Other Names: *Rubus spectabilis*, Klallam: ʔəlɪlúʔ, Quileute: tca’a’xiwap’ut

Identifying Salmonberry: Salmonberry forms dense thickets in wet forested areas. Plants grow as high as nine feet tall with brown stems that are covered in thorns. Deep pink flowers have five petals and many stamens. Leaves are sharply toothed, pointed at the tip, and grow in threes, similar to raspberry leaves. Salmonberries are the first berry to ripen – usually in April through June. They can be orange to ruby-colored and are the same shape as raspberries and blackberries. Salmonberry is in the rose family.

Where it Grows: Salmonberry patches are abundant throughout the Pacific Northwest in wet forested areas, especially near streams and rivers. They prefer shade to partial sun, and can be grown in gardens as long as they get enough water.

Season: Sprouts are eaten in April-May. Berries are ripe in late spring to early summer. Leaves are dried for tea in spring through summer.

Eating Salmonberry: Sprouts - the tender spring shoots of salmonberry are also called “bear candy” because bears relish this spring treat. Watch closely or you will miss them! Sprouts are only available for a few weeks unless you travel to colder regions or higher elevations. As soon as it gets warm, new shoots grow rapidly. During this time they are tender and juicy, and can easily be pinched off either from where they emerge on previous years stems or from the ground. You will have to gingerly navigate through the newly developed thorns as you pick them, but it is well worth it! The outer skin is easy to peel, leaving a crunchy vegetable that is tart and sweet. Sprouts become bitterer toward the tip of the shoot. As they mature, they become hard and fibrous. If you can’t easily pinch them off with your fingers, don’t bother. Once they are a little too developed you can chew them to get the juice, but you will have to spit out the fiber.

Salish Elders teach that spouts are an important spring food to wake up our bodies after wintertime. They are loaded with nutrients, including Vitamin C and minerals, that help us to enter a new season with strength and vigor. Muckleshoot tribal member Warren King George remembers that sprouts were considered an “elders treat” when he was growing up. They can be eaten right off the bush in raw form and have a bright, tart taste that enlivens your senses. Their astringency makes your mouth pucker up, but is rounded out by honeyed
sweetness. Salmonberry’s relative, thimbleberry, also has delicious sprouts that can be eaten in the same way. Thimbleberry sprouts are green and do not have thorns.

You can preserve sprouts for a few days in a refrigerator in a plastic bag. Add them to salads or serve them on a vegetable tray with dipping sauce. Northwest Native People traditionally dip them in oil made from eulachon (a small fish), bear, or seal. Some people lightly sautéing them in a little butter or olive oil.

**Flowers** – salmonberry flowers are edible and have a sweet taste due to their nectar and pollen content. Blow on the flowers before eating them to scare away insects. They are a pretty garnish on salads and desserts.

**Berries** – Many people look forward to eating salmonberries – the first ripe berry of spring. Berries can vary in color, even on the same bush, and can be yellow, orange, red or deep purple. Some people claim a favorite color, saying that it tastes better. The taste also varies according to where they grow. Perform taste-tests to find bushes with the most delicious berries. Salmonberries are especially juicy and do not dry or preserve well. They remind us to embrace the gifts of the season. Otherwise, we have to wait until next year.

Some Coast Salish families owned large salmonberry patches and maintained them as berry gardens. Skokomish elder Bruce Miller taught that salmonberries were so prized that his ancestors held a First Salmonberry Ceremony to honor the berries and share them with the community.

**Medicine:** Salmonberry sprouts and leaves are astringent and act as a desiccant to tighten inflamed tissue including wounds, burns, swollen gums, stomach problems, and gut inflammation. You can make a mineral-rich and astringent tea from the leaves of salmonberry and other rose family plants including strawberry, blackberry, and thimbleberry. Completely dry the leaves before making tea. Use 1 tablespoon per cup and steep 10-15 minutes.

**Ecological Relationships:** Native Elders from many Salish communities teach that salmonberry is an environmental indicator for salmon runs. If salmonberries are abundant in springtime, it shows us that there will be many salmon spawning. Salmonberry is intimately tied to the health of rivers and tributaries. Many Native communities in the Pacific Northwest associate salmonberry with Swainson’s thrush, which is also called salmonberry bird. Salmonberry flowers are often in bloom when this bird return from its winter grounds.

Salmonberry provides important food for many species. Hummingbirds, butterflies, and insects, including bees, drink the flower nectar. Insects carry pollen from bush to bush and assist in pollinating flowers and creating more berries. Salmonberries are eaten by many types of birds, squirrels, chipmunks, and larger mammals like coyotes, bear, deer, and elk. Salmonberry patches provide shelter for birds and small mammals.

**Growing Tips:** Salmonberry is available at many native plant nurseries. Plants will grow in full shade but they produce more berries with partial sun. If the soil is moist and rich, they will spread to form a thicket of salmonberry bushes.

**References**

**Overview:** Students learn about salmonberry as an indicator for seasonal changes and ecological relationships and then hear a Coast Salish story about Salmonberry Bird and Raven. Through a drawing activity, students explore botanical characteristics and useful parts of the salmonberry plant.

**Student Wondering:** What does salmonberry signal about seasonal changes and relationships between plants, people, and the land?

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### Learning Objectives

**Understandings**

*Student will understand that…*

- plants provide indicators for seasonal changes and ecological relationships.
- we can eat many parts of plants including flowers, berries, and shoots.
- traditional stories teach us about relationships in the world around us.

**Knowledge and Skills**

*Student will be able to…*

- identify the edible parts of the salmonberry plant, name when to harvest them, and name one reason they are beneficial for health.
- name a typical habitat for salmonberry and one relationship it has with an animal.
- use observation skills to look closely at salmonberry parts and draw them.

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### NGS Standards: Performance Expectations

- **3-LS1-1.** Develop models to describe that organisms have unique and diverse life cycles but all have in common birth, growth, reproduction, and death.

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**Vocabulary:** spawn, pollinators, nectar, pollen, serrated, stamens

**Materials:**

- *Salmonberry Picture Page:* print or project on a screen
• **Samples of salmonberry**: including leaves, thorny stems, berries and flowers (if in season). If you are inside, gather enough samples so that each pair of students can draw the leaf, flower, and berry. If you are outside, have students gather near salmonberry plants that have flowers and/or berries in season.

• **Drawing materials**: pens, crayons, colored markers or colored pencils, paper, or nature journals

**Preparation:** Review the *Salmonberry Overview*. Print or project the *Salmonberry Lifecycle Page*. Pull up a Swainson’s thrush song that you can play on a phone or computer.

**Outside:** Choose a place where students can explore salmonberry bushes.

**Inside:** Gather salmonberry samples ahead of time.

**Older Students:** Incorporate botanical terms and explore salmonberry as a member of the rose family.

### LESSON: SALMONBERRY, THE FIRST BERRY OF SPRING

#### INTRODUCTION

5 MINUTES

Begin by gathering around salmonberry plants (outside) or by projecting a picture of salmonberry plants (inside). **Share:** Salmonberry is one of the first signs of spring. The pink flowers are a beautiful splash of color after the dark of winter. Coast Salish Elders say that if the salmonberry flowers are abundant, it is a sign that it will be a good spring salmon run.

**Older students – Ask:** What might be the connection between salmonberry flowers and salmon spawning? Think about where salmonberry plants grow.

**Share:** Salmonberries often grow along waterways including rivers and streams. If there is enough rain and the waters are healthy and flowing well, salmonberry flowers will be abundant, and salmon will be able to easily **spawn** up rivers and streams to renew their species.

Salmonberry flowers are edible and have a sweet flavor because they are full of pollen and nectar. **Pollinators** are drawn to the bright pink color and sweet nectar of salmonberry flowers. This **nectar** is a food for butterflies, hummingbirds, bumblebees, and other insects. When they drink it, they often catch **pollen** on their bodies and carry it to other salmonberry plants. This helps to pollinate flowers and create more berries.

**Ask:** Has anyone eaten salmonberries? What colors are the berries? Do you have a favorite color to eat?

**Share:** Salmonberries can be yellowish orange, ruby red or reddish purple, even on the same bush! They are only ripe for a short time and do not preserve well, so we have to enjoy them when they are ready. Salmonberries were so prized among some Native communities that families owned patches of them and maintained them as berry gardens. They pruned the branches to make them more productive. The Skokomish People historically had a First Salmonberry Ceremony to honor this important traditional food. Many species of animals love to eat salmonberry including birds, chipmunks, squirrels, bears, deer and elk.
There is another part of salmonberry that can be eaten. Sprouts come out in April and May. You can find tender thick shoots at the base of the plant and along the older stems. These are called "bear candy" because bears love to eat them. They are also considered an "elder's treat" among Native People. Coast Salish Elders teach that their nutrients and medicine make salmonberry an important spring food to energize our bodies after winter. To eat sprouts, pinch off the thick tender sprouts (beware of young thorns) and peel back the outer skin, which can be green or reddish pink. The inside is a vegetable that is crunchy, tart, and sweet. It has a distinctive astringent taste that makes your mouth pucker. Thimbleberry sprouts are also eaten as a spring vegetable.

**Older Students:** Share the nutritional and medicinal benefits of salmonberry from the *Salmonberry Overview*.

**SALMONBERRY BIRD STORY**

**Share:** The Swainson's thrush is called salmonberry bird. These small brown birds arrive right around the time the flowers are blooming, and they eat salmonberries and nest in the bushes. It is said that this little bird's song makes the salmonberries ripen in springtime. Saanich elders teach that Swainson's thrush's song translates as, "Come on, all you dark ones! Come on, all you light-colored ones! Come on, all you red-colored ones! Come on, all you golden ones! Ripen, ripen, ripen, ripen!"

**Play the song:** (do an internet search for Swainson's thrush's song). Youtube has several options, for example: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lpLnRUnoJNQ

**Story Connection:** Salmonberry Bird and Raven. Share this story from Elise Claxton and Violet Williams in the book *The Earth's Blanket* by Nancy Turner:

> One time, Salmonberry Bird invited Raven to her house for a meal. She told her kids to take their baskets out to pick berries. She started to sing her song, and as she sang, her children’s baskets filled up. The children came home, and everyone had a wonderful meal of deliciously ripened salmonberries of all the different colors. Afterwards Raven said, "You come to my house tomorrow." So Salmonberry Bird came along the next day, and Raven gave baskets to his children and told them to go out to get the berries. Raven’s children went out for their dad, and Raven sang and sang in his croaky raven voice. They waited and waited, but the Raven children’s baskets never got full, and finally Salmonberry Bird went home without any berries.

**Optional:** Upper Skagit storyteller, Tammy Cooper Woodrich tells a similar story about Raven and salmonberry. See the video at https://vimeo.com/202328275

**Group Discussion:** **Ask:** What lessons does this story teach us? Give students a chance to share. One interesting teaching from the story is that we all have our own talents, and trying to mimic other people is rarely fruitful.

**DRAWING ACTIVITY**

Have students to take a close look at the salmonberry plants. **Ask:** What do you notice about the leaves… flowers…. berries…. stems? For example:
• **Leaves** have **serrated** edges, are very pointed, and are in groups of three. If you fold the opposite leaves together they look just like a butterfly!
• **Flowers** have five petals with many **stamens**.
• **Berries** are shaped like a raspberry and come in many colors.
• **Stem Shoots** many or may not have thorns and are green to reddish. They are tender.
• **Mature stems** are brown, woody and covered in thorns.

**Grades 6-12** - **Ask:** *Can you think of other edible berries that have similar flowers or berries?*
Examples include blackberry, thimbleberry, raspberry, rose, and strawberry. These are all in the **rose family**. Many rose family plants have similar characteristics including many stamens, a domed receptacle at the base of a pistol, and small leaf-like growths called stipules at the base of each leaf. The leaves of many rose family plants are rich in minerals, including calcium, and can be made into a nutritious tea. Salmonberry leaves are astringent meaning that they tighten tissue that is inflamed. Examples of inflammation include burns, swollen gums, an upset stomach, or irritated intestines.

**Make a Salmonberry Poster:** Have students create their own salmonberry poster. Encourage them to draw plant traits will help them identify the plant later or clues about the uses – for example, what parts are used for food or medicine, and what relationships does salmonberry have with animals, places, or seasons? Younger students can do leaf rubbings. Encourage students to follow the ABCDE’s of scientific drawing including:
- A – Accurate
- B – Big – use the whole page
- C – Colorful or gives context
- D – Detailed – use writing and drawing together. What do you notice about color, texture, shape, size?
- E – Explained - “I notice… I wonder… this reminds me of…”

**TYING IT TOGETHER**

10 MINUTES

Have students share their salmonberry posters. You can do a "poster exhibit" or ask for volunteers to share. As a closing question, ask students to share one thing they want the world to know about salmonberry.

**DIGGING DEEPER**

**Develop a Story about Five Salmonberry Sisters:** Place five berries on each child's fingers. As the teacher tells the story (with five salmonberries on fingers) remove the caps of the sisters and eat the salmonberries.

**Salmonberry Phenological Study:** Plant phenology is the study of plant cycle events and how they are influenced by variations in climate and habitat factors including elevation. Have students track when sprouts, flowers and berries begin, and how long they last. Document as many factors about where they are gathering information including elevation, sun exposure, etc. Compile class results and compare it to the following year.
Swainson’s thrush loves this berry and sings from inside the bushes.

Flowers are not pink and bloom early spring.

Leaves look like a butterfly, if you fold the middle one down.

Salmonberrys
Rubus spectabilis

Early spring sprouts are a tasty snack.

Berries are juicy and come in colors from yellow to deep ruby red.