

# Special Places in the San Luis Valley



Today, we value native flowers, shrubs, and trees for their hardiness and ecological value. Wild plants are adapted to local climates and provide critical food and shelter for insects, birds, and animals. Thriving native ecosystems help purify our air and water. Many of the products we use every day contain ingredients harvested from wild plants.

Indigenous Americans who lived in the San Luis Valley relied on dozens of different native plant species for food, medicine, artistic expression, and spiritual practice. For the San Luis Valley's Hispano communities, wild plants are the backbone of a vibrant folk medicine tradition and supplemented staple crops.



Places where culturally significant plants grow are important parts of the landscape. Many of those places have unique ecological qualities that promote the growth of valued plant species. They also may be located along regularly used travel corridors or associated with other important natural features of the landscape.

La Botica, a Spanish term meaning “the pharmacy,” is one of those special places. Located on a protected bench deep within a steep-walled canyon, the La Botica archaeological site preserves a record of human lifeways that spans thousands of years. The site is also home to a diverse community of culturally significant plants.

The illustration above depicts three different groups of people harvesting native plants at La Botica during three different periods. On the left, Pueblo people are collecting pine nuts around A.D. 1350. In the center panel, Hispano people gather rose hips during the 1920s. On the right, Ute elders and youth are harvesting chokecherries during the 2010s.



Indian Ricegrass

Major funding for this exhibit was provided by a History Colorado – State Historical Fund grant (2021-M2-007). Additional funding was provided by the Sangre de Cristo National Heritage Area and the Colorado State Land Board. The exhibit was designed and produced by Paleocultural Research Group (PCRG) (paleocultural.org). PCRG gratefully acknowledges the expertise of the many contributors to the La Botica ethnobotany project. Greg Harlin created the backdrop illustration (wrh-illustration.com). **Images:** Threeleaf Sumac–Sean O’Meara; Indian Ricegrass–Bill Gorum/Alamy Stock Photo; Narrowleaf Yucca–Patrick Myers/NPS/Wikimedia Commons; Pinon Pine–John Fowler/Wikimedia Commons; Chokecherry–NPS/Wikimedia Commons; Rose Hips–Joe Mabel/Wikimedia Commons; Sandal–Kimberly Spurr/Museum of Northern Arizona (Sand Dune Cave, NA7523.N25-26.1, reproduced with permission from the Bureau of Indian Affairs and the Bureau of Reclamation). Quoted material from: B. Chapoose, S. McBeth, S. Crum, and A. LaForge, “Planting a Seed: Ute Ethnobotany, A Collaborative Approach in Applied Anthropology,” *The Applied Anthropologist*, vol. 32, no. 1, p. 3, 2012.



Chokecherry



Visit the Exhibit Online

## Traditional Ecological Knowledge

The growth of urban areas and commercial agricultural fields in the United States has led to a critical loss of native ecosystems. Equally important has been the loss of knowledge about the uses of native plants. Indigenous peoples and local communities retain that wisdom, known as “traditional ecological knowledge.” As one Northern Ute



Threeleaf Sumac

tribal elder has said, Native Americans are “sophisticated naturalists,” who understand the complex web of connections among species. In an increasingly interconnected world, traditional ecological knowledge is crucial for maintaining healthy ecosystems and ultimately for ensuring sustainable economies and resilient communities.

## People, Plants, and Places

Landscapes are more than storehouses of the things people need to survive. Landscapes also symbolize people’s understanding of their place in the world. People discover who they are by learning about the places where their ancestors lived.

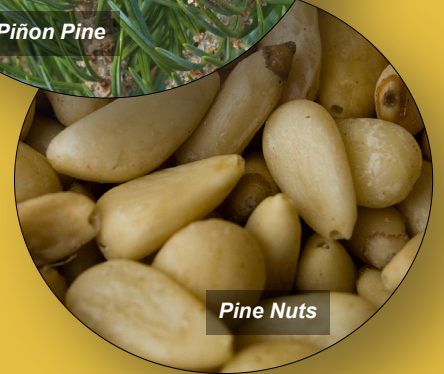
Traditional ecological knowledge about native plants—expressed through oral histories, songs, origin stories, and family traditions—connects people to the landscapes that are important to their communities. Visiting and learning about special places like La Botica can teach people about their past and help them envision the future.

Today, the San Luis Valley remains important to many Indigenous groups and local communities. For Ute people, it is a part of Núuchiu Tənvəpə, or traditional Ute lands. Pueblo people—visitors to the San Luis Valley for more than 1,000 years—regularly return to obtain culturally significant plants. Navajos, Jicarilla Apaches, Comanches, and other groups continue to make use of the Valley’s natural resources and cultural landscape. Hispano people, who first came to the Valley during the 1830s, continue to gather wild plants for medicines, edible greens, and other uses. For all of these people, the Valley’s native plant resources remain cultural touchstones.

# Harvesting Native Plants at La Botica



Piñon Pine



Pine Nuts