissa was already up to her waist, sloshing around trying to dislodge the tubers with her bare feet. Since the foliage of wapato dies back in September, there is now no obvious evidence where the plant grows. We knew it grew here from previous visits.

The water was covered with what Melissa identified as "false loosestrife" (*Ludwigia palustris*), a floating network of plants that somewhat interfered with her progress. She was frustrated, because

I modified my stading bar and gathered backpack, and waded up to my thighs in the water. The modified backpack allows me to throw the tubers over my shoulder where they hit a cardboard wall and drop into the backpack. Using my bare feet, I broke through the loosestrife mat, and worked the somewhat solid, weight supporting ground under the water. Other locations have had much softer muck than this. With some effort, that solid surface gave way-softening down to a depth of about 6 inches. I worked the ground quite well, marching in a circular motion, somewhat similar to stomping grapes. Not much of anything came up in the first five minutes. Then, as I worked, tubers began popping up out of the water-first one, then another, then 2 more, 4 more, and then, a continuous stream. After working about 2.5 square yards of area, I had gathered almost 2 pounds of wapato in about 15 minutes. We hypothesized that my success was due to both my greater weight (I am 40 pounds heavier than Melissa), and the focus on really working one area well.

Wapato is apparently of maximum size, dormant, and best collected from October through March. Since it was May, the tubers were no longer dormant, and hence, began growing new shoots (young wapato plants). Shoots were from one to eighteen inches long. I cut off the long shoots since my research found no accounts of their being used for food.

From the literature, I got the impression that you could feel wapato tubers with your feet. I was surprised to find that this was not the case for me. I could only feel the muck. Apparently, the tubers are distributed within the muck at various depths. Since the tubers are buoyant, continuously disturbing the muck allows them to slowly work their way upward. Once they reach the top of the muck, they are free to float to the surface of the water. So, there is a delay between beginning the initial stomping action and when the first tubers float to the surface.

Tuber skin is thin and gray to light brown with an orange tinge. It can also be subtly mottled with pale khaki green, magenta, or yellow. Tubers are roundish to oblong in shape in soft muck, but can be irregular in shape when growing in a rocky substrate. Each tuber has surface lines, (shown in photograph), that are darker and give the appearance of dividing the tuber into segments. Fibrous roots arise from these lines. Shoots arising from the tubers are yellowish or cream colored, with some magenta near its base.

The tubers ranged in size from 3/4 to 2 inches long, and 3/4 to 1-1/4 inches wide. In 15 minutes, I gathered 88 tubers weighing a total of 1 pound, 10 ounces.

Wapato in the raw form is somewhat bitter, but not excruciatingly so. It has the texture of a raw potato, that is, solid throughout, and mildly grainy. The meat is cream colored with a yellowish tinge. When it is cut, the tuber bleeds a milky juice, and has the odor of bruised tomato plant. This juice just moistens the tuber, but does not drip from it. The juice does stick to the knife, or on the table that it rests on. The skin does not seem to be bitter, or at least is much less bitter than the meat.

Heat apparently destroys most of the bitterness. Once it is cooked, wapato tubers taste and feel pretty much like Idaho potatoes with a very slight tinge of bitterness and a pleasantly nutty flavor. When it is incorporated into any mixed dish, it yields the bitterness imperceptible. Take your favorite potato recipe and substitute wapato. Other than a nuttier flavor, no one will be the wiser.



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