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# *Plant Medicine of the Innu*



**A Report for the Innu Nation  
by Tracey Inkpen**

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## **Acknowledgements**

This report is a summary of information shared with the author by elders in the communities of Utshimassit and Sheshatshiu during the summer of 1998. The author wishes to extend her deepest thanks and gratitude to these people for their generosity of time and spirit and their patience. The knowledge and resourcefulness displayed by these Innu elders is truly admirable in its breadth and quality. At the same time, however, this report is in no way a complete record of Innu medicine relating to plants. As the elders stressed time and again, the information they were telling me formed only a tiny part of the vast wealth and richness of their knowledge. It is hoped, however, that this brief report will help to stimulate interest in the area of traditional Innu medicine, particularly among the young people of both communities. It is through them that the knowledge and traditions of the Innu people will continue to survive, now and for countless generations to come.

## **Contributors**

The following people shared their time and knowledge with the author for the preparation of this report:

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### **Author's Note and Disclaimer**

The information contained in this report is complete to the best abilities of the author. Some of the uses of specific plants were only alluded to briefly in interviews with elders, and consequently not all preparation information is provided. The author urges anyone interested in specific medicinal preparations to consult with a knowledgeable elder prior to their use.

Although the author is no linguist, she has attempted to use the plant name spellings and standard orthography agreed upon and used by various authors, especially Clément. In cases where the standard spelling was unavailable, the author has reproduced the word to the best of her ability. It is hoped that readers can understand the result.

This report is intended for educational purposes only. The author assumes no responsibility for any injury or death that results from the use of the information contained in this report.



Robert R. Taylor

**Plant Names:** *uâtshinâkan* (Utshimassit)

*uâtnanis* (Sheshatshiu)

larch; tamarack; juniper tree

**Scientific Name:** *Larix laricina* (DuRoi) Koch

**Parts Used:** boughs (*tshishtapakunat*; *shitat*)

inner bark (*uânâtsheshk'*)

### **Preparation and Medicinal Use:**

Utshimassit Innu consider this tree to be *shutshimakuan*, strong, powerful medicine.

The branches are boiled in water and the tea that results is useful for curing many things, including sore throat, fever, loss of appetite, and joint pain. It is important to stay warm after drinking the tea in order to allow the medicine to work properly.

To help heal burns (especially in children) the twigs are cut up into small pieces about 3-4 centimetres long. These pieces are boiled and the outer bark is peeled in order to expose the sticky inside. This inside portion is crushed and either applied directly to the burned area, or mixed with a bit of lard and then applied.

To prevent infections in cuts or scrapes, the twigs are prepared in the same way as for burns. After crushing the inside, the sticky mixture may be mixed with a bit of water and then applied directly to the wounded area.

Skin boils are healed by using the inner bark of the tree. It is scraped off, boiled in water, wrapped in a bit of cloth and then applied to the skin.

A poultice containing the ground twigs and needles is used to help relieve sore knees and other swellings and inflammations.





Julie Hrapko



**Plant Names:** *minamuk*<sup>"</sup> (Utshimassit)

*minaiik*<sup>"</sup> ( Sheshatshiu)

white spruce

**Scientific Name:** *Picea glauca* (Moench) Voss

**Parts Used:** boughs (*tshishtapakunat*; *shitat*)

inner bark (*uânâtsheshk*<sup>"</sup>)

sap (*pitshu*; *petshuatuk*)

cones (*uâshkuetuî*)

### **Preparation and Medicinal Use:**

Boil the boughs and place a towel over the head. Use the hot water as a steam bath to relieve snow blindness and eye pain.

The boughs are boiled and ground up and then used in a poultice to relieve general aches, joint pain, and snow blindness. Reheat and reapply as needed.

Boil the twigs and soak hands and legs in the water to reduce joint pain.

Scrape off the inner bark and chew it like gum in order to relieve a very sore throat or dry cough. It also acts as an expectorant to remove mucus/phlegm from the lungs. Make sure to spit out the bark after chewing as this is a strong medicine and should NOT be swallowed.

The cones are boiled and the liquid used to relieve a stomachache and induce vomiting if necessary. They may also be mixed with seal fat and water to help cure pneumonia.

Cuts and wounds may also be healed using various parts of the tree. The sap is applied to skin sores, and the inner bark is put in a bit of cotton and placed on a wound to stop it from bleeding.



Blaine Andrussek

**Plant Names:** *innashit* (Utshimassit)

*innâsht* (Sheshatshiu)

Balsam fir

**Scientific Name:** *Abies balsamea* (L.) Mill

**Parts Used:** boughs (*tshishtapakunat*; *shitat*)

inner bark (*uânâtsheshk<sup>u</sup>*)

sap (*petshuatuk*; *pitshu*)

### **Preparation and Medicinal Use:**

Drink the tea from the boiled boughs to relieve sore legs, stomachache, and colds. In the past, it was also a source of nutrition during periods of famine.

The boiled inner bark is useful for relieving someone with cold shivers, as well as colds and stomachaches.

The sap from the tree is used in many ways. The resin blisters on an older tree are broken to collect the sap. It is heated up and applied to cuts or skin sores to prevent infection and speed up healing. The hot sap is also used to help cure colds and pneumonia (*kashipiskat etakushinatshi*). It helps to loosen chest congestion and remove phlegm from the lungs. Apply it to a piece of paper or cotton cloth and place it on the chest of the person. If the patient is a small child or baby, care must be taken, as this is a strong medicine. As soon as someone can smell the sap on the baby's breath, the paper must be removed from the chest. Adults may leave the sap on their chest for longer periods by lighting it with a match and letting it burn for a few seconds. After cooling, it is put on a cloth on the chest and may left on for couple of days before removing.

Another way to use the sap to treat cuts and infections is to boil it in a bit of water on the stove. Stir the mixture and allow it to cool. Then take a long strip and rub it between the hands until it has the consistency of toffee candy. Cut it into squares and apply it as 'Band-Aids' to the cut or infected area. Leave it on for several days to allow the wound to heal properly. These strips can also be applied to mouth sores to speed healing.





Blaine Andrussek

**Plant Names:** *inmeshit; innatik'* (Utshimassit)

*sheshatuk'* (Sheshatshiu)

black spruce

**Scientific Name:** *Picea mariana* (Mill.)

**Parts Used:** boughs (*tshishtapakunat; shitat*)

sap (*petshuatuk; pitshu*)

cones (*uâshkuetui'*)

### **Preparation and Medicinal Use:**

Boil the boughs and drink the tea for colds, cough, or chest pain.

The immature (not fully budded) cones are boiled and mashed. This mixture is eaten to induce vomiting and relieve nausea and loss of appetite. It is also good for constipation.

The sap from the tree is applied to skin sores to help them heal.





**Plant Names:** *uishtshitak*" (Utshimassit)

*kushkushkatuk*" (Sheshatshiu)

rotten spruce wood

**Scientific Name:** *Picea* spp. (probably *P. mariana*)

**Parts Used:** rotten wood

**Preparation and Use:**

Rotten wood that crumbles easily and has the consistency of flour is used to treat diaper rash on babies.



Photosynthesis

**Plant Names:** *kakatshiminakashi*

common juniper; ground juniper

**Scientific Name:** *Juniperus communis* L.

**Parts Used:** boughs (*tshishtapakunat*; *shitat*) with or without berries (*mina*)

**Preparation and Use:**

Boil the twigs and drink the tea to relieve diarrhea (*shogute*) and flu (*kauishiuat*).

Boil the twigs and berries and drink the tea to help with kidney trouble (problems peeing).





Jim Pojar

**Plant Names:** *apueminânakashi; uiminâna*

pin cherry

**Scientific Name:** *Prunus pensylvanica* L.

**Parts Used:** leaves

berries (*mina*)

inner bark (*ushakai*)

### **Preparation and Use:**

Boil the leaves and drink the juice to help relieve stress and depression, or for heart pain.

To help cure cough, scrape off the inner bark and chew on it.

The bright red berries are also helpful. If someone is feeling depressed or sad, he/she should carry the berries around to help feel happy.





Derek Johnson



**Plant Names:** *ushkuai*

white birch; paper birch

**Scientific Name:** *Betula papyrifera* Marsh.

**Parts Used:** inner bark (*ushakai*)

**Preparation and Medicinal Use:**

Peel the outer papery bark and then scrape off the inner bark of the tree. Cut it up, boil it and drink the fluid to help relieve extreme or long-term diarrhea.



Jerry Pavia

**Plant Names:** *mashkuminakashi*

dogberry tree; showy mountain ash

**Scientific Name:** *Sorbus decora* (Sarg.) Schneid

**Parts Used:** leaves

twigs

bark (*ushakai*)

berries (*mina*)

### **Preparation and Medicinal Use:**

For a cough, boil the leaves and drink the tea or chew on a small twig of the tree.

The berries are used to relieve a sore throat. They are eaten fresh or the berries are boiled into a liquid juice, which the person drinks.

This plant is also useful to treat colds and pneumonia. It acts as an expectorant to remove yellow mucus from the lungs. Scrape off the bark and boil it, then drink the tea.

The bark is also boiled and used in a hot compress to relieve general aches and pains of the body, including headaches.



Robert R. Taylor



**Plant Names:** *shakau*; *tshitshue-shakau* (Utshimassit)

*uapineu-mitshima* (Sheshatshiu)

pussy willow

**Scientific Name:** *Salix discolor* Muhl.

**Parts Used:** leaves

inner bark (*ushakai*)

### **Preparation and Medicinal Use:**

To cure a cough or sore throat, boil the leaves and gargle with the liquid three times a day until better.

Scrape the white inner bark from the twigs and boil it for a long time until it turns into a dark molasses-type mixture. Allow it to cool and then put it on a piece of paper or a cloth and apply it to the chest to help cure colds and pneumonia (*kashipiskat etakushinatshi*). Leave the paper or cloth on for 3-4 days.

During childbirth, tea made from the boiled bark may be used to induce labour.





**Plant Names:**     *shakau*

speckled alder

**Scientific Name:**   *Alnus rugosa* (DuRoi) Spreng.

**Parts Used:**       bark

leaves

**Preparation and Use:**

This shrub is useful to relieve pain after childbirth. A tea made from either the peeled bark or the leaves is given to the mother.



Brenda Chambers

**Plant Names:** *nasht-shakau; kamishiuakat-shakau; kaushkuetushit-shakau*

mountain alder; green alder

**Scientific Name:** *Alnus crispa* (Ait.) Pursh

**Parts Used:** branches with leaves

**Preparation and Medicinal Use:**

Boil the leaves and branches until they become a sticky mixture. Apply it to the chest with paper or cloth to relieve chest pain and colds.





Steven Foster

**Plant Names:** *mikuta* (Utshimassit)

*ikuta* (Sheshatshiu)

Labrador tea

**Scientific Name:** *Ledum groenlandicum* Oeder

**Parts Used:** leaves

**Preparation and Medicinal Use:**

Tea from the boiled leaves is used for a wide variety of ailments including stomach pain, sore throat, colds and flu, or people who have problems peeing.

The fresh leaves may also be chewed to help relieve a sore throat.

The boiled leaves are also used in a poultice and applied directly to areas of muscle pain to relieve suffering.



Robert R. Taylor



**Plant Names:** *uishâtshiminakashi*

mountain cranberry; partridgeberry; redberries

**Scientific Name:** *Vaccinium vitis-idaea* L.

**Parts Used:** berries (*mina*)

**Preparation and Medicinal Use:**

Eat the berries to help relieve a sore throat.

The berries are especially useful for mouth or gum problems. The berries are mashed up and may be warmed, then they are applied directly to the gums of teething babies to help relieve their pain. For sores or blisters in the mouth, drain the blister first using a needle, then rub the berries over the area.



**Plant Names:** *pineu-minânakashi*; *pineu-minâish*  
creeping snowberry

**Scientific Name:** *Gaultheris hispidula* (L.) Muhl.

**Parts Used:** berries (*mina*)  
leaves and stem

**Preparation and Medicinal Use:**

Boil the leaves and apply them as a poultice to sores that are not healing properly.

Eat the berries or chew on the leaves to cure bad breath.

The stem is used to treat eczema.





**Plant Names:** *amu-nipisha*

bog laurel

**Scientific Name:** *Kalmia polifolia* Wang.

**Parts Used:** flower petals

**Preparation and Medicinal Use:**

Pick the flowers and eat them to help cure colds and sore throat.



Linda Kershaw

**Plant Names:** *ashtshiminakashi*

black crowberry

**Scientific Name:** *Empetrum nigrum* L.

**Parts Used:** roots

**Preparation and Medicinal Use:**

Crush up the roots, boil them, and put them in a cloth. Apply to affected area to relieve joint or muscle pain.





**Plant Names:** *anikminânakashi* (Utshimassit)

*atiguminânakashi* (Sheshatshiu)

northern comandra

**Scientific Name:** *Geocaulon lividium* (Richardson) Fern

**Parts Used:** stem

**Preparation and Medicinal Use:**

Boil the stem and apply it in a compress to relieve body aches and pains.



Karen Legasy

**Plant Names:**     *shipeku-massekushkamik'* (Utshimassit)

*massekushkamik'* (Sheshatshiu)

Warnstorf's peat moss

**Scientific Name:** *Sphagnum warnstorffii* Russ.

**Parts Used:**       whole plant

**Preparation and Medicinal Use:**

Boil the plant and apply it as a wet, hot poultice to any area affected with skin boils, or to relieve joint pain or arthritis.

The moss can also be used to relieve sore ears and a baby's cough.





Rob Arnup



**Plant Names:** *uishaushkamik'*

Peat moss

**Scientific Name:** *Sphagnum subsecundum* Nees.

**Parts Used:** whole plant

**Preparation and Medicinal Use:**

Boil the moss and put it in a poultice. Apply to skin boils and leave on for four days.

Heat the moss and apply it to the skin to relieve high blood pressure. Reheat and reapply as needed.



Dale Vitt

**Plant Names:**     *nekau-massekushkamik'*

hairy screw moss; sidewalk moss

**Scientific Name:**   *Tortula ruralis* Hedw.

**Parts Used:**        whole plant

**Preparation and Medicinal Use:**

The moss can be boiled and used as a poultice to help cure joint pain or boils. *Sphagnum* sp. is considered to be a better alternative, however.



Jim Pojar



**Plant Names:** *kakauashit* (Utshimassit)

*kakauat* (Sheshatshiu)

stiff clubmoss

**Scientific Name:** *Lycopodium annotinum* L.

**Parts Used:** whole plant

**Preparation and Medicinal Use:**

In order to relieve urinary problems, boil the plant for 1-2 hours and drink the liquid three times.

The plant is also used as a poultice to help heal cuts and wounds. Heat the plant with a bit of butter or lard and then grind up the stiff leaves. Wrap the mixture in a cloth and apply it to the wounded area.



Dave Williams

**Plant Names:** *uapikun-uapitsheushkamik*" (Utshimassit)

*anikapagua* (Sheshatshiu)

leaf lichen

**Scientific Name:** *Nephroma* sp.

**Parts Used:** whole plant

**Preparation and Medicinal Use:**

Clean the plant well and apply it directly to a burn to help speed up healing.

### Additional Types of Innu Medicine

Although it is the primary focus of this report, the Innu do not restrict themselves to plants for their traditional medicines. Animals and rocks are also used in the healing process, as outlined below.

Seal (*âtshuk'*) is used to help relieve stomachache. Heat up the fat until it melts and then allow it to cool. Drink a spoonful to get rid of the stomach pain.

Caribou (*atik'*) is very useful for treating infected cuts and wounds. An inside portion of the caribou penis is applied to the infected area.

Beaver (*amisk'*) is a very powerful medicine. Among other things, it is helpful in curing infected boils and may also be used to induce labour in a pregnant woman. The beaver's testicles (*uishinau-amishk'*) are the most useful part.

Another important animal in Innu medicine is the otter (*nitshuk'*). It is very useful for curing sore, achy, or runny ears, especially in children. Two parts of the otter's body may be used, the scrotum or the tail fat. An inside portion of the scrotum may be applied directly to the child's ear, or fat from the tail can be heated up on the stove until it becomes a liquid. This liquid is then cooled and a few drops are placed in the ear.

Feces from a young male child was also mentioned as being a useful medicine. A small amount is applied to a sore tooth to cure a toothache. In the past, it was also applied to areas of the body where a person was experiencing cancer pain (*manitûsh*) in order to relieve the person's suffering.

Rocks are also used in Innu medicine. A flat type of rock (*akuapassimaun*) is useful for relieving various aches and pains. It is heated on the stove, wrapped up in a cloth, and applied to the painful area. This is especially useful for curing toothaches or stomachaches.



## **Conclusion**

As shown on the previous pages, Innu medicine is very rich both in terms of its specific knowledge and its variety. In order to preserve its wealth, however, it is essential that this knowledge is transmitted to the younger generation. Discussion among elders and young people in the communities is necessary to ensure the survival and growth of Innu medicine into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It is hoped that this report will encourage interest and curiosity in the subject and contribute in some small way to improving that dialogue.





