



**Tarweed**  
***Madia sp.***  
**TUKWA**

Tarweed is an upright, sturdy plant that can grow anywhere from 2 to 6 feet tall. It can be identified by its large buds that whorl around the stem and produce small, light yellow flowers. The leaves are often thin and long, with smooth or toothed edges. Tarweed leaves are often crowded, especially toward the bottom half of the plant. A distinguishing feature of tarweed is the stiff hairs that are present on the stem and leaves.

There are several species of tarweed that grow in the Willamette Valley, all of which can be distinguished from similar plants by their extremely sticky seeds. Many local tribes began harvesting tarweed in late summer or early fall, after the plant has flowered and seeds are present. The harvest would begin with a cultural burning of the meadow, which effectively removed the oily, “tar”-like coating from the seeds. Since species of tarweed thrive in disturbed areas, this practice was not only effective in preparing the seeds for food, but also in priming the soil for the unharvested seeds to be successful the following year.

Practices that ensure the security of the meadow in which tarweed grew also secured a resilient food source for years to come. These seeds were an important food for people native to Oregon’s valleys, since they could be stored year round and used during cold, rainy winters. Following the meadow’s burn, women traditionally harvested the seeds by knocking them off the plants into a gathering basket. Then the seeds were used to make meal or flour with other pounded nuts and seeds, such as hazelnuts or sunflower seeds. Oils from the tarweed were used to spread on the skin during ceremonies. It was also used as an oil for cooking, and for making a bar-like food without the intense sugar that Europeans

introduced. The seeds were also paired with camas-water to make a sweet soup. These rich and aromatic seeds were often called “Indian Oats” in English, as tarweed was a staple food source and often traded across Oregon. The flour-like material made from tarweed was called lemolo sapoliel in Chinook jargon.

**Sources:**

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