

Living History: Fort Laramie Plants

Step back in time at Fort Laramie National Historic Site by exploring its plants!

Fort Laramie National Historic Site is a landmark of western history. It lies at the confluence of two major rivers, the North Platte and the Laramie, which were Rocky Mountain travel corridors and gateways to natural resources for traders, military personnel, settlers, and Native Americans, alike. The native plants of Fort Laramie link our past and present.

Benevolence of buffalo grass

Dust clouds once marked the passage of people and stock on the Fort Laramie parade grounds while it was an active fort. Native grasses returned when the fort was abandoned. The parade grounds are now carpeted by buffalo grass (*Buchloe dactyloides*), a short, sod-forming, warm-season grass that came back to Fort Laramie just as it once returned after the pounding of buffalo herds. The capacity of prairie grasses to recover is reflected in the words of a U.S. Senator from Kansas: "Grass is the forgiveness of nature--her constant benediction."¹



The aroma of the place:

Sand sage and silver sage

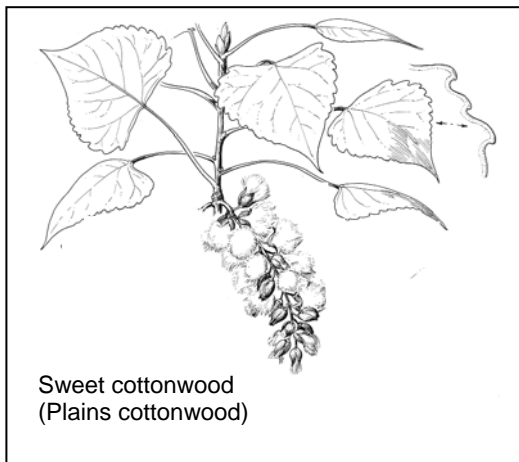
Explorers passing the Fort Laramie trading post in 1842 noted "One of the prominent characteristics in the face of the country is the extraordinary abundance of the artemisias [sagebrushes]. They grow everywhere – on the hills, and over the river bottoms, in tough, twisted, wiry clumps ...and the whole air is strongly impregnated and saturated with the odor of camphor and spirits of turpentine which belongs to this plant."² Another expedition member noted: "When the wind blows, it is as though one were in a pharmacy"³. Sagebrush aromas pervaded the senses of all Fort residents and visitors. Sniff out bushes of sand sage (*Artemisia filifolia*) growing around the Fort Infirmary and silver sage (*Artemisia cana*) at the entrance. The volatile oil fragrances are made all the more conspicuous after a rain, or by crushing a leaf tip.



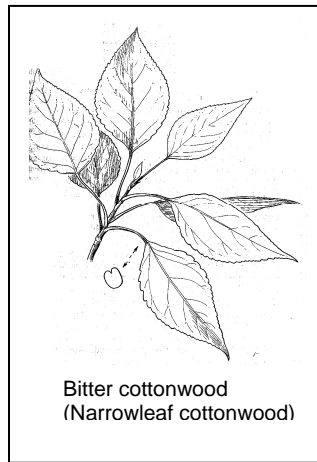
¹ John James Ingalls (1833-1900), Senator from Kansas from 1873 to 1891, wrote this in his address "In Praise of Blue Grass," printed in the Kansas Magazine, 1872, and excerpted from: Grass: The Yearbook of Agriculture, 1948. USDA, Washington, DC.

² John C. Fremont, leader of the Fremont Expedition of 1842 (Fremont 1945. Report of the exploring expedition to the Rocky Mountains in the year 1842, and to Oregon and north California in the years 1843-'44. 28th Congr., 2nd Sess., Senate Exec. Doc. No. 174. Serial 461.)

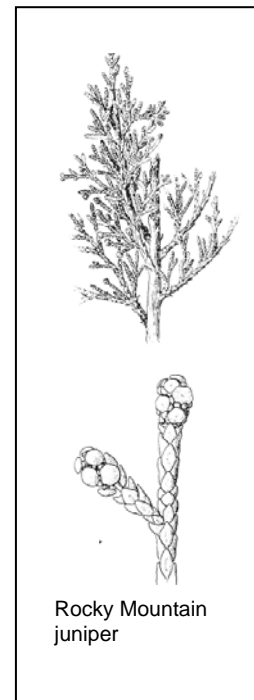
³ Charles Preuss, cartographer on the Fremont Expedition of 1842 (Preuss 1958. Exploring with Fremont. University of Oklahoma Press, Norman. E.G. and E.K. Gudde, ed. and translation.)



Sweet cottonwood
(Plains cottonwood)



Bitter cottonwood
(Narrowleaf cottonwood)



Rocky Mountain
juniper

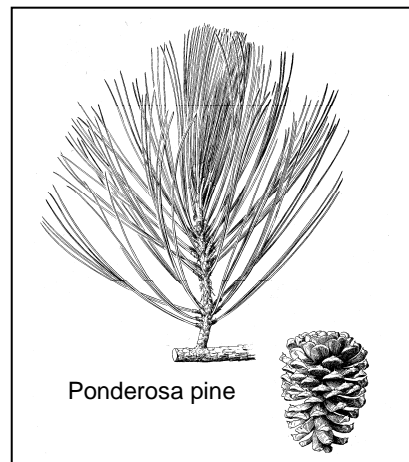
Where mountains and plains meet: Sweet cottonwood and bitter cottonwood

Early-day visitors to the Fort Laramie trading post and fort were greeted by groves of cottonwood trees. The sweet cottonwood (also called plains cottonwood); provided fuel and shelter, and it later became the State Tree of Wyoming. In times of scarce grass, the bark of sweet cottonwood also provided food for hungry horses. Fort Laramie is a meeting ground of the sweet cottonwood and its mountain cousin, bitter cottonwood (also called narrowleaf cottonwood; *Populus angustifolia*). Fort Laramie is rich in plants of both mountains and plains.

Building materials of Man and Nature:

Ponderosa pine and Rocky Mountain juniper

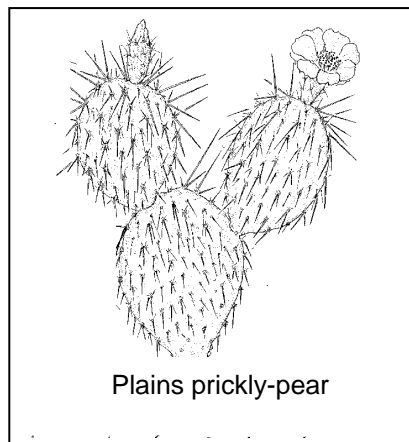
Trees were part of the “architecture” of the landscape when it was an active fort, and also comprised the construction materials for its buildings and borders. Wagon train travelers ear Fort Laramie wrote: “The bluffs... are... sparsely dotted with dwarf pine and cedar.”⁴ Ponderosa pine (*Pinus ponderosa*) was used in Fort Laramie buildings, and Rocky Mountain juniper (*Juniperus scopulorum*) was used for fence posts. Both trees are still found on upland breaks above the Laramie and North Platte Rivers in the area.



Ponderosa pine

Watch your step! Plains prickly-pear and twistspine prickly-pear

Cacti at Fort Laramie were the bane of travelers and soliders, and their livestock. “We had to drive the cattle down [from the bluffs] again, on account of the vast amount of prickly pears which almost covered the ground.”⁵ The common cactus along the floodplains is twistspine prickly-pear (*Opuntia macrorhiza*) and the common cactus in abandoned fields north and east of the Fort is plains prickly pear (*Opuntia polyacantha*). Both have spiny, succulent pads. The former has a spine-free, bright red fruit more readily sought for food when ripe, compared to the green, spiny fruit of its cousin.



Plains prickly-pear

These are only a few of the stories told in Fort Laramie plants. For further information, refer to the brochures that highlight the common trees, shrubs, wildflowers and grasses in Fort Laramie; or to the annotated checklist represents the full array of Fort Laramie plants.

Illustrations are reprinted from: Flora of North America and Intermountain Flora, with permission of the publishers.

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Brown, J.R. 1860. Journal of a trip across the plains of the U.S, from Missouri to California, in the year 1856. Privately published, Columbus, Ohio. 119 pp.