

THE PATH TO SELF-RELIANCE

by Christopher Nyerges



Students learning how to identify wild plants.

AT AN EARLY AGE, I BECAME INTERESTED IN KNOWING EXACTLY HOW NATIVE AMERICANS OF PAST DAYS COULD LIVE OFF THE LAND WHEN THERE WERE NO SUPERMARKETS, HOSPITALS, OR HARDWARE STORES.

It was a random phone call: “How many of your classes will I need to attend before I can save at least 50% -- maybe 100%-- on my food bill?” The caller primarily wanted to save money on his food bills using wild foods. How long does it take to learn about the wild plants of the world, and their medicinal and edible properties? It takes time, and like any science or art, the time it takes you depends upon how much time and effort you’re willing to devote to the study and practice.

At an early age, I became interested in knowing exactly how Native Americans of past days could live off the land when there were no supermarkets, hospitals, or hardware stores. My sources of information were my botany and science teachers, living Native Americans, the library at the Southwest Museum, and anyone who would listen to my questions. I spent a considerable amount of time in the beginning learning mycology and going into the field with experts to learn how to recognize wild mushrooms and learn about their growing conditions. Along the way, you cannot help but learn about the trees and plants and environments which produce the mushrooms.

I had spent at least five years of fairly actively research and study of wild plants and their uses before I spent my first period time trying to subsist entirely on wild plants. Though there was still a lot that I didn’t know, I was able to eat well for a week at a time because there was an abundance of the plants that I did know. Though I continue to study and learn about the uses of wild plants, I have never had the goal of trying to live exclusively from wild plants,