

## Seneca Root

Picking Seneca<sup>1</sup> root has provided many generations of Aboriginal people with a steady income during the summer months. It grows on the prairies where it can get full sun. It is found in areas undisturbed by cultivation such as the Interlake Region of Manitoba. In 1929, there was one of the largest harvests of Seneca root ever known in Manitoba; 524,119 pounds were exported.

Seneca root is a perennial plant 25-40 centimetres (10-15 inches) inches tall with a 5-ounce (141.75 gram) root. The stem has small leaves with tiny greenish-white flowers. The roots are yellowish and twisted snake-like. It smells and tastes like wintergreen. The best time to collect the root is when the plant is in flower, in the summer or fall, as it is easier to recognize among the other grasses and vegetation. Large groups of Metis families would camp out for weeks at a time in the summer to pick Seneca root.



Seneca root has long been used by Aboriginal people to treat coughs and colds. Today it is used in the preparation of commercial cough syrup and cough drops. Statistics Canada records (1973) indicated that Manitoba once accounted for 80 percent of the total Canadian export of Seneca root. At that time it was exported to nine countries. So, although digging the Seneca roots was a seasonal occupation, it did supplement many families' yearly incomes.



### Reference:

Pelletier, Emile. *A Social History of the Manitoba Metis*. Winnipeg: Manitoba Metis Federation Press, 1977.

---

<sup>1</sup> *Polygalaceae*.



Compiled by Lawrence Barkwell  
Coordinator of Metis Heritage and History Research  
Louis Riel Institute